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Mediated climate rift society: articulation and metabolic rift theories in analyzing climate change news in South Africa

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Introduction: Journalism is essential in addressing climate change. Journalists' constructions of climate change issues, worldviews, and proposed solutions legitimise those aspects that are made commonsensical and are given discursive salience. The news media has often constructed climate change as a purely scientific issue whose solutions rely on technological interventions- thus neglecting climate change's cultural and political economics. This paper seeks to situate climate change journalism research within ecoCultural Studies and Environmental Sociology.

Methods: Through articulation and metabolic rift theories combined with discourse analysis techniques, this study examines how four weekly newspapers (the Sunday Times, the Mail & Guardian, the City Press, and the Sunday Independent) in South Africa reproduced and re/presented neoliberal climate change solutions anchored on "green" and "clean" transition discourses - from 2011 to 2018.

Results: The majority of discourse actors support the green economy initiative, with its normalisation facilitated by actors like scientists, media, and politicians. This discourse, prominent during both Zuma and Ramaphosa's administrations, has been integrated into South Africa's energy blueprints, emphasising job creation and cleaner air. While perpetuating capitalist inequalities, the green economy has been championed as a national project aligning with public aspirations. News media often portrays climate change solutions through a neoliberal, techno-optimistic lens, emphasising "green economy" and "sustainable development". These solutions, paired with market principles, balance economic growth and environmental responsibility.

KEYWORDS

climate change, newspaper, South Africa, re/presentations, green economy, metabolic rift, articulation

Introduction

The escalating severity of the global climate crisis underscores the urgency of a comprehensive response (Allan et al., 2021). As central influencers of public opinion and policy discourses (Carvalho, 2008, 2020), the news media play a critical role in shaping people's understanding of this complex issue (Boykoff, 2007, 2011). Yet, their coverage often reproduces capitalist and neoliberal narratives, presenting "green" and "clean" transitions not as radical systemic changes but as opportunities for market-driven solutions (Pepermans and Maesele, 2014, 2018). This focus could potentially de-politicize and limit the scope of the public debate, reducing it to technological and economic dimensions

while downplaying the need for broader social, political, and economic transformations (Beck, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2011; Pepermans and Maesele, 2018). The green discourses that prioritize technological and scientific solutions have been criticized for “de-politicizing political passions to the point of leaving citizens nothing but gloomy asceticism, a terror of violating nature and an indifference toward the modernization of modernity” (Beck, 2010, p. 263). Similarly, Olausson and Berglez (2014, p. 54) saw the de-politicization of climate change and environmental issues as working in favor of the capitalist status quo where the “formation of consensus naturalizes perceptions of capitalism and the existing market economy as the sole options for the social, environmental, and economic order”.

In response to this problematic portrayal, this paper aims to critically situate climate change journalism research within ecoCultural Studies and Environmental Sociology. By employing articulation and metabolic rift theories, it seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between media, ideology, and environmental discourse in the era of the climate crisis. Specifically, it will examine how four weekly newspapers in South Africa have reproduced neoliberal climate change solutions anchored on “green” and “clean” transition discourses. In doing so, it seeks not just to critique these narratives but to expose the potential rifts between socio-economic systems and the ecological systems they depend upon, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the climate crisis and the role of the media in its discourse.

Journalism is essential in addressing climate change. Beck (2010, p. 253) noted that climate change remains “an expert and elitist discourse in which peoples, societies, citizens, workers, voters and their interests, views and voices are very much neglected”. Further, Moser (2010) argued that the public’s understanding of climate change is limited. These aspects increasingly point toward the centrality of the news media in enabling debate around climate issues to increase the public understanding of the issues. Media coverage and representation of climate change remain critical as the news media are seen as “important arenas and important agents in the production, reproduction, and transformation of the meaning of climate change” (Carvalho, 2010, p. 172). Schäfer and Painter (2021, p. 2) argued that the news media are “crucially important for how individuals, organizations, and societies understand climate change and how they evaluate and act upon it”. Drawing from Carvalho and Burgess (2005), journalists’ constructions of climate change issues, worldviews and proposed solutions legitimize those aspects given discursive salience. The news media has often constructed climate change as a purely scientific issue whose solutions rely on technological interventions, thus neglecting climate change’s cultural politics and political economy (Carvalho, 2020; Pepermans and Maesele, 2018).

Climate change is seen as primarily a product of capitalist exploitation and disruption (Beck, 1992, 2010; Guattari, 2000; Clark and York, 2005; Foster et al., 2010). Articulation provides researchers with a means of identifying the different fragments that constitute discourse units in the news and also guards against the traps of capitalist essentialism and reductionism, instead allowing the researchers to account for “other factors” and, in doing so, conceptualize how the articulation of the fragments leads toward making capitalism a “tendential force” but born out of

disjointed fragments. The metabolic rift theory remains central to understanding how capitalism has been an ecological force driving climate change. Therefore, the combination of articulation and the metabolic rift theories should be embraced as new ways of researching climate change in the news.

The climate rift society: a journey through the rifts of time

In this section, the paper endeavors to ground the examination of climate change news within broader environmental sociology perspectives that interpret climate change as a risk engendered by the unending quest for profit intrinsic to capitalism. This relentless aspiration to exploit and accumulate wealth stems from capitalism’s perception of nature as an endless, cost-free resource available for unending exploitation. As Moore (2011, 2015) argues, capitalism cannot be considered separately from “nature”; rather, capitalism makes nature. Capitalism imposes its temporal paradigm, compressing geological, ecological, and social timescapes (Moore, 2015). Drawing from Dale (2019), and synthesizing with Moore’s (2015) contention, through technological innovation that ensures the relentless exploitation of nature, the capitalist time has eroded ecological time by exploiting nature at velocities that have downgraded ecological time, burning fossil fuels in ways that have produced climate risks. Capital, driven by its profit maximization logic, has introduced technological systems that amplified the extraction of fossil fuels and, concurrently, accelerated the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (Foster et al., 2010).

In the spirit of Marx and others and complementing Moore’s (2011) assertions, this paper argues that capitalist production and reproduction of nature through technology have succeeded in condensing productive time but have concurrently compressed humanity’s capacity to inhabit an untroubled future. For example, the evolution of agrarian and industrial capitalism was contingent on the introduction of new technologies that expedited and broadened farming and industrial production. However, such technological advances, while seemingly beneficial in the short term, lead to the accumulation of toxic waste on nature and the atmosphere, and the effects of this are felt today through the wide-ranging impacts of climate change (Beck, 1992, 2010; Clark and York, 2005; Moore, 2011).

It is crucial to underscore the threats of climate change in terms of curtailing the ability of the future-present to exist on a linear, uninterrupted timescale (Dale, 2019). While the ecological-social timescapes have been compressed for capitalist convenience, it is equally important to note that the time humans and other living species have on earth has been condensed and restricted. As Dale (2019) desolately noted, and Moore (2015) would likely concur, capitalism’s voracious appetite to “eat time, and in the process, erase nature” has led the world to the precipice of a profound ecological crisis. The temporal modality of capitalism, inextricably linked with its exploitative nature, leads to the erosion of “natural” or “ecological” time and the creation of a rift between humans and the environment (Moore, 2015). This climate rift, as it can be termed, manifests as the growing disjunction between the exploitative pace of capitalism and the Earth’s capacity to regenerate and absorb

waste (Clark and York, 2005; Foster et al., 2010). Capitalism's inherent short-termism, driven by immediate profit maximization, neglects the planet's long-term survival.

This rift is evident in the mass production of goods. The transition from Marx's concept of production for "use" to production for "exchange" highlights a shift in focus from meeting human needs to maximizing capitalist profits. Agrarian capitalism led to extensive tillage of land, increased use of chemical fertilizers, and the use of oil in agricultural production, all of which were hailed as technological breakthroughs (Clark and York, 2005; Foster et al., 2010). Yet these advancements, celebrated for their ability to expedite production and meet the "present" profit needs, resulted in an accumulation of toxic waste on nature and in the atmosphere, with the impacts of this "climate rift" felt today through the wide-ranging effects of climate change (Guattari, 2000; Beck, 2010). Industrial capitalism's legacy, embodied in the millions of cars, thousands of airplanes, ships, and trains produced to facilitate global trade and human movement, has further widened this rift. While these innovations have been lauded as progressive and beneficial in reducing travel time and compressing spaces, they have simultaneously increased greenhouse gas emissions and accelerated climate change (Moore, 2015).

Climate change, therefore, is not just an environmental problem; it is a temporal crisis, a byproduct of capitalism's relentless manipulation and exploitation of nature's timescapes (Dale, 2019). It is a future-present existential threat to all life on Earth, disrupting eco-social timescapes and compressing living species' ability to inhabit a future free from climatic disruptions. As one navigates this climate rift, it becomes imperative to articulate the situation's urgency in the news media and broader public discourses. It is no longer just about halting or slowing down climate change; it is about fundamentally rethinking humanity's relationship with nature and the timescapes it inhabits, breaking free from the shackles of capitalist temporalities that are inherently unsustainable (Moore, 2015; Dale, 2019). This means moving beyond the capitalist logic of endless growth and consumption and toward a more equitable and eco-centric paradigm that respects nature's timescapes and the intricate web of life they sustain.

Beck's (1992) concept of a self-mutating risk society is seen in how capitalist society responds to climate risks. Capitalism presents itself as the solution to the problems it created through scientific innovation and the propagation of a "green economy" and "green growth". Here, solar and wind energy are championed to regenerate ecological capital. Drawing from Marx's use and exchange value concepts, this approach still exploits natural common goods for exchange value, not use. Hajer (1995) argued that this approach merely trades old risks for new ones, creating fresh ecological, geological, and social rifts. The commodification of nature is another manifestation of the capitalist risk society's self-mutation. For instance, the Paris Agreement's Article 6 introduces the financialization and commodification of natural common goods such as air, wind, and the sun. This risks further widening the climate rift, with nature becoming a plaything for the capitalist elite who can afford to participate in carbon trade and emissions trading systems (see Evans and Musvipwa, 2017).

The climate rift society is deeply rooted in the political-economic system of capitalism. Drawing from Marx's concept of the metabolic rift and the ecological rift concept popularized

by Foster, Clark, and York, it can be seen how the media representations of climate change often overlook these structural issues inherent in the capitalist political economy. The solutions proposed are often embedded in neoliberal language, sidestepping the fundamental questions of political economy. This approach only reproduces and automates neoliberal concepts such as sustainable development and the green economy in news media, presenting them as commonsense solutions.

Drawing from the works of Jason Moore, Karl Marx and others, it becomes clear that to address the climate crisis truly, there is a need to alter agricultural practices and re-establish the metabolic relationship between humans and nature. This means moving away from surplus-based agricultural forms and toward practices that produce what is sufficient, based on use and not exchange value (Moore, 2011). It means critically examining and challenging the dominant discourses and practices perpetuating the climate rift, from the news media's uncritical reproduction of neoliberal climate solutions to the government's techno-optimism. Building on Marx's metabolic rift theory and Foster, Clark and York's ecological rift theory, studies on climate change politics and communication discourses should focus on these theories. They allow one to investigate how capitalism, both as a lifestyle and language, is uncritically reproduced in the news media and presented as common sense.

A critical, theory-informed approach to understanding and communicating climate change is essential. One can challenge the narratives and practices perpetuating these rifts by recognizing the metabolic and ecological rifts inherent in the current capitalist system. Furthermore, by acknowledging the role of the media in reproducing these narratives, researchers can strive for more balanced, critical, and nuanced discussions on climate change and humanity's relationship with nature. This discourse shift is necessary to address the climate crisis and move toward a more sustainable and equitable future.

Exploring the concept of articulation within news media climate change discourses

This paper applies the theory of articulation as a rigorous methodological and analytical tool in exploring the discourse around climate change within the news media. The theory of articulation provides a wide lens for probing the ideologies embedded within these re/presentations, the underpinning structures, and discursive tactics perpetuating dominance systems. The adoption of articulation bears dual essential advantages. Initially, it grants an avenue to scrutinize the political economy of the media-climate dynamic, media contexts, the impact of societal structures on media organizations and news narratives, and the ideology of the news media. This approach is critical to circumventing simplistic conclusions attributing climate change re/presentation in the media to deterministic forces. Articulation allows for an exhaustive examination of existing conditions while avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism and essentialism. Additionally, the discipline of Cultural Studies, characterized by its propensity for continual refinement and re-theorization, has yet

to fully incorporate ecoCulturalism into its analysis (Slack, 2008, p. 478). This investigation thus plays a crucial role in unlocking the potential of Cultural Studies to deconstruct the ecocultural, thereby contributing to its evolution in environmental analysis.

Hall (1985) characterized articulation as a relationship that is not invariably present, as either a law or a fact of life, but rather one that necessitates specific conditions for its emergence. Particular processes must actively maintain it and is neither “eternal” nor unalterable; it can vanish or be overturned, allowing old connections to dissolve and new ones—re-articulations—to be created (p. 114). These novel connections do not become “identical” to or “dissolved into” the previous ones. Instead, the components of these connections retain their “distinct determinations and conditions of existence” (Hall, 1985, p. 114). Building upon Hall’s conceptualisations, Slack (2016) posits that the theory of articulation seeks to comprehend how “elements are linked within a social formation and the manner in which change transpires within it” (p. 1). Articulation refers to the joints or links of fragments that enable specific formations at certain times and under certain conditions (contexts), and also how these connections can be disassembled or disconnected (disarticulation) under specific circumstances and contexts. These connections are not inherently stable, enduring, or predetermined but contingent upon “the work of establishing or breaking connections and the unities they form are dependent on specific conditions, which are other elements and forces within the social formation” (Slack, 2016, p. 2).

This perspective views communication and discourse practices as having no inherent guarantees. Ideological practices from various social actors can converge at a specific time and location to advance shared interests. Rearticulating discourses, therefore, involves revisiting texts within their discursive context to comprehend how social forces or blocs coalesced to form a unity at a specific contextual moment. This approach is crucial to tracing discourses’ development, evolution, and disarticulation. Thus, discourse and event analysis necessitate a process of “re(constructing)” them by “fabricating the network of relationships into which they are articulated, as well as possibilities for different articulations” (Grossberg, 1992, p. 54).

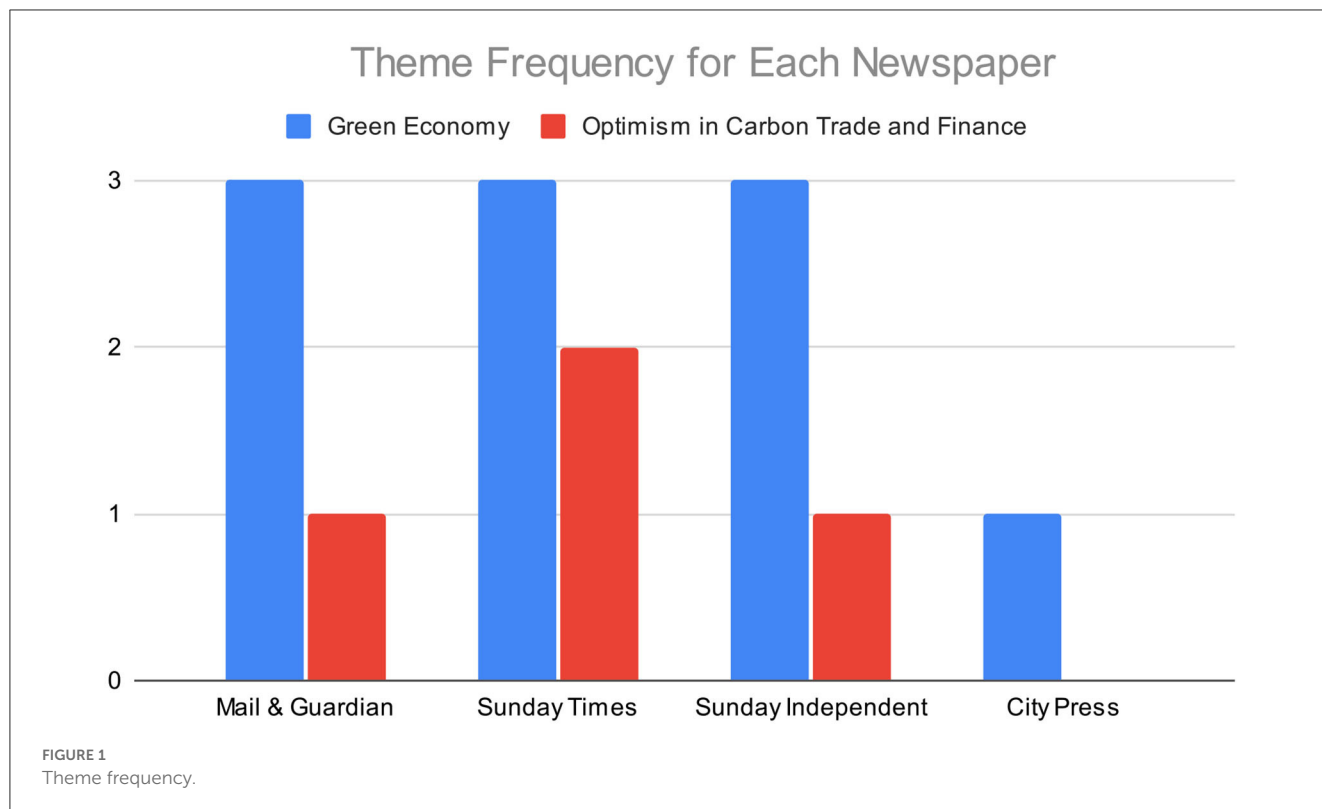
The theory of articulation demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the ideological forces driving discourse. The discursive portrayal of climate change in the news media carries ideological undertones, with ideology serving as a conduit through which relations are naturalized and solidified through their production and reproduction. An exploration of news representations of climate change through the lens of articulation necessitates a diligent search for, and analysis of, the connotative links embedded in the discourses, the bonds that transform the discourse into a cohesive unit. This is an exercise in disarticulating these links, enabling a thorough examination of the intricate, “multiple, and theoretically abstract non-necessary links” (Slack, 1996, p. 120). As posited by Laclau (1977), discourses rarely possess “class connotations; the meanings within discourse are always connotatively linked to disparate class interests or characters” (p. 7). Laclau (1977) further argued that class hegemony is attained by the class capable of interpellating subordinated groups through the artifice of representing their interests.

Social formations maintaining a hegemonic status acquire what Gramsci et al. (1971) termed “tendential forces”. When rearticulating media re/presentations of the climate crises, one must interrogate, for instance, the structures of dominance sustaining the neoliberal lifestyle. The answers lie in how capitalist material forces have been reproduced through discourse to the point of naturalization. Gramsci et al. (1971) described hegemony as a nexus of alliances and blocs that obscures the simplistic delineation of class relations, domination, and subordination. Clarke (2015) echoed this sentiment, arguing that hegemony should be perceived as the “construction of popular consent to the project and programme of a ‘ruling bloc’” achieved by articulating subaltern groups “through material and symbolic concessions in which they are ‘taken account of’ in ways that lead them to identify themselves within the leading project” (p. 5). Language serves as the means through which subjects are interpellated into the culture of the dominant class, thereby beginning to identify with and act in the interests of the dominant ruling social formations. As Hall and O’Shea (2013) noted, political elites often endeavor to gain popular consent by purporting that their policies cater to the interests of the commonsensical and the popular. However, as Hall and O’Shea contested, “what they are actually doing is not merely invoking popular opinion but molding and influencing it so as to harness it to their advantage. By asserting that popular opinion already concurs, they aspire to induce agreement as an effect” Hall and O’Shea (2013, p. 8).

The dominance and hegemonic characteristics of neoliberal discourses on climate change are not necessarily secured through the blunt imposition of neoliberal perspectives. Instead, capitalist blocs have adeptly utilized the discourses of subordinated groups in articulating the capitalist class interests in profit generation. The dominance of sustainable capitalism is solidified in the news through the co-optation of populist discourses of “development” and “sustainable development”, concepts that inherently appeal across class divisions and timescapes. Examining the re/presentation of the climate change discourse(s) as they traverse the news media landscape necessitates scrutinizing how particular worldviews on climate change are converted into consensus discourses and resonate with what is generally regarded as common sense, thereby helping entrench the capitalist system. The discourse of green capitalism has been reconstructed and ascended to become a hegemonic force within the realms of climate change responses. This success can be traced back to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in Brazil, where “sustainability” was introduced as a pragmatic approach to addressing climate issues, seen through the lens of common sense where reducing greenhouse gas emissions is construed as leading to “economic development”.

Methodology

This study is informed by the social constructivist paradigm that sees news as journalists’ construct (van Ginneken, 1998). As early as 1991, Hansen called for researchers studying the media and the environment to “look” toward the constructivist approach. Hansen (1991) saw the constructivist approach as being able to account for the socio-political nature of environmental issues. The approach facilitated “an understanding of media coverage



of environmental issues which goes beyond the (ahistorical) focus on the immediate actors involved (scientists, politicians, pressure group activists, journalists) to consider how the wider ‘cultural givens’ and ‘cultural resonances’ help privilege the advancement of some issues and not others” (Hansen, 1991, p. 454). Through articulation and metabolic rift theories combined with discourse analysis techniques, this study examines how four weekly newspapers (the *Sunday Times*, the *Mail & Guardian*, the *City Press*, and the *Sunday Independent*) in South Africa reproduced and re/represented neoliberal climate change solutions anchored on “green” and “clean” transition discourses—from 2011 to 2018. These outlets were selected for their wide geographic distribution and agenda-setting influence. Despite low circulation compared to dailies, these newspapers shape public opinion and media narratives.

The study followed Carvalho’s (2008) recommendations for considering the temporal sequence of texts, allowing for a longitudinal examination of the climate change discourse over 8 years. This temporal analysis elucidates the influence of prior discourses on subsequent ones and how discursive positions evolve. The study tracked changes in the representation of climate change solutions in South Africa from 2011 to 2018, noting key events, actors, and developments. The starting point, 2011, was chosen due to the significance of COP17 in bringing climate issues into mainstream South African discourse.

To collect relevant news articles, specific keywords such as “climate change”, “global warming”, “renewable energy”, “green economy”, and “green growth” were utilized in search queries on the *Sabinet* news clippings database and on individual newspaper websites. This initial sweep generated 736 articles of interest. A second, more focused selection was conducted from the initial pool,

prioritizing local South African news stories, opinion pieces, and lead stories highlighting global South perspectives. The focus was to ensure that the topics primarily revolved around climate change. As a result of this refined search, 290 articles with climate change as a key topic were chosen for a more detailed review. The final step involved categorizing each article from this reduced sample based on several criteria such as primary and secondary topics, publication date, page/section of the newspaper, thematic category, source of the story, context, framing, associated policy issues, and types of interventions discussed. The selection was further narrowed down to include only those articles that predominantly featured climate solutions and focused on the themes of a green economy or a green transition. This rigorous process resulted in a final selection of fourteen articles—ten news stories and four Op-Eds pieces. The analysis also considered the roles of various actors within these stories, which allowed for a quantitative distribution of the topic across different media outlets.

News textual analysis

The initial stage involved a comprehensive identification of the range of arguments and viewpoints on climate change and the green economy in South Africa. The analysis began with an open-ended reading of the texts, allowing the researchers to identify significant data characteristics without any predetermined bias. This was followed by a scan-type (Carvalho, 2008) reading to narrow the articles to those explicitly dealing with climate change and the green economy. Textual analysis involved a detailed examination of the structure and content of the news articles (Fowler, 1991; Carvalho, 2008). The first level of textual analysis

focused on surface features such as the section, page number, visual elements, title, and author (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). The next level examined the objects or themes reconstructed in the news texts, such as the economics of the climate change transition. The third level identified the discourse actors (van Dijk, 2008; Hall and O'shea, 2013), their interests, and their influence level in the articles. The fourth level examined key metaphors and other rhetorical devices used to construct ideological viewpoints. The fifth level examined discursive strategies used in the news text, including social actors and journalists' discursive manipulation of reality (Carvalho, 2008, 2020). The sixth level was concerned with the ideological standpoints embedded in the articles. The seventh level investigated the ontology of the discourse. Finally, the eighth level examined the taken-for-granted assumptions about natural relationships.

Contextual analysis

Following textual analysis, the study moved to a comparative contextual analysis, which examined the overall coverage of an issue in one news outlet and the broader social context. This involved a comparative-synchronic analysis (Deacon et al., 2007, 2021), comparing one text with other representations of the issue published at the same time by different authors in the same news outlet or others. After the comparative-synchronic analysis, the study conducted a historical-diachronic analysis. This step involved creating a history of media constructions of a given issue by examining the sequence of discourse constructions of an issue and assessing its significance. This helped understand how media representations affected subsequent texts and realities and how particular worldviews were reproduced or contested over time.

In the next section, an examination of how four weekly newspapers, namely the *Mail & Guardian*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Independent* and the *City Press* re/produced and automatized the green economy discourse is presented. At the end of the section, the paper argues that the green economy will not solve climate change but rather create new climate rifts and social inequalities.

Media re/production of the neoliberal green economy in South Africa

This section outlines how the South African news media have perpetuated the societal climate rift by endorsing neoliberal climate crisis solutions, utilizing articulation and metabolic/ecological rift theories as analytical tools. Two main themes surfaced from the analysis of the fourteen articles: optimism toward a green economy and confidence in carbon trade and finance. Articles with a positive view of the green economy considered it a key to providing much-needed jobs in light of South Africa's high unemployment rate. On the other hand, discourse on carbon trade and finance perceived the financialization of carbon as a crucial step in accelerating South Africa's development. Interesting from these results is how social actors from the government, the business community, journalists and civil society converged in support of the country's transition toward the "green economy". In the following sections, the paper

TABLE 1 Source use and frequency across newspapers.

Newspaper name	Type of source			Total
	Government	Business	Civil society	
Mail & Guardian	6	3	1	10
Sunday Times	5	5	1	11
Sunday Independent	9	3	2	14
City Press	4	1	0	5
Total	24	12	4	40

provides the gross quantitative distributions of the thematic focus across newspapers and the distribution and source dynamics. Further, the presentation of the results on the two themes is provided.

Thematic frequency across newspapers

Figure 1 below shows that from the fourteen articles selected for analysis, the green economy optimism theme was more prevalent across the four newspapers than the optimism in carbon trade and finance. However, it is essential to note that the lower frequency on carbon trade and finance optimism could result from the global uncertainty and debates around the appropriateness of the Kyoto Protocol, especially as a topic that received so much discussion at COP17 in 2011. However, the issue gained discursive salience between 2012 and 2018 as the country was warming up to taking active continental leadership on carbon trade issues.

This study notes that the news media largely relied on elites for news. Table 1 shows source distribution across the four newspapers. Importantly to highlight from the statistics is that government and business people were given extensive discourse definitional power and thus were successful in setting an agenda within which climate change solutions were to be imagined.

The news articles gave government and business sources the primary definitional power. The journalists primarily relied on government and banking sector officials to define and set the agenda on how green economy and transition issues were debated and discussed. The sources used cohered around endorsing the "green economy" to develop the economy. By so doing, the subject was actively de-politicized as alternative avenues of discussing climate action outside of the neoliberal lens were closed.

Green economy optimism

Since their initiation, the United Nations-led climate change talks (Conference of Parties) have been underpinned by the objective of reducing carbon emissions and assisting countries in mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change. The proposed global solutions advocated for technological interventions, including renewable energy, framed as the foundation for a "green

economy". This "green economy" narrative was propagated and normalized by the United Nations, political leaders, and industry leaders, ultimately resulting in an "imagined consensus" where it became the only logical and desirable goal to transition toward a "green future". It's argued here that the South African news media played a significant role in the reproduction and legitimization of this green economy discourse, conferring upon it a common-sense status and ideological preeminence. The green economy was portrayed as a path toward sustainable development.

Key actors within the South African media discourse, such as government officials, civil servants, environmental groups, and the renewable energy sector, endorsed and propagated the green economy narrative. An exemplar is Lynley Donnelly's news story, "A green SA economy: 'The train is shifting direction,'" (*Mail & Guardian*, 24 November 2011), which applauded the advent of a "green economy", a consensus among businesses, government, and labor that aimed to generate 300,000 jobs through the development of a green industrial base in South Africa. In this story, Zwelinzima Vavi from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) endorsed the consensus, as it would "make a huge contribution in turning the structure of the economy around so that we rely more in future on the country's manufacturing capacity". This uni-dimensional narrative shaped a consensus, reinforcing the notion that the transition to a green economy was inevitable and commonsensical. Notably, the labor movement was adept at articulating capitalist accumulation concepts. Vavi's views aligned with those of the government and business, creating a potent social formation that perpetuates capitalism.

At the 2011 COP17 in Durban, Environmental Affairs Minister Edna Molewa advocated for a green economy transition, promising a more environmentally sustainable South Africa (Eleanor Momberg, "All eyes on UN climate talks", *Sunday Independent*, 27 November 2011). In another news story, Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), asserted that the green economy offered a fresh perspective on challenges and highlighted the economic and social opportunities of investing in modern clean-tech systems (Eleanor Momberg, "MDG goals at risk, UN report warns", *Sunday Independent*, 11 December 2011).

The news story by Suthentira Govender and Subashni Naidoo, "Jobs promise gives SA green fever", (*Sunday Times*, 04 December 2011), portrayed the green economy, a neoliberal construct, as a windfall for job creation and economic growth. This narrative, which translated elite neoliberal interests into the public language of the poor, claimed that "the green economy was about the people, and all were going to benefit". Such representations facilitated the alignment of neoliberal profit motives of the elite with the aspirations of the less affluent. While the transition into a green economy was presented as beneficial to the ordinary populace, the underlying vested interests of capital, the elite, and multinational corporations were obscured. The green economy, it was argued, could invigorate the economy and create hundreds of thousands of jobs within a few years. This optimism toward the green economy was intricately linked with optimism toward renewable technology: "Renewable sources of energy and materials form the basis of a green economy". The economization of the discourse was a key strategy, and the green economy was morally justified

because it would "boost the economy and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs". In this story, Ebrahim Patel, the Minister of Economic Development, urged for a swift transition. Edna Molewa stated, "We have stressed that there will be the creation of jobs. This is not just an effort that is jobless, we will be getting into sustainable development that talks to our people, our economy and takes care of our environment". This narrative of the creation of new "green jobs" helped in rearticulating the green economy discourse and aligning it with the interests of the working class, thus normalizing the green economy as a solution to both climate and socioeconomic issues.

The South African media consistently drew on official government sources for their stories, privileging the government's views on climate change and environmental issues. This was evident in the increasing rhetoric around green jobs and market-driven innovation. By adopting a neoliberal discourse around climate change, the media helped legitimize these narratives, marginalizing alternatives in the process. This marginalization reinforces the dominance of market-centric neoliberal ideologies, as climate change solutions are framed within the confines of economic modernization. Such an approach depoliticizes the climate issue and obscures critiques of the political economy of green economics and its associated inequalities.

This narrative was echoed in Alf James's article "Opportunity to power job creation," (*Sunday Times*, 11 March 2012), which suggested that the green economy could create jobs and revitalize the South African economy. Similar sentiments were expressed by government officials like the Minister of Energy, Dipuo Peters, who believed that the green economy offered a unique opportunity to tackle job creation and climate change concerns simultaneously. The same view was reflected in an Op-Ed by Edna Molewa, who emphasized that a sustainable development path would open up new job opportunities and markets.

Matthew Savides's piece "'Green economy' to create thousands of jobs," (*Sunday Independent*, 04 December 2012) further reinforced this perspective. Various discourse actors, including the Minister of Economic Development and a researcher at the Industrial Development Corporation, underscored the economic and moral imperatives for a transition to a green economy. The media's translation of elite neoliberal views into a common language of job creation made these ideologies seem logical and natural. Yet, the views expressed were predominantly those of the elite, which, when translated, became cultural resources for the everyday man. In Yazeed Kamaldien's piece "SA on its way to a greener economy" (*Mail & Guardian*, 06 June 2013), the achievements of South Africa in pursuing renewable energy were lauded. This narrative was built around official sources, including the Minister of Energy and the President, who praised the investments in new generation capacity. The story presented the transition to renewable energy as common sense and beneficial for job creation, investment, and emission reduction.

Yolandi Groenewald's feature "SA economy waits for the green light" (*City Press*, 15 December 2013) emphasized the green economy as a viable replacement for the old industrial economy. The green economy was moralized through economization, positioning the transition to a greener economy as a growing trend,

thus constructing it as common sense within ideological consent. This green economy optimism was not limited to the ruling African National Congress (ANC) government but also extended to other political parties, such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) party. Helen Zille, in her Op-Ed “Mayors, businesses tackle global warming”, (*Sunday Independent*, 22 January 2017), highlighted the urgency of the climate crisis and the economic potential of a greener future. Despite their differing political ideologies, the ANC and the DA converged on the issue of the green economy, underlining the necessity to examine the overarching political-economic ecologies of climate change in South Africa.

Embracing carbon trade and finance optimism

One of the neoliberal approaches to addressing climate change involves enthusiasm for carbon trading principles. In the Op-Ed “Climate funds give our continent an opportunity to lead the world”, (*Sunday Independent*, 13 November 2011), Geoff Sinclair, Head of Carbon Trade at Standard Bank South Africa, advocated for market-driven mitigation measures, particularly carbon trading. Sinclair saw climate finance as essential for implementing energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, and as an opportunity to create green economies from the ground up. Sinclair’s article endorsed this neoliberal strategy, which claimed to stimulate sustainable growth in emerging economies. Carbon finance’s commodification and fetishization of nature were presented as a morally responsible approach to foster development in emerging economies while reducing emissions in developed nations.

Carbon trading was also depicted as a common-sense solution in the *Sunday Times*. Thekiso Anthony Lefifi’s article “Banks wait for the ‘green’ light”, (*Sunday Times*, 27 November 2011) portrayed banks as crucial players in emission reduction due to their involvement in carbon trading schemes. The story framed carbon trading as a common and beneficial business practice, legitimizing both carbon trade and the commodification and financialization of nature. The piece also indirectly quoted Standard Bank’s Geoff Sinclair, expressing hope that COP17 would establish a design for the Copenhagen climate finance fund that would attract private investment. In doing so, the article reinforced and legitimized the neoliberal ideology of private finance.

In the article “South Africa may lose out on carbon-trading”, (*Mail & Guardian*, 25 April 2012), Fiona Macleod assumes the necessity for South Africa’s participation in the global carbon trading market. The idea of emissions reduction through carbon trading is taken as a given and presented as a rational response to climate change. This acceptance sidelines ideological disagreement and overlooks the neoliberal nature of carbon trading, which involves the financialization and further commodification of nature. Christiana Figueres, UNFCCC’s Chief Executive, is quoted supporting carbon trade: “The CDM continues to evolve and improve and deliver on a scale well beyond initial expectations”.

Jocelyn Sambira’s feature article “Green bond market set to change Africa’s development”, (*Sunday Independent*, 05 July 2015)

expresses optimism about green bond financing’s potential to boost African economies. The article legitimizes and moralizes neoliberal market instruments by portraying green bonds as a solution. Importantly, the narrative of creating a financial market to trade environmental commodities is taken as given and goes unquestioned. By excluding counterpoints to green financing, the piece presents a monolithic view of climate finance, making market-driven responses appear commonsensical and natural.

Discourses on carbon financing tend to downplay or ignore the fact that carbon trading and private financing often do little to reduce emissions, instead effectively awarding licenses for continued pollution. Critics argue that carbon trading allows high-polluting countries and industries to offset their emissions (Kumi et al., 2014; Evans and Musvipwa, 2017). Therefore, such discourses promote market-led responses to climate change, contributing to the illusion that carbon trading is vital to South Africa’s climate response strategies, enabling heavy industries to continue emitting greenhouse gases while offsetting their emissions elsewhere.

While this aligns with South Africa’s economic development priority, it’s critical to consider the nexus of discourse, policy, and finance. Despite their divergent interests, these elements contribute to a culture of relentless accumulation and exploitation, preserving capitalism at all costs. This tendency attempts to position capitalism as a savior in the face of climate change, without advocating for structural transformations addressing social, environmental, and economic justice. Climate change problems are reframed as “unrealised opportunities”, and as green projects target developing countries, the displacement of indigenous communities becomes a significant concern. Carbon markets epitomize 21st-century financial markets, where public goods like nature are commodified and sold to the highest bidder, often at the environment’s expense.

Discussion and conclusion

The results presented in this paper show that nearly all discourse actors, barring those with vested interests in coal, have rallied behind this green economy initiative. Through the use of discursive mechanisms such as economization and moralization, various actors, including scientists, academics, financial institutions, politicians, and the media, have facilitated the normalization of the green economy. The green economy was touted as a beneficial strategy for South Africa as it promised job creation, cleaner air, investment opportunities, and a favorable position in the international community.

The green growth/economy discourse has garnered discursive significance in South Africa, spanning the Jacob Zuma (2009–2017) and Cyril Ramaphosa (2017–present) administrations. At the policy level, the green economy is integrated into the nation’s Integrated Resource Plans (energy blueprints), demonstrating a gradual but consistent transition toward an envisaged green economy. While materialistically and ideologically perpetuating capitalism and its inherent inequalities, the green economy has been elevated to a national project under the banner of “national interest”, “economic development and employment creation”—claims that resonate with what could be termed “the aspirations of the people”.

The government's vision of a green economy has garnered support from capitalist entities within the renewables sectors and finance capital. Subordinate groups are incorporated into this project by articulating their interests and accounting for them (at least ideologically) through interpellation, address, and symbolic representations that appeal to their sentiments of belonging. Scholars must interrogate the strategies of address employed in news media discourses on climate change. These symbolic re/presentations account for popular consent and interests, essentially demonstrating how popular thoughts are mobilized and ritualized in service of the interests of ideological and discursive elites in the context of climate change. This task involves questioning how sustainability, economic development, clean energy, employment creation, and equality are used to interpellate the "masses" into the rhetoric of sustainable green capitalism.

As part of the solutions narrative, the newspaper representations of climate change in South Africa often reproduced the ideas of techno-optimism where buzzwords such as "green economy", "sustainable development," and "green growth" were used and reproduced as common-sense ideologies. All the newspapers reproduced this optimism, leading to the manufacture of consent and a one-dimensional discourse that saw solutions to address climate change through the neoliberal market-led lenses. The green economy discourses acquired a tendential force status by way of economization: they were constructed as "bringing jobs", they were "clean" and "safe".

Techno-responses combined with market principles were seen as rational, reasonable and innovative because they balance economic growth with clean air. The agency of capitalism in causing climate change was passivized and nominalized but was significantly revealed in offering "rational" solutions. The discourses conceptualized, to draw from (Pepermans and Maesele, 2018, p. 642), "nature (including the climate) as a resource that can be mastered through unlimited scientific and technological progress and economic growth". Economic growth (wealth) and mitigating the climate change risks were treated as complementary and compatible through technological innovation and market activities. Halvorsen (2017) drew attention to the false hopes preached under the neoliberal climate responses crusade, noting that the neoliberalist economic agenda sees solutions to climate change as a way for "the state to create secure markets in the environmental sector" (p. 21).

Neoliberal solutions have long been promoted by ecological modernization theorists who believe that technology can potentially dematerialise the world. These proponents of "green capitalism" argue that techno-managerial solutions can disarticulate "the economy from energy and material consumption, allowing human society, under capitalism, to transcend the environmental crisis" (Clark and York, 2005, p. 410). To pacify fears of increased ecological rifts under capitalism, the neoliberal discourse has sought to portray capitalism as "saving the planet from the ecological destruction" (Foster et al., 2010, p. 60).

However, this paper contends that the creation of the green economy is based on capitalist accounting methods that emphasize exchange over use-value. Accounting through exchange value primarily exploits natural habitats and sees all common goods, such as water and the air we breathe, as infinite gifts (Foster et al., 2010,

p. 60). Because nature is viewed as given *gratis*, the marketization of public goods means that they can no longer be enjoyed freely by everyone; rather, those with money would enjoy the benefits of public goods. As an example, the carbon market allows big polluters to continue with business as usual on the basis that once they exceed their carbon budgets, they can easily purchase credits elsewhere.

Carbon continues accumulating, and inequalities get extended as countries with enough money continue intensive carbon-based production and those with little money rely on the former for products. Critical to note is that the metabolic and ecological rifts remain in place; thus, the climate rift society becomes normal. As Clark and York (2005, p. 410) argued, this distorted accounting method leads to the belief that "the institutions of capitalist modernity can avert global environmental crisis without a fundamental restructuring of the social order". Higgins (2012, p. xiv) opposed this view by arguing that neoliberal solutions could not "disrupt the very system that is destroying our world".

In a similar argument, Guattari (2000, p. 28) contended that climate change problems could not be solved by prescribing the same solutions that, in the first instance, are responsible for the current ecological crises. While capitalist innovations have been birthed, and some of these have been able to eliminate some forms of pollution, Foster et al. (2010, p. 94) warned that while capitalism may at some moments appear to be solving environmental problems; it is essential to note that in doing so "new crises spring up where old ones are supposedly cut down". The desire to address climate change through a capitalist lens obscures critical discussions on the need to challenge the mainstream mode of production and its limits in responding to the environmental crises it created.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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