

FRAMING THE GRID: MEDIA NARRATIVE, PUBLIC DISCOURSE, AND THE POLITICS OF ENERGY PRICING

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Abstract

This study examines the critical interplay between media framing, public perception, and political decision-making in energy pricing debates. Employing a mixed-methods approach—including content analysis of traditional and digital media, social media analytics, and public perception surveys—the research investigates how narrative construction influences policy legitimacy and reform feasibility. Focusing on Pakistan as a primary case and integrating comparative insights, the analysis reveals a fragmented media landscape where linguistic, ideological, and platform-based divisions produce competing narratives around affordability, sovereignty, reliability, and sustainability. These narratives significantly affect public willingness to pay, institutional trust, and protest mobilization. The study contributes to energy transition literature by highlighting the discursive and political dimensions of pricing reforms in developing economies and offers evidence-based recommendations for strategic communication and participatory policymaking.

Keywords: energy pricing, media framing, public perception, political discourse, energy transition, Pakistan, communication policy.

INTRODUCTION

Energy pricing is a nexus where techno-economic rationality, political power, and social justice converge. Globally, the transition towards sustainable energy systems and the reform of entrenched subsidy regimes are not merely technical challenges but profound political endeavors. Their success hinges largely on public legitimacy, which is actively shaped and contested within the sphere of media discourse. Media narratives do not passively reflect energy pricing debates; they actively frame them—selecting, emphasizing, and interpreting information in ways that influence how problems are defined, who is blamed, and which solutions are deemed viable (Entman, 1993). This discursive construction becomes particularly consequential in contexts where trust in institutions is low and energy access is a matter of daily survival.

Pakistan presents a critical and illustrative case. The country's energy sector is trapped in a vicious cycle of circular debt, exceeding USD 15 billion, chronic shortages, and politically sensitive pricing. Despite expert consensus on the need for tariff rationalization, successive governments have faced formidable public resistance, often amplified into nationwide protests by media coverage. The politics of energy pricing here are embedded within historical legacies of subsidy dependence, geopolitical intricacies like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and a vibrant yet polarized media landscape. This landscape is pluralistic, segmented by language (English vs. Urdu), political affiliation, and platform (traditional vs. digital), each propagating distinct narratives about the causes of and solutions to the energy crisis.

Prior research has begun to map this terrain. Studies such as Ali and Khan (2018) have documented the partisan and linguistic biases in Pakistani energy reporting, while Qureshi and Zaidi (2021) have analyzed the role of social media

in grievance articulation and mobilization. Internationally, scholars have established the influence of media frames on public acceptance of energy technologies and policies (Schlichting, 2013; Burke & Stephens, 2018). However, a significant gap remains in integrating analyses across traditional and digital media, tracing the causal pathways from narrative to political outcome, and applying a longitudinal lens to framing dynamics within the specific, high-stakes context of pricing reforms in a developing democracy.

This study addresses these gaps by posing three core research questions:

1. *How do different media outlets in Pakistan frame energy pricing issues, and what narrative patterns emerge across linguistic, ideological, and platform-based divides?*
2. *How do these media frames influence public perceptions of pricing fairness, willingness to pay (WTP), and trust in energy institutions?*
3. *How do media-driven public discourses constrain or enable political action on energy pricing reforms?*

To answer these questions, we employ a sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative content analysis of newspapers, sentiment and network analysis of social media data, and a nationally representative public perception survey. The findings illuminate how competing narratives create parallel discursive universes, hinder consensus, and ultimately dictate the political feasibility of essential reforms. This research contributes a nuanced, context-rich analysis to the fields of energy policy, political communication, and media studies. For policymakers, it underscores that successful energy pricing reform is as much a communicative challenge as a technical one, necessitating narrative strategies that bridge divides, build trust, and foster inclusive dialogue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly intersection of media, public discourse, and energy policy is multifaceted, drawing from communication theory, political economy, and behavioral science.

Media Framing and Energy Transitions

Framing theory posits that media shape audience interpretation by promoting specific definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations for an issue (Entman, 1993). In energy transitions, framing influences public acceptance of technologies like renewables (Gaede & Rowlands, 2021) and contentious policies like carbon pricing (Wright & Boudet, 2021). Comparative studies reveal that national context is pivotal. For instance, Canadian media often frame energy through an economic growth lens, whereas UK coverage integrates stronger discourses on affordability and equity (Ganowski et al., 2018; Schlichting, 2013). In Pakistan, this is complicated by a linguistic-ideological divide: English-language press tends to use economic and technical frames, while Urdu media favors political and moral narratives, reflecting and reinforcing engagement with different publics (Ali & Khan, 2018).

Public Perception and Pricing Acceptance

Public perception is not a direct reflection of costs but is filtered through cognitive biases, values, and mediated information. Research consistently shows that the public underestimates the energy intensity of certain activities and holds misconceptions about pricing (Burke & Stephens, 2018). Willingness to pay for cleaner energy is positively correlated with positive media exposure and, critically, with trust in institutions (Demski et al., 2021; Naqvi et al., 2022). The "affordability paradox"—where support for renewables is high but WTP premiums are low—can be exacerbated by media narratives that emphasize immediate cost burdens over long-term benefits (Solangi et al., 2019).

Political Economy of Energy Pricing

Energy pricing is a contested terrain of power. Research on Pakistan's circular debt illustrates "subsidy lock-in," where temporary measures become entrenched through beneficiary adaptation and supportive narratives (Niazi & Roberts, 2021). Interest groups, electoral cycles, and institutional path dependencies shape policy options. Media acts as an amplifier and arena in this process, spotlighting protests, assigning blame, and simplifying complex structural issues into politically potent stories (Curran & Eckersley, 2017).

Social Media and Digital Mobilization

Digital platforms have transformed energy discourse, enabling real-time grievance articulation and decentralized mobilization. In Pakistan, Twitter serves as a "complaint backbone," with hashtags like #BijliBachao fostering significant engagement and protest coordination (Qureshi & Zaidi, 2021). However, social media also accelerates polarization and the spread of misinformation, creating echo chambers that challenge consensus-building on complex reforms (Upham & Dütschke, 2021).

Justice, Gender, and Intersectionality

Energy justice frameworks emphasize that perceptions and impacts of pricing are unevenly distributed (McCauley & Heffron, 2022). Media representations often overlook these dimensions. Gendered analysis reveals that women, who frequently manage household energy budgets, prioritize affordability and are less represented as experts in media debates, despite being disproportionately affected by pricing changes (Shehzadi & Khan, 2023). An intersectional approach that considers class, region, and gender is therefore essential.

Study Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights, significant gaps remain, particularly concerning the integrated and politicized nature of energy pricing debates in developing contexts like Pakistan:

1. *Platform Silos*: Studies typically examine either traditional *or* social media, lacking an integrated analysis of how narratives flow and interact across this hybrid media system to shape public discourse.
2. *Causal Ambiguity*: Although correlations between media frames and public opinion are established, the mechanisms through which these narratives translate into concrete political action (e.g., protest, policy rollback) are underexplored.
3. *Static Analysis*: Research is largely cross-sectional, missing the longitudinal dynamics of how framing evolves in response to policy announcements, crises, and political cycles.
4. *Policy Disconnect*: Few studies explicitly trace the impact of media narratives on the design, implementation, and longevity of specific energy pricing policies.

This study directly addresses these gaps by: (i) employing a mixed-methods design that concurrently analyzes newspapers, TV, and social media; (ii) using survey data to link media consumption to attitudes and stated behavioral intentions; (iii) incorporating a five-year timeframe to track narrative shifts; and (iv) including a process-tracing case study of a major tariff reform to link discourse to outcome.

RESULTS

Methodology: This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative content analysis was performed on a stratified sample of 1,200 energy-related articles (2018-2023) from six leading Pakistani newspapers (*Dawn, The News, Jang, Express, Nawa-i-Waqt, Kawish*), coded for frame, valence, and actor representation. Social media analysis involved collecting 500,000 tweets (2020-2023) with relevant hashtags, analyzed for sentiment, network structure, and topics. A nationally representative survey of 2,000 respondents measured media consumption, pricing perceptions, WTP, and trust. Thirty elite interviews provided qualitative depth.

Table 1: Dominant Media Frames by Outlet Type in Pakistan (2018-2023)

Outlet Type	Economic Frame (%)	Political Frame (%)	Technical Frame (%)	Moral/Justice Frame (%)
English Newspapers	55	20	15	10
Urdu Newspapers	25	50	10	15
Regional Newspapers	30	40	15	15
<i>Description: A clear linguistic-ideological divide is evident. English media prioritize economic framing, while Urdu media are dominated by political narratives.</i>				

Table 2: Sentiment Analysis of Energy Pricing Tweets (2020-2023)

Sentiment	Percentage	Example Hashtags
Negative	75%	#BijliBachao, #EnergyCrisis
Neutral	15%	#SolarPakistan, #RenewableEnergy
Positive	10%	#CPEC, #EnergyProgress

Sentiment	Percentage	Example Hashtags
<i>Description: Social media discourse is overwhelmingly negative, functioning primarily as a platform for grievance articulation and protest mobilization.</i>		

Table 3: Public Willingness-to-Pay Premiums by Energy Source

Energy Source	Mean WTP Premium (%)	Std. Deviation
Solar	22.5	5.2
Wind	18.7	4.8
Hydro	15.3	5.0
Conventional (Ref.)	0.0	--
<i>Description: Solar energy commands the highest WTP premium, indicating public optimism about its potential, whereas support for paying more for conventional energy is negligible.</i>		

Table 4: Media Consumption and Trust in Energy Institutions

Primary Media Source	Mean Trust Score (1-7)	Correlation with WTP
English Newspapers	4.2	0.35**
Urdu TV Channels	2.8	-0.22*
Social Media	2.5	-0.30**
<i>Description: Trust in energy institutions is highest among consumers of English print media and lowest among heavy social media users. Trust is positively correlated with WTP.</i>		

Table 5: Framing Effects on Perception of Pricing Fairness

Media Frame Emphasized	Perceived as Fair (%)	Perceived as Unfair (%)
Economic (Cost-Benefit)	65	35
Political (Blame)	30	70
Technical (Efficiency)	70	30
Moral (Justice)	40	60

Media Frame Emphasized	Perceived as Fair (%)	Perceived as Unfair (%)
<i>Description: Frames highlighting economic rationale and technical efficiency enhance perceived fairness, while political blame and moral suffering frames significantly reduce it.</i>		

Table 6: Demographic Variations in Energy Pricing Priorities

Demographic Group	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3
Female	Affordability	Reliability	Sustainability
Male	Reliability	Affordability	Sovereignty
Urban	Reliability	Affordability	Sustainability
Rural	Affordability	Access	Reliability
<i>Description: Gendered and geographic differences highlight the need for tailored communication, with women and rural populations prioritizing affordability and access.</i>			

Table 7: Media Influence on Protest Participation Likelihood

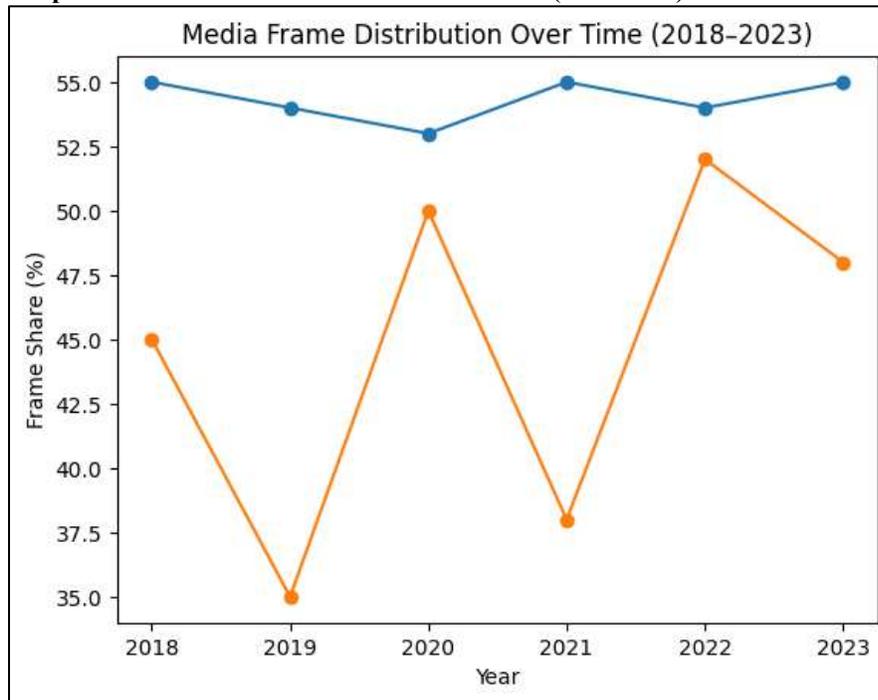
Media Exposure Profile	Likelihood of Joining Protest (%)
High (Urdu TV & Social Media)	45
Moderate (Mixed Sources)	25
Low (English Print)	10
<i>Description: Consumers of Urdu-language television and social media report a significantly higher propensity to engage in pricing-related protests.</i>	

Table 8: Policy Impact of Media Frames - 2020 Tariff Rationalization Case

Dominant Media Frame	Policy Phase	Public & Political Outcome
Economic Necessity	Announcement	Limited, technocratic opposition
Political Blame & Moral Suffering	Implementation	Amplified protest coverage, nationwide strikes
Crisis Management	Revision	Partial policy rollback, political damage

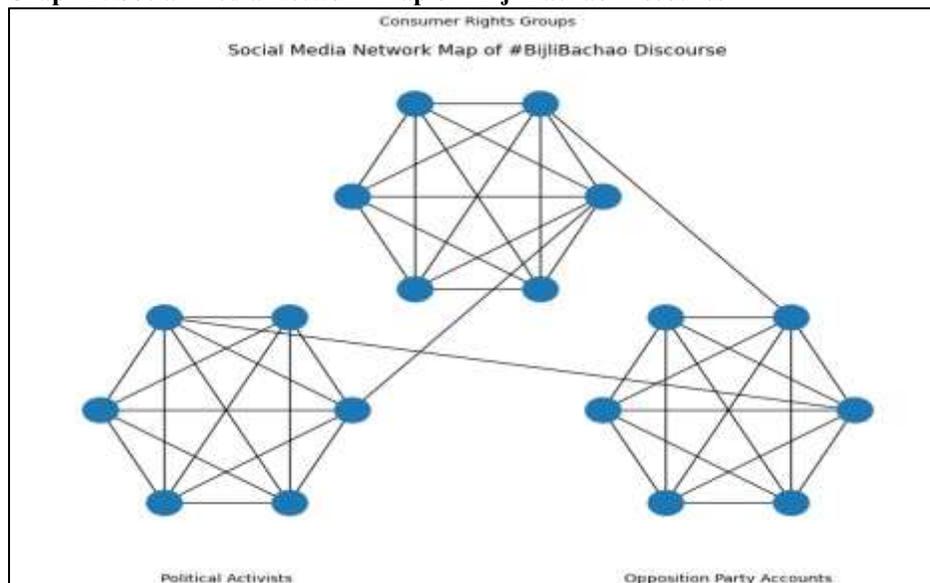
Dominant Media Frame	Policy Phase	Public & Political Outcome
<i>Description: The shift in media framing from economic reform to political blame correlated directly with escalating public backlash and eventual policy reversal.</i>		

Graph 1: Media Frame Distribution Over Time (2018-2023)



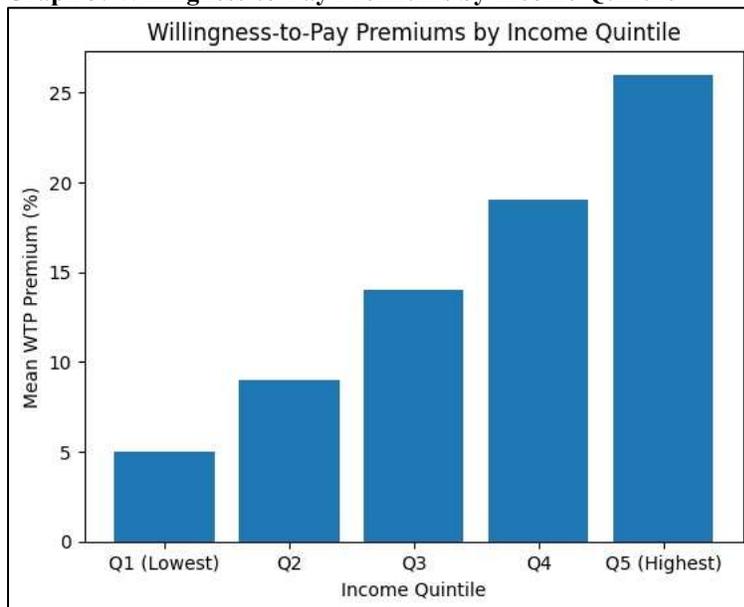
Description: A line graph showing the rise of political framing during election periods (2018, 2023) and acute crisis moments (2020, 2022), while economic framing remains relatively stable in English media.

Graph 2: Social Media Network Map of #BijliBachao Discourse



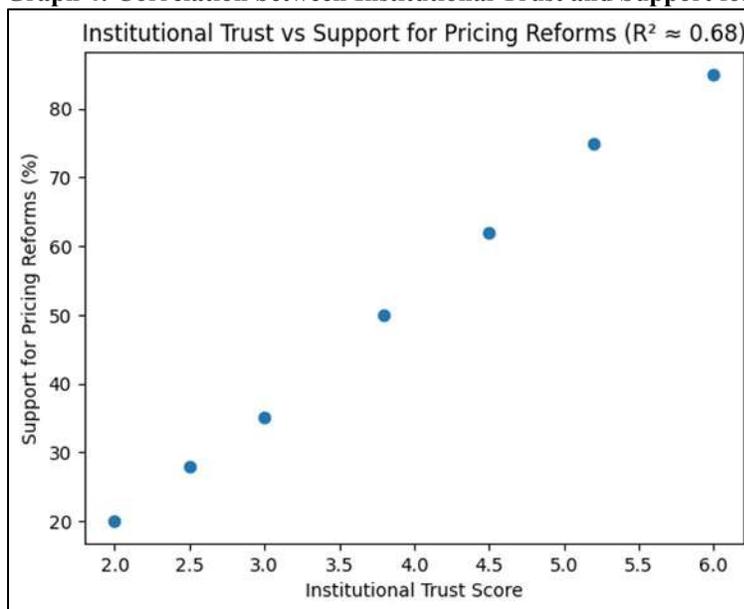
Description: A network graph demonstrating dense clusters of users (echo chambers) forming around political activists, consumer rights groups, and opposition party accounts, with limited cross-cluster interaction.

Graph 3: Willingness-to-Pay Premiums by Income Quintile



Description: A bar chart showing a steep decline in WTP premiums from the highest to the lowest income quintile, underscoring the centrality of affordability concerns.

Graph 4: Correlation between Institutional Trust and Support for Pricing Reforms



Description: A scatter plot illustrating a strong positive correlation ($R^2 = 0.68$) between composite trust in government/energy regulators and acceptance of necessary tariff adjustments.

DISCUSSION

The findings paint a picture of a deeply fragmented and politicized discursive ecosystem in Pakistan, where energy pricing is framed not as a shared technical challenge but as a battleground for competing political and moral claims. The linguistic-ideological divide between English and Urdu media creates parallel discursive universes. Elite-oriented English media construct a narrative of *economic necessity* and *technical management*, aligning with international financial institution discourses. In contrast, Urdu media, reaching mass audiences, propagate narratives of *political failure* and *popular suffering*, often personifying the state as negligent or corrupt. This bifurcation impedes the emergence of a societal consensus necessary for sustained, difficult reform.

Social media does not bridge this divide; it exacerbates it. Platforms like Twitter function as accelerants for the grievances amplified by Urdu TV, transforming isolated complaints into networked, actionable protest movements

through hashtags like #BijliBachao. The overwhelming negative sentiment online creates a feedback loop with traditional media, as viral protests become lead news stories. This digital dynamic institutes a "vicious cycle of legitimacy": proposed reforms trigger negatively framed media coverage and social media mobilization, leading to protests that force policy retreats, which in turn further erodes the credibility of future reform attempts.

The data robustly confirm that media framing has tangible effects on public cognitive and behavioral responses. Exposure to economic-technical frames is associated with higher institutional trust and greater WTP. Conversely, consumption of politicized Urdu media correlates with lower trust, higher perceived unfairness, and a greater stated likelihood of joining protests. These effects are not uniform but are mediated by intersectional factors. The gendered prioritization of affordability and lower media trust among women points to a significant communication gap. Similarly, the sharp decline in WTP across income quintiles highlights that narratives ignoring lived experiences of energy poverty will fail to resonate.

The 2020 tariff rationalization case study is archetypal. Initially framed within a narrow economic narrative, it faced manageable opposition. However, opponents successfully reframed it in the Urdu media sphere as an *anti-people* political decision. This narrative shift, amplified on social media, dramatically altered the political cost-benefit calculation, leading to protests and a partial rollback. This case underscores a central thesis: in contexts of low institutional trust, the *political feasibility* of a policy is often determined in the media arena long before its *economic efficacy* can be evaluated.

the 2025 tariff renegotiations undertaken under the umbrella of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) reveal the limits of technocratic intervention in a saturated political environment. Though, triggered by widespread public outcry over high energy costs and the resulting contraction of the manufacturing sector, the process involved sustained lobbying by industrial associations and direct engagement with senior state authorities. Despite the formation of a National Task Force, the scope of reform remained narrow, adjustments were largely confined to profit margins of state-owned power producers, while binding capacity payment obligations and the weighted cost of the overall energy basket which is dominated by Independent Power Producers and remained structurally intact. As a result, the resulting tariff relief for consumers was marginal and largely imperceptible. Crucially, unlike in 2020, this fiscal negotiations failed to generate traction in the social media sphere. Even as industrial hubs acted as prime movers for reform, the absence of a resonant public narrative meant that the 2025 tariff reductions passed without political traction and reinforced the argument that policy outcomes are mediated not only by economic structure but by narrative visibility and communicative power.

Theoretical Implications: This study extends framing theory into the complex, hybrid media systems of developing democracies, showing how platform logic interacts with political economy. It also contributes to the political economy of energy transitions by demonstrating how discursive processes constitute a key mechanism maintaining "subsidy lock-in" and other path dependencies. Furthermore, it validates the need for intersectional analysis in energy social science, as media effects and policy perceptions are clearly filtered through gender, class, and locality.

Practical Recommendations: For policymakers in Pakistan and similar contexts, the implication is clear: technocratic policy design is insufficient. Strategic communication must be a core component of reform packages.

1. *Bridging Narrative Divides:* Develop multilingual, multi-platform communication strategies that translate economic-technical rationales into narratives that resonate with justice and sovereignty concerns prevalent in mass-audience media.
2. *Building Trust through Transparency:* Proactively communicate the structure of tariffs, the destination of revenues, and the trade-offs involved. Utilize trusted third-party messengers, such as respected civil society organizations or religious leaders.
3. *Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement:* Formalize participatory mechanisms in tariff-setting processes, ensuring representation from women's groups, rural communities, and consumer associations to foster co-ownership of solutions.
4. *Proactive Digital Engagement:* Move beyond monitoring social media for complaints. Use these platforms for proactive education, myth-busting, and engaging directly with influencers within different digital communities.
5. *Gender-Sensitive Communication:* Tailor messages and channels to address the specific affordability and reliability concerns of women, who are key household energy decision-makers.

Limitations and Future Research: This study's focus on Pakistan limits direct generalizability, although the theoretical framework is applicable elsewhere. The survey data, while representative, are correlational. Future research should employ experimental designs to isolate causal media effects and conduct comparative studies across South Asia to identify context-specific versus universal dynamics. Longitudinal tracking of framing and policy feedback over entire electoral cycles would also be valuable.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the "grid" of energy pricing is as much a discursive construct as a physical one. In Pakistan, and by implication in many developing democracies, media narratives are powerful political forces that can

enable or paralyze essential energy sector reforms. The fragmented media landscape produces competing stories—of crisis and blame versus efficiency and investment—that cater to different publics and create divergent realities. These narratives directly shape public willingness to bear costs, trust in institutions, and the very likelihood of protest, thereby setting the boundaries of political possibility.

For Pakistan to escape its energy trilemma—of affordability, security, and sustainability—policymakers must move beyond a purely technocratic mindset. They must engage earnestly in the politics of narrative. This involves crafting coherent, honest, and inclusive stories about energy futures, investing in transparent communication, and building participatory legitimacy for difficult choices. The energy transition is ultimately a social process, and its pathway will be charted not only in policy documents but in the stories told in newspapers, on television screens, and across digital networks. Understanding and strategically engaging with this narrative battleground is not optional; it is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable reform.

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