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## Research on Chinese Energy News' Agenda Setting under the Background of Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality—Based on the Postprint

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### Abstract

In the report delivered at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, national leaders emphasized: “We should actively yet prudently advance carbon peaking and carbon neutrality based on China’s energy resource endowment, adhere to the principle of establishing before innovating, implement carbon peaking actions in a planned and step-by-step manner, further promote the energy revolution, improve coal use efficiency, accelerate the planning and construction of a new energy system, and actively participate in global climate change governance.” Against the backdrop of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, energy issues exert a more profound impact on China’s social development and national economy. The general public’s grasp and awareness of energy-related scientific knowledge is relatively weak, making it imperative for energy news reporting to rationally arrange agenda setting and achieve better communication effects. In terms of public opinion guidance, People’s Daily maintains a high political stance and strong theoretical capacity. Its agenda setting revolves around the Party’s central tasks and major themes of national construction, and it possesses strong communication, guidance, influence, and credibility. Therefore, this paper takes People’s Daily’s reporting on “carbon peaking and carbon neutrality” as its research object, examines the agenda setting of China’s energy news, and proposes relevant innovative recommendations.

## Full Text

# Research on Agenda Setting in Chinese Energy News Under the Background of Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality: Based on *People's Daily's* “Carbon Peaking and Carbon Neutrality” Reporting

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**Abstract:** In the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, national leaders emphasized: “We should actively and steadily promote carbon peaking and carbon neutrality based on China’s energy resource endowment, insist on establishing the system before breaking it, implement carbon peaking actions in a planned and step-by-step manner, further promote the energy revolution, improve coal utilization efficiency, accelerate the planning and construction of a new energy system, and actively participate in global climate governance.” Against this backdrop, energy issues exert a profound impact on China’s social development and national economy. However, the general public’s grasp and awareness of energy-related scientific expertise remains relatively weak, making it urgent for energy news reports to arrange agenda setting rationally and achieve better communication effects. In guiding public opinion, *People’s Daily* maintains a high political stance and strong theoretical capacity. Its agenda setting revolves around the central work of the Party and major national construction themes, demonstrating strong communication, guidance, influence, and credibility. Therefore, this paper examines *People’s Daily’s* reporting on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality to study agenda setting in China’s energy news and proposes relevant innovative suggestions.

**Keywords:** carbon peak, carbon neutrality, energy news, agenda setting, *People’s Daily*

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the global greenhouse effect has intensified, and climate change remains a severe challenge. Energy conservation and carbon reduction have become important concerns for all countries. As a key participant in global climate governance, China pledged at the 75th United Nations General Assembly in September 2020 to strive for carbon dioxide emissions to peak by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060—the “dual carbon” goals [1]. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further stated: “We should actively and steadily promote carbon peaking and carbon neutrality based on China’s energy resource endowment, insist on establishing the system before breaking it, implement carbon peaking actions in a planned and step-by-step manner, further promote the energy revolution, improve coal utilization efficiency, accelerate the planning and construction of a new energy system, and

actively participate in global climate governance.” This represents the central government’s latest strategic deployment for achieving these goals, demonstrating China’s enhanced determination and confidence. The dual carbon target is a strategic decision made by the Party Central Committee after careful consideration, vital to the great rejuvenation and sustainable development of the Chinese nation.

However, the general public’s grasp and awareness of energy-related scientific and professional knowledge remains relatively weak. How can media facilitate deeper public understanding of energy issues and motivate concrete actions to promote the dual carbon goals? How does *People’s Daily*, China’s newspaper with the largest circulation and highest rank, set its agenda for energy news reporting? This paper investigates these questions.

## 2.1 Literature Review on *People’s Daily’s* Energy News Reporting

This study selects *People’s Daily* as its research object—the newspaper with the largest circulation and highest rank in China. With a mission to propagate Party and government principles and policies while reporting major national events, it has become China’s most authoritative newspaper, earning widespread reader acclaim. Through decades of development, *People’s Daily* has witnessed the political and economic landscape, changes, and growth across various historical periods in China. It serves as an “encyclopedia” for the general public to understand national conditions and a witness to China’s livelihood construction and citizens’ lives.

From its earliest 12 editions to today’s 24 editions, *People’s Daily* has continuously revised its format to meet reader needs. The newspaper is distributed in more than 100 countries and regions worldwide, with branches across the globe and over 30 editorial newspapers and periodicals. In recent years, to improve news dissemination, gather reader feedback, and enhance vitality, *People’s Daily* has also added new media platforms, including official WeChat, Weibo, official accounts, mobile apps, and People.com.cn.

In terms of public opinion guidance, *People’s Daily* focuses on major themes such as the Party’s central work and national construction. It maintains a high political position and strong theoretical capacity, with agenda setting that is highly communicative, instructive, influential, and credible. Therefore, *People’s Daily* serves as an excellent model for researching energy news agenda setting.

## 2.2 Literature Review on Agenda-Setting Theory

The core proposition of agenda-setting theory is that media news reports and information transmission activities can assign varying degrees of salience to different issues, thereby influencing the audience’s perception of the surrounding world and information dissemination patterns [2]. McCombs and Shaw first proposed agenda-setting theory after investigating media influence on voters during the 1968 U.S. presidential election, concluding that a close relationship

exists between media agendas and public agendas [3]. In 1997, McCombs and Shaw introduced “attribute agenda-setting” theory in a paper on Spanish elections, arguing that mass media can tell the public not only “what to think about” but also “how to think about it,” establishing this as the second level of agenda-setting theory [4].

In the new century, with the emergence and development of the Internet, Guo Lei, McCombs, and others achieved new breakthroughs in agenda-setting theory. In 2011, they proposed the “Network Agenda Setting” theory, discussing whether media influence extends beyond single issues or attributes to encompass a cognitive network composed of interconnected issues. News media not only tell us “what to think about” or “how to think about it,” but more importantly, determine how we connect different pieces of information to construct our understanding and judgment of social reality.

### 2.3 Research Questions

Under the dual carbon background, energy issues profoundly impact China’s social development and national economy. In the era of media convergence, rapid digital and information technology development has enabled new media, represented by the Internet, to gradually reshape the media ecology and communication patterns. New forms of online communication media such as Weibo, WeChat public platforms, and mobile live streaming have provided new opportunities for energy knowledge dissemination. The author observes that the general public’s grasp and awareness of energy-related scientific expertise remains relatively weak. Therefore, how can media facilitate deeper public understanding of energy issues and motivate concrete actions to promote the dual carbon goals? How does *People’s Daily*, China’s newspaper with the largest circulation and highest rank, set its agenda for energy news reporting? This paper addresses these questions.

## 3 Method

This study employs content analysis, which communication scholar Berelson defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content in communications.” Content analysis uses quantitative statistics and analysis of large, representative samples, progressing from data to regular patterns and summaries through layered reasoning, thereby minimizing the shortcomings of purely quantitative analysis while maintaining strong systematicity and objectivity. This paper analyzes *People’s Daily’s* agenda setting in carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reporting from October 2020 to January 2023 by examining report frequency, sources, and placement.

The study examines *People’s Daily* reports on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality from October 2020 to January 2023. Using the *People’s Daily* Database, we searched for “carbon” in “title + keyword” fields, yielding 287 results. After manually screening out government work reports, news reports, and literary

works that merely mentioned “carbon” without focusing on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, we identified 263 relevant reports for analysis.

## 4 Discussion and Analysis

### 4.1 National Policies and Important Events Drive Reporting Peaks in March

From the perspective of agenda-setting theory, “the agenda-setting function of media is to increase issue salience in the public mind through repeated reporting,” guiding readers with high frequency and volume. As an influential and authoritative media outlet, *People’s Daily’s* sustained coverage of important issues demonstrates its strengthened agenda-setting function. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], from October 2020 to January 2023, *People’s Daily’s* carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reporting first rose sharply, then stabilized, rose sharply again, fell sharply, and finally fluctuated upward, demonstrating phased and rapidly changing characteristics. Notably, March of each year shows a reporting peak. Analyzing this phenomenon, the author concludes that national policies, important news, and major meetings significantly influence this March peak.

*People’s Daily* built this agenda through continuous reporting on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality. In terms of policy, 2021 marked the first year of the 14th Five-Year Plan. On March 13, 2021, *People’s Daily* published the *Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035* on page 001, which stated “anchor efforts to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 and adopt more powerful policies and measures.”

Regarding important news, the National Bureau of Statistics of China releases the previous year’s Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development on the last day of February annually. The February 28, 2021 bulletin noted that “carbon dioxide emissions per 10,000 yuan of GDP decreased by 1.0%,” while the February 28, 2022 bulletin reported a 3.8% decrease.

Simultaneously, the “Two Sessions” are held each March. The government work report represents the most important document of these sessions and holds significant research value. *People’s Daily’s* March 6, 2021 excerpt from Premier Li Keqiang’s Government Work Report stated: “Do a solid job in carbon peaking and carbon neutrality. Formulate an action plan for carbon emissions peaking before 2030.” The March 6, 2022 excerpt noted: “Promote carbon neutrality and carbon peaking work in an orderly manner. Implement the carbon peak action plan.”

### 4.2 Prescribed Actions Prompt September Reporting Peaks

The trend line in Figure 1 shows that *People’s Daily’s* carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reporting generally exhibits a volatile upward trend. This

demonstrates that newspapers increase public exposure to energy news through higher reporting frequency, raising awareness of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality information. Media also leverages public understanding and environmental concern to guide reader attention. Figure 1 reveals that September also shows annual reporting peaks. Research into this concentrated September reporting found that the Central Propaganda Department releases “prescribed actions” in advance based on leadership speech tasks, prompting newspapers to arrange reporter stations for interviews nationwide. Local propaganda departments receive advance notice and arrange corresponding interview processes.

At the 75th UN General Assembly in September 2020, national leaders first announced the carbon peaking and carbon neutrality commitment. As the official newspaper of the CPC Central Committee, *People’s Daily* bears responsibility for reporting and propagating this political position. As public understanding of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality deepened, related reporting increased accordingly.

In September 2021, Premier Li Keqiang attended the opening ceremony of the 2021 Taiyuan Energy Low-Carbon Development Forum and delivered a keynote speech, explicitly stating the Chinese government’s commitment to high-quality energy development and climate change response, which again increased topic visibility. Figure 1 clearly shows September 2021 reached a peak of 21 articles.

In February 2022, *People’s Daily* reported extensively on the Beijing Winter Olympics, during which national attention focused on this grand event. The author therefore infers that the data trough shown in Figure 1 for February 2022 is highly relevant to this current affairs hotspot.

### 4.3 Credible Information Sources Enhance Issue Attribute Communication

*People’s Daily’s* news sources are authoritative and extensive, demonstrating high persuasiveness and credibility, which improves energy news dissemination effectiveness. As shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper], as “China’s No. 1 newspaper,” over 90% of *People’s Daily’s* carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reports are self-collected, fully demonstrating the abundant resources, organizational capacity, and talent network behind this central Party newspaper.

The “Letters from Readers” section is an independent page established by *People’s Daily* to effectively “come from the masses and go to the masses,” fulfilling the “three closeness” principle in news reporting (close to life, close to reality, close to the masses), narrowing the distance with readers, and understanding public sentiment [5]. Since searching the *People’s Daily* Database for “carbon” did not yield letters from readers, the author separately searched recent letters and identified seven articles related to energy conservation and emission reduction, such as *Planning Street Trees Requires Brainstorming, Develop and Grow Together with Street Trees*, and *Planting and Managing Roadside Trees Should be Tailored to Local Conditions* (published in 2022); and *Green Office Starts with*

*One Piece of Paper, Strictly Prevent Illegal Occupation of Forest Land, Prevent Deforestation Caused by Tea Planting and Other Issues from Reoccurring, and Resolutely Curb Tea Planting and Deforestation* (published in 2021). This shows that while public awareness of the professional term “carbon peaking and carbon neutrality” needs improvement, awareness of energy conservation and emission reduction is gradually increasing with social development and media publicity.

Additionally, some *People’s Daily* reports not only convey the latest government policies and measures but also facilitate direct communication between government departments and the public, including the National Development and Reform Commission, the State Council Information Office, and the Development Research Center of the State Council. With support from Xinhua News Agency, readers’ letters, government departments, and other parties, *People’s Daily* has made significant contributions to China’s carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reporting. In short, *People’s Daily’s* wide range of news sources enhances report persuasiveness and strengthens agenda-setting effects.

#### 4.4 Diversified and Professional Reporting Themes Strengthen Audience Awareness Networks

“The order of importance or prominence given to ‘issues’ by media affects public and political perception.” *People’s Daily* has repeatedly arranged front-page coverage, highlights, and features on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality to intensify coverage and draw attention from the public and relevant departments, helping promote issue resolution. The diversification, specialization, and scientization of reporting content also reflect media guidance for the public to understand carbon peaking and carbon neutrality scientifically and rationally, guiding public opinion with positive and rational coverage.

Table 1 shows that from October 2020 to January 2023, *People’s Daily’s* carbon peaking and carbon neutrality reports occupied pages demonstrating diversification across 20 categories: front-page features, title highlights, ecology highlights, international, finance, consumption, green, integrated, economic, social, commentary, science and technology, special reports, politics, special issues, culture, sports, democracy, economics, theory, and documents.

Furthermore, the front page and special topics have been arranged multiple times to focus on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality. The pages listed in the table show reports covering multiple topics and wide-ranging content. For example, the August 2, 2021, edition 18 (Finance and Economics) reported “Developing Carbon Finance and Boosting the Carbon Market,” focusing on the official launch of the national carbon emissions trading market and the financial industry’s important role. The August 10, 2022, edition 14 (Politics) report “Speeding Up Green and Low-Carbon Technology Innovation to Help Achieve Dual Carbon Goals” was based on the JiuSan Society Central Research Team’s key investigations in Jiangsu for the dual carbon strategy. The December 1,

2022, edition 12 (Ecology) focused on “Protecting Island Ecology and Helping Green Development,” covering Suzhou, Jiangsu’s ecological restoration of the Taihu Lake Basin and Taihu Ecological Island construction.

In 2011, Guo Lei, McCombs, and others proposed the third level of agenda-setting theory—Network Agenda Setting. Unlike traditional agenda-setting theory, Network Agenda Setting emphasizes that news media influence extends beyond the public’s cognition of single issues or attributes to encompass a cognitive network composed of interconnected issues and attributes, similar to network structures connecting different nodes rather than linear distributions.

Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper] illustrates traditional agenda setting versus online agenda setting [6]. *People’s Daily’s* multiple themes on carbon peaking and carbon neutrality confirm the core theory of Network Agenda Setting: what affects the public is not a single issue or attribute but a cognitive network composed of various complex topics. News media influence the masses not only regarding “what to think about” or “how to think about it,” but more importantly regarding how they connect disparate pieces of data and information to form perceptions and judgments of the real world.

## 5 Conclusion

This research reveals that *People’s Daily* continuously reports on the important issue of carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, building an agenda through substantial coverage volume. Simultaneously, *People’s Daily* maintains wide-ranging news sources that enhance report persuasiveness and strengthen agenda-setting effects. Moreover, *People’s Daily* reports are diverse, professional, and scientific, forming a cognitive network through rich reporting topics.

Under the dual carbon background, energy issues are closely related to China’s social development, yet public grasp and awareness of energy-related scientific and professional knowledge remains generally weak. Currently, rapid digital and information technology development has enabled new media, represented by the Internet, to gradually reshape the media ecology and communication patterns, providing new opportunities for energy knowledge dissemination. To raise public awareness of energy issues and motivate concrete actions promoting dual carbon goals, energy news reports must rationally arrange agenda setting and improve dissemination effectiveness.

First, we must keep pace with the times and elevate news to greater heights [7]. For news reporting, timeliness is particularly important—producing due social effects within appropriate timeframes is the primary factor for dissemination effectiveness [8]. State leaders emphasized that “we must persist in consolidating and strengthening mainstream ideology and public opinion, promote the main theme, spread positive energy, and inspire the powerful force of the whole society to unite and forge ahead” [9]. Journalists must promote the main theme, follow the footsteps of the times, and spread positive energy to produce excellent news reports.

Second, we must expand news sources and increase news warmth. The “three closeness” principle requires news reports to be “closer to life, closer to reality, and closer to the masses.” This involves not only interpreting professional knowledge into understandable content to improve communication effects but also integrating and displaying information from multiple sources and reporting objectively and comprehensively to truly “come from the masses and go to the masses” [10].

Third, we must broaden reporting content and increase news breadth. What affects the public is a cognitive network composed of various complex issues. The public can more deeply understand report themes through diversified and comprehensive coverage, allowing multiple aspects of topics to be reported more objectively and professionally.

In the era of media convergence, information dissemination has become more diverse in form, broader in scope, and more comprehensive in content. Energy news will eventually become an important position of public opinion. With journalists’ efforts, energy news will make greater contributions to promoting China’s carbon peaking and carbon neutrality strategy.

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