Framing The SDGs In Asian Media: A Comparative Study Of China, Thailand, And Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The study looked at national media in China, Thailand, and Indonesia to investigate how they frame the SDGs, following Entman's four framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations. Through qualitative content analysis of 52 Indonesian news, 49 Thai news, and 92 Chinese news agency news in the first half of 2025 from the three largest outlets in each of these countries, the study highlights the selective emphasis and different narrative biases conditioned by political systems and media ownership structures. Chinese state media highlighted the SDGs underpinned by national development agendas, such as the infrastructure agenda and climate action, highlighting centralized planning as a success factor while downplaying governance and equality issues. Thai media seems to view things from a technocratic angle, emphasizing innovation and partnerships while leaving aside biodiversity and systemic inequality. Indonesian media focuses more on achievements at the institutional level in poverty and infrastructure, viewing development issues largely as external or technical, while being very reluctant to criticize structural barriers. In all cases, the media narrative tends to legitimize the government's agenda and national image projections rather than nurture them.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Media Framing, Entman's Framing Theory, Content Analysis, Media Bias

INTRODUCTION

The Role of Mass Media in the SDGs Process

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced in 2015 by the United Nations, provide a comprehensive framework to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and peacebuilding (Javed, 2024. Effective communication is essential to advance this goal, as it increases awareness, shapes public discourse, and mobilizes citizen policies and actions (Irwansyah, 2018; Janoušková et al., 2019; Mulholland, 2019). Media, both traditional and digital, serves as a key intermediary that helps translate technical sustainability frameworks into accessible narratives (Irwansyah, 2018; Javed, 2024).

Mass media plays a dual role in the SDG process: informing citizens and acting as an accountability mechanism for governments and institutions (Mulholland, 2019; Janoušková et al., 2019). Through agenda-setting, the media can bring sustainability topics into mainstream public debates and thus influence policy priorities at the local, national, and international levels (Javed, 2024; Mehmood et al., 2022). Empirical research confirms that media campaigns have been effective in mobilizing public opinion and regulatory responses, as in the case of National Geographic's "Invisible Plastic" campaign, which contributed to global policy discussions on single-use plastic bans (Javed, 2024).

However, while the media has great potential to drive awareness of the SDGs, communication efforts remain uneven and fragmented. Janoušková et al. (2019) argue that sustainable development is often communicated through disconnected themes (e.g., climate, education, or gender) without reference to the overarching SDG framework. This compartmentalized reporting undermines the integrative nature of the SDGs and reduces public understanding of their systemic interdependence (Janoušková et al., 2019). Media analysis conducted in Indonesia also found that only a few SDGs, particularly the environment, are regularly featured in news reporting, with others largely ignored (Irwansyah, 2018).

China, Thailand, and Indonesia were chosen as comparative cases because of their shared status as developing countries in Asia with a formal commitment to the SDGs through several Voluntary National Reviews (UN, 2023), but are very different in political systems, socialist one-party states (China), constitutional monarchies (Thailand), and democratic republics (Indonesia). Despite regional proximity and development challenges, there is no comparative study that systematically examines how these different regimes affect the framing of SDG media. By analyzing media narratives in these three contexts, this study addresses gaps in the communication science of the SDGs and offers insights into how political structures shape sustainability discourse in Asia and to understand how regional media systems frame the global sustainability agenda.

Research Questions

The study identifies how news media in China, Thailand, and Indonesia report and present the SDGs and related topics that are most often covered in news and how these topics are presented and then analyzed using Entman's four framing methods, how they define problems, explain their causes, assess morality, and suggest solutions.

In addition, studies examine narrative bias, for example, choosing certain topics over others, leaving out other topics, showing support for certain groups, and using symbols to frame issues, how media narratives are shaped in support of government or political goals. Differences in the media system are owned and operated namely the government-controlled system in China, the mix of public and private media in Thailand, and most private media in Indonesia, the study also identifies how these systems affect the narrative of the SDGs covered in the news. The narrative comparator is a report on the SDGs reported by the United Nations in 2025. This comparison shows the difference in the emphasis of the UN focus with the news published in each country.

Research Objectives

This study aims to identify the narrative of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in thematic issues in news coverage on the websites of news agencies from China, Thailand, and Indonesia, then the narratives in the news are analyzed about their framing strategies and potential bias in reporting related to the SDGs in each country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of narrative bias studies in Mass Media about the SDGs

The results of this study show how the news media should communicate the SDGs in the development agenda in achieving sustainable goals, educating the public and to build the national image of the country without framing that tends to frame in a non-neutral manner. The findings of the research are expected to be the subject of study and discussion on how biased the narrative of the news media and how journalism shapes and educates the public about the SDGs.

Media in Indonesia

Wijayanto and Nurhajati (2019) stated in their research that in Indonesia, online news media coverage is only limited to environmental issues related to the SDGs. In addition, it is chosen only on certain issues with the aim of getting significant attention (Irwansyah, 2018).

The media narrative in Indonesia focuses more on environmental issues, while the implementation of the SDGs is more limited. Thus, it reflects that the narrative reflects a bias only on certain aspects of sustainability, namely the environment while the social and economic aspects receive less attention (Wijayanto & Nurhajati, 2019).

In Indonesia, the government shapes the media narrative about the SDGs. Media that relies on government press releases as an official source can lead to biased representation of the SDGs. TVRI (Televisi Republik Indonesia) is a state-owned broadcasting institution that promotes the government's SDGs initiatives through development communication strategies. The government regulates the use of national and local stations, new media platforms, and participatory strategies (Ramadhani et al., 2020). Therefore, the promotion of initiatives can be biased because it ignores the contributions and perspectives of grassroots or civil society.

Media in Thailand

The Thai government actively promotes the SDGs with the aim of emphasizing economic growth and environmental sustainability. The driving strategy of the BCG economic model 2021-2026 which refers to the Government Public Relations Office, 2021 consists of four issues: 1) balancing conservation and utilization for the sustainability of resources and biodiversity, 2) using the power of identity and potential thinking (biodiversity and cultural diversity) whose creativity and technology can increase value in the production chain of goods and services to a higher level that affects society and the economy development, 3) harnessing knowledge, technology, and innovation to help improve the industry to be competitive and environmentally friendly, and 4) building immunity and the ability to respond to global changes (Seesung, 2021).

The media emphasized the integration of the SDGs into local governance and community-based solutions, such as community waste banks and sustainable fashion projects led by royal initiatives.

The Department of Public Relations (2024) also reported financial innovations that support the SDGs. For example, the issuance of $12.5 billion worth of sustainability bonds and the launch of Thailand's Green Taxonomy are covered as key tools to mobilize green and social investments.

Media in China

The news coverage of the SDGs in China from a study conducted by Yu et al. (2020) shows limited disclosure by companies. Companies' attention is more focused on infrastructure and economic growth, while other sectors are less paid attention to or ignored.

The SDGs narrative shows a shift more towards economic goals than health, social goals, and environmental goals. This shift in focus leads to a non-comprehensive and unfair approach to development (Lencucha et al., 2023).

Fu et al. (2024), stated in their research that the SDGs are an area that is ignored by stakeholders in their analysis, both public and government. The findings of the study suggest that the implementation of development goals that guide policy direction, inform public engagement strategies and increase understanding of sustainable development is a priority for the SDGs.

The role of the media in improving environmental governance and monitoring sustainable development is carried out He et al. (2020). In addition, his research explores the relationship between the Chinese government and media coverage. Framing theory and attention cycle literature are used as theories to analyze the findings. Analysis of framing, news sources and media bias both negative, neutral and positive by China Daily, an English-language newspaper in China. The issue as a framework is significantly correlated with the citations of statements by government officials and agencies as news sources.

Theoretical Framework

Entman's framing theory is used to analyze news information framed by the media will affect public perception and understanding. Framing is done by selecting certain aspects of the existing reality to make them more prominent and noticed in the context of communication (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018).

The systematic pattern of institutional narratives that shape public perception selectively emphasizes, omits or frames information on ideological, cultural or strategic agendas in a media becomes a reference for the analysis of narrative bias typology. Selective emphasis, neglect, legitimacy signaling, symbolic framing and attribution bias are indicators of bias in framing theory analysis (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974),

Media narratives are strategically distorted for institutional, ideological or political interests. The distortion mechanism is manifested by means of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration, so that it will shape the audience's perception in understanding the problem and the actors in the narrative. In the selection, which event or voice statement will be selected to include in the coverage. This often prioritizes goals that align with national priorities or institutional agendas. The emphasis aims to strengthen certain aspects, such as success stories or technological solutions by ignoring structural challenges, namely inequality or failure of institutional or government governance. Exceptions are made by intentional or unintentional omissions from different perspectives, marginalized communities, or controversial topics that narrow the scope of public discourse. Meanwhile, elaboration is making layered interpretations by framing actors or actions. It is used to strengthen legitimacy or alignment with global norms. (Hansen, Anders, 1991)

The entirety of these biased mechanisms shapes the SDGs communication narrative with a frame on what goals are considered more important, who is responsible, and what solutions are accepted. This research will identify and categorize biases. Bias is used to critically assess the media's framing of symbolic adherence or strengthening of the dominant power structure in SDGs discourse.
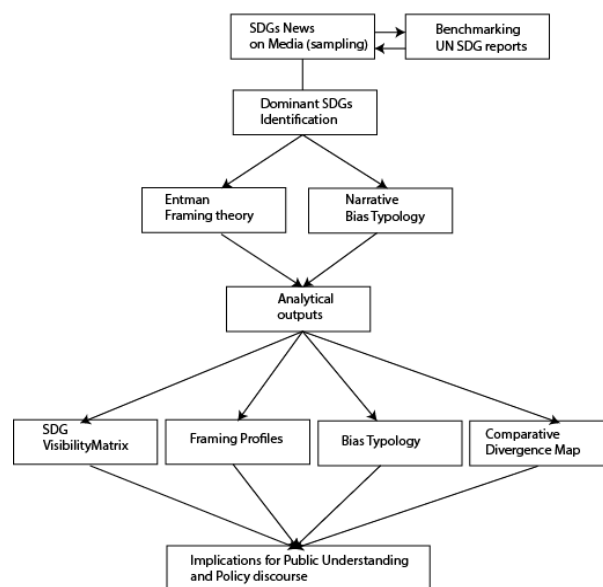
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The SDGs Media Analysis Framework is a systematic approach to assess the representation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the media, as well as compare them to UN reports on the SDGs in each country. The systematic process begins with the main data source, namely a collection of articles in the selected media because it contains reports on the SDGs from the National Media of the three selected countries. The analysis of the news is then compared with the 2025 SDGs progress report. This data is used to uncover the SDGs that are commonly highlighted in media coverage, exposing trends of excellence and oversight. The advanced exam uses two complementary theoretical perspectives. Entman's Framing Theory is used to evaluate how the media presents issues, emphasizing problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral judgments, and treatment suggestions. Second, the Narrative Bias Typology examines how narratives are shaped through selection (what is included), emphasis (what is highlighted), omission (what is left out), and elaboration (how thoroughly the issue is examined). This analysis method yielded four main outcomes: the SDG Visibility Matrix, which describes the benefits of various goals; Framing Profiles, which define media narratives; Typology of Bias, which classifies narrative distortions; and the Comparative Divergence Map, which illustrates the differences between the media and the UN's point of view. Ultimately, these results clarify the effects on public understanding and policy dialogue, highlighting how media framing and bias affect public views on sustainability and influence policy agendas.

METHODOLOGY

This study discusses qualitative methods, content analysis to identify gaps and biases in the SDGs narrative in three countries in terms of China, Thailand, and Indonesia. Content analysis methods used to find trends in how the SDGs are portrayed in the media, including which targets are most discussed, how they are expressed, and whose voices or narratives are highlighted or left out. The amount of SDG-related reporting assesses and analyzes the underlying meaning, frame, and bias of the text using content analysis, which has both quantitative and qualitative components.

Sampling for this study used all news covering the SDGs from the top three outlets of each country with several criteria. The criteria for selecting Media outlets from each country are based on the top three news agencies, accessibility

to the public and in the period from January 1 to June 30, 2025. The time based on the latest UN report on the SDGs for the world is in 2025. News will be searched using only the keyword "SDGs".

The results of each country will be analyzed to identify and describe problems, causal interpretations, moral judgments, and/or suggested actions, based on Entman's theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results of SDGs news reports

1. **Indonesia News Case Study**

The selected Indonesian media, namely Kompas, Republika, and Koran Tempo, selectively framed the issues of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their coverage tends to highlight SDGs related to technology, innovation, and institutions such as SDG 9 (Industry and Innovation), SDG 1 (Poverty Alleviation), SDG 10 (Reducing Inequality), SDG 6 (Clean Water), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), while goals such as SDG 2 (No Hunger), SDG 14 (Marine Ecosystems), and SDG 15 (Terrestrial Ecosystems) are marginalized. Kompas presents development from a technocratic point of view, emphasizing infrastructure and technological advancement, but lacking social and ethical aspects. Republika elevates the narrative of partnership and community empowerment but often ignores systemic challenges such as access and funding.

Meanwhile, Koran Tempo focuses on diplomacy and national leadership on climate issues and strategic partnerships. These three media outlets emphasize institutional success and promotional narratives, without including independent evaluations, measurable impact data, or grassroots community perspectives. The UN report on Indonesia's SDGs 2025 shows that although Indonesia's SDGs performance score increased from 69.4 to 70.2 and the global ranking rose to 77th out of 167 countries, only 35% of the SDGs targets are on track, while 18% are regressing and the rest are stagnant. The UN highlighted systemic barriers such as climate change, debt, and geopolitical instability that are hampering progress, and called for transformation in six key sectors: food, energy, digital, education, jobs, and climate-biodiversity integration. Indonesia's media narrative seems to be aligned with global goals but lacks analytical depth and lacks accountability mechanisms to validate claims of sustainable development success.
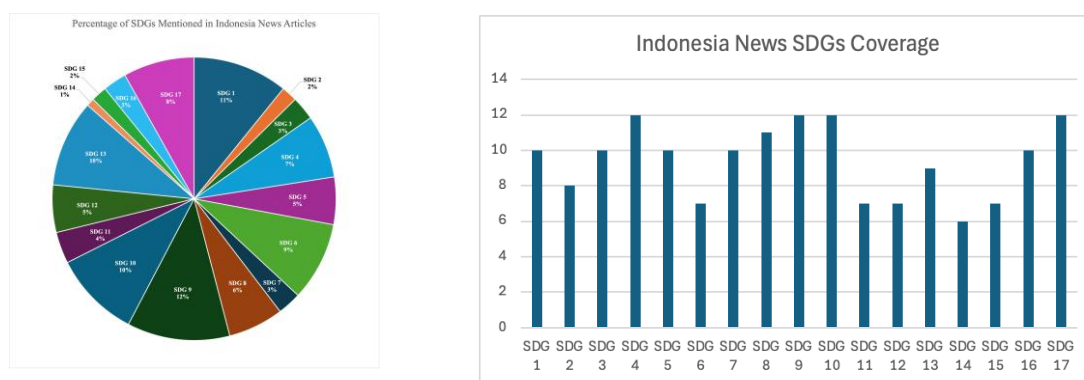

Figure 2. Graph of Indonesia's SDGs news coverage

2. China News Case Study

Chinese state media coverage of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) shows a pattern of selective framing that focuses on specific themes that are aligned with national development strategies. An analysis of 92 articles from People's Daily Online, Xinhua News Agency, and China Daily revealed that SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) were the most cited, reflecting China's priorities in digital modernization, low-carbon transition, and urban planning. However, the SDGs 2025 report shows a decline in China's performance in several important SDGs such as SDG 13, SDG 14 (Life Underwater), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 16 (Strong Institutions), with negative indicators such as increased emissions, decreased biodiversity, and low press freedom.

Although media outlets such as People's Daily Online highlight the government's successes in poverty alleviation and green finance, as well as Xinhua which promotes technology as an SDG solution, and China Daily which features China's global participation, this coverage tends to ignore controversial issues and structural challenges. This framing strategy reinforces the country's image as a sustainability leader, but risks creating incomplete representation and hampering critical public discussion of the progress of the SDGs.
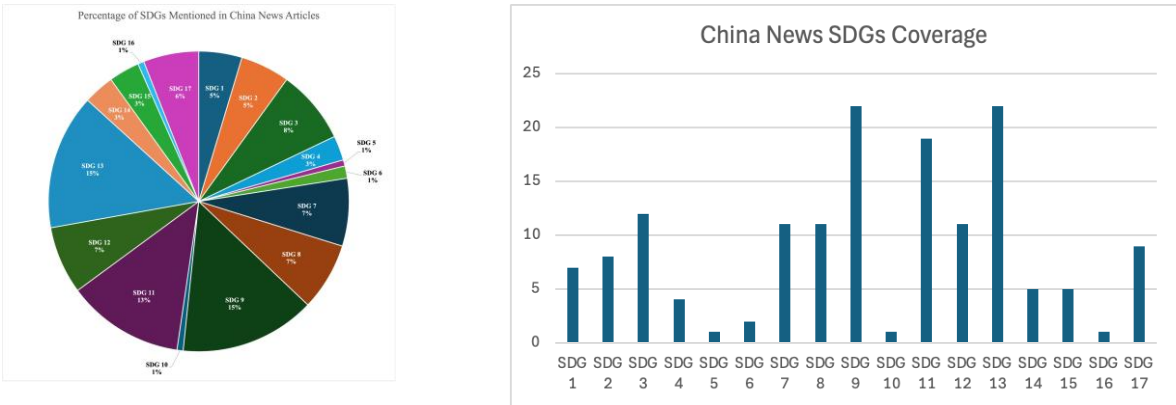

Figure 3. China's SDGs news coverage chart

3. Thailand News Case Study

Coverage of the SDGs 2024–2025 by Thailand's three major media outlets—Thairath, Matichon, and MGR Online—shows a pattern of selective framing that emphasizes themes such as responsible consumption (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), global partnerships (SDG 17), and industrial innovation (SDG 9), in line with national policies focused on the green economy and international cooperation. In contrast, environmental issues such as marine life (SDG 14), terrestrial life (SDG 15), and clean water (SDG 6) receive less attention, despite increasing urgency. Thairath highlighted corporate responsibility and technological innovation, while Matichon framed the SDGs in the context of national competitiveness and government flagship projects.

MGR Online emphasizes the dominant role of academics and local institutions in descriptive narratives and is not critically evaluated. This media presents more SDGs because of institutional compliance and promotional events that do not demand accountability and community involvement. The issues of inequality (SDG 10), the content of peace and justice (SDG 16) and environmental degradation are ignored. This pattern reinforces

the image of institutions and companies, at the risk of obscuring structural challenges and creating a gap between policy communication and ecological realities, thus necessitating independent monitoring mechanisms and more inclusive media reporting.
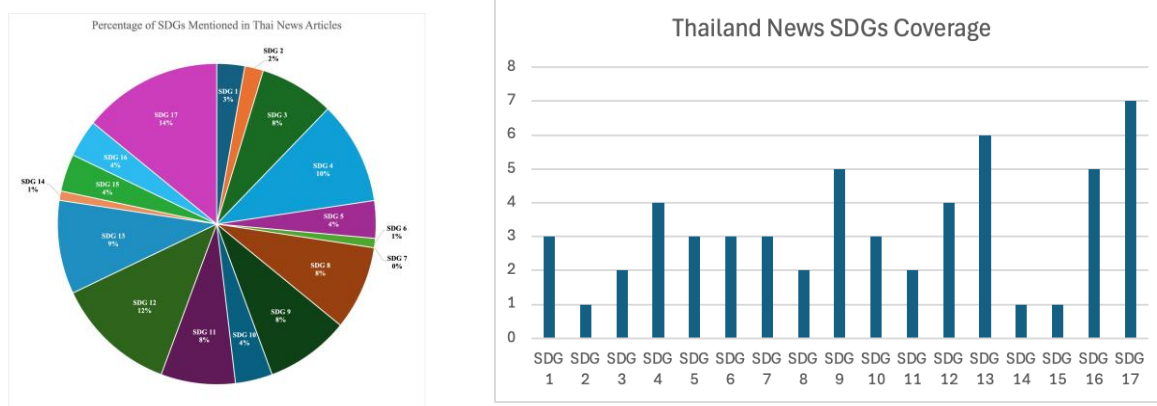

Figure 4. Pie chart China's SDGs news coverage chart

Summary of the Results of SDGs news reports in three countries

Analysis of the frequency of coverage of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in China, Indonesia, and Thailand shows an emphasis pattern that reflects their respective national priorities. China most often highlights SDG 8 (Decent Work) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), followed by SDG 9 (Industry and Innovation), which reflect a focus on sustainable economic growth and industrial modernization. Indonesia shows a more balanced distribution, with SDG 9 and SDG 1 (Poverty Alleviation) being the most dominant, as well as significant attention to health (SDG 3) and social equality (SDG 10). Meanwhile, Thailand places the most emphasis on SDG 17 (Global Partnerships), followed by SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption) and SDG 13, which are in line with environmental policies and international cooperation. All three countries prioritize SDG 13, which reflects regional awareness of climate issues, but show low emphasis on SDG 14 (Life Underwater) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), which show a gap in attention to biodiversity and environmental conservation.
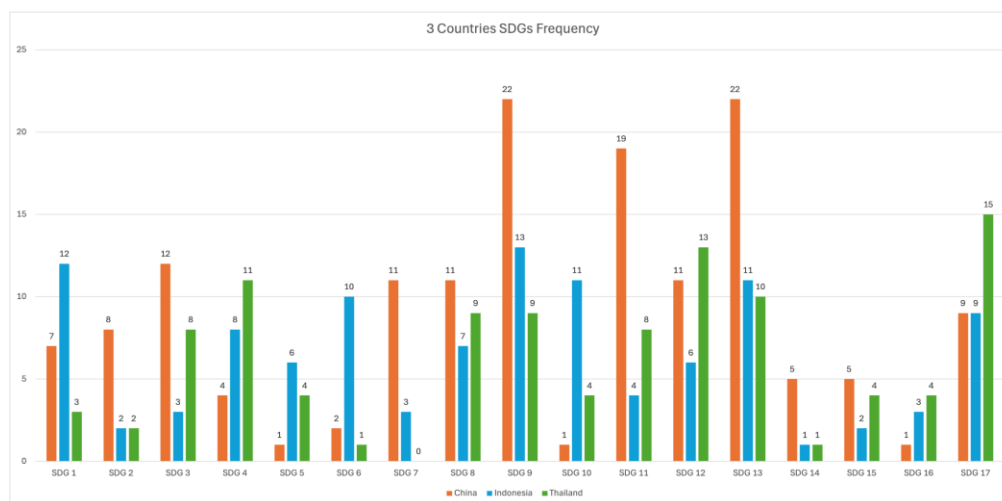

Figure 5. Histogram of the news coverage of the Three Countries SDGs

Through Entman's framing theory, the media in Indonesia, China, and Thailand tend to present the SDGs narrative selectively, emphasizing institutional success and technocratic innovation while ignoring structural challenges. In Indonesia, media coverage often highlights a lack of funding or innovation as a barrier to development, with external causes such as global competitiveness as the reason, thus distracting from policy inequality and systemic exclusion. Success stories are morally reinforced, while the failures and voices of affected communities are often ignored. In China, state media emphasize successes in poverty alleviation and infrastructure development, linking them to state planning and strengthening the image of centralized leadership, while issues such as climate and gender equality receive less attention. Thailand frames sustainability as an innovative challenge, focusing on technology, partnerships, and green consumerism, but ignoring issues such as inequality and environmental degradation. The UN 2025 report points to serious obstacles such as high emissions, pollution, and weak governance, which contrasts with media narratives that tend to be promotional and symbolic. Overall, media framing in all three countries places more emphasis on institutional legitimacy and image than public accountability, risking obscuring the need for systemic reforms to achieve the SDGs across the board.

CONCLUSION

Through Entman's framing theory, media in Indonesia, China, and Thailand tend to present the SDGs narrative selectively, emphasizing institutional success and technocratic innovation while ignoring structural challenges. In Indonesia, media coverage often highlights a lack of funding or innovation as a barrier to development, with external causes such as global competitiveness as the reason, thus distracting from policy inequality and systemic exclusion. Success stories are morally reinforced, while the failures and voices of affected communities are often ignored. In China, state media emphasize successes in poverty alleviation and infrastructure development, linking them to state planning and strengthening the image of centralized leadership, while issues such as climate and gender equality receive less attention. Thailand frames sustainability as an innovative challenge, focusing on technology, partnerships, and green consumerism, but ignoring issues such as inequality and environmental degradation. The UN 2025 report points to serious obstacles such as high emissions, pollution, and weak governance, which contrasts with media narratives that tend to be promotional and symbolic. Overall, media framing in all three countries places more emphasis on institutional legitimacy and image than public accountability, risking obscuring the need for systemic reforms to achieve the SDGs across the board.

Implication

These findings reveal that the representation of the SDGs by the media in China, Thailand, and Indonesia is strongly influenced by the institutional context and development priorities of each country, resulting in a selective pattern of coverage. To address this bias, journalists and media organizations are advised to expand the scope of their reporting to include under-highlighted goals, such as climate action, inequality, and institutional accountability. While these changes may be hampered by a variety of constraints, small shifts in editorial direction or collaboration with civil society groups can help create a more balanced public understanding. For educators and communication practitioners, it is important to encourage critical media literacy so that the public can recognize progress and gaps in the implementation of the SDGs. This simple effort can strengthen a more inclusive, transparent, and sustainability-oriented communication ecosystem.

Further Research

To build on these findings, future research could expand the analysis to include independent or subnational media, as well as audience acceptance studies to assess how SDG framing affects public perception. In addition, it can pay more attention to the role of digital and social media in shaping alternative sustainability discourses, especially among younger or marginalized audiences.

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