CLIMATE CRISES IN THE AGE OF CORPORATE MEDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

The climate crises unfold not only through spectacular disasters but also through what Rob Nixon terms slow violence – gradual, delayed, and often invisible forms of environmental harm that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. In the age of corporate media, however, such protracted ecological crises pose fundamental challenges to dominant news values shaped by immediacy, spectacle, and commercial imperatives. This paper critically examines how corporate media represents environmental disasters and slow-onset climate impacts, interrogating the narrative, visual, and temporal frameworks through which climate catastrophe is made visible – or rendered invisible. It argues that event-driven news cycles, market-driven pressures, audience fatigue, limited visual immediacy, and the growing circulation of misinformation significantly constrain sustained and structural engagement with the climate crisis. Situating media practices within the political economy of corporate journalism, the study highlights the ethical and representational responsibilities of the media to move beyond episodic disaster reporting, amplify marginalised voices, and contextualise long-term ecological risks within broader socio-economic structures. Through a critical analysis of media practices and selected case illustrations, the paper ultimately calls for more nuanced, long-form, empathetic, and solutions-oriented modes of climate storytelling capable of representing slow violence and fostering deeper public engagement in an era of ecological precarity.

Keywords: Climate Crisis, Corporate Media, Slow Violence, Environmental Disaster Representation, Media Ethics, Political Economy

1. INTRODUCTION

It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us, and if we don't learn to listen you may be sure that we will be punished for it. Ghosh (2019)

Environmental crises today are marked not only by sudden disasters but also by forms of perils that unfold gradually over years or even generations. Climate catastrophes in the twenty-first century increasingly manifest through what Nixon (2011) describes as *slow violence*: harm that is incremental, accretive, and frequently imperceptible within dominant temporal and visual regimes. By slow

violence, Nixon (2011) discerns "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). Examples may include extreme weather, sea-level rise, deforestation, industrial pollution, and the slow, toxic aftermath of nuclear and chemical warfare. Slow violence is thus defined by fractured and extended temporalities that unfold beyond the immediacy of human perception, resisting the short-term, event-driven frameworks through which harm is conventionally recognised, measured, and represented. Such temporalities refuse containment within singular events or dramatic visuals, problematising corporate media's reliance on image-driven storytelling, compressed temporal frames, and attention economies. Consequently, traditional mass media often struggles to narrate ecological processes whose temporalities exceed human perception, demanding instead forms of imagination, attentiveness, and relationality that the environmental humanities have long advocated.

Within the environmental humanities, slow violence is understood not merely as a descriptive category but as a conceptual intervention that challenges the epistemological, sensory, and narrative structures through which societies perceive environmental harm. It exposes the asymmetrical distribution of vulnerability, the long historical accumulation of ecological damage, and the lived suffering of communities erased by the temporal regimes of global capitalism, colonial extraction, and technocratic governance. As climate change intensifies and ecological degradation accelerates, slow violence increasingly shapes lived environments, yet its temporally extended and spatially diffuse nature disrupts dominant cultural imaginaries and exceeds traditional frameworks of representation – including those of mass media. Unlike fast-onset disasters, such as floods or earthquakes, slow violence lacks spectacle and urgency, making it harder to represent, understand, and respond to Nixon (2011).

These theoretical and practical concerns shape the central research questions guiding this study as it attempts to examine the responsibilities and challenges faced by mass media in narrating slow violence within the contemporary context of environmental uncertainty. It seeks to answer the following questions: (a) What are the ethical and practical responsibilities of corporate media in representing slow-onset environmental crises? (b) What structural, economic, and perceptual challenges hinder the effective narration of slow violence? (c) How can innovative storytelling and journalistic practices improve media representation of gradual environmental degradation? To address these questions, the paper interrogates how journalistic norms, temporal structures, and representational logics shape the visibility and invisibility of slow violence within news discourse. It examines how media narratives intersect with the liberal capitalist market, and how alternative storytelling modes inspired by environmental humanities frameworks may offer more ethically and epistemically adequate representations.

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach that integrates critical media analysis with environmental humanities theory, drawing on scholarship in environmental communication, narrative theory, and media studies to conceptualise slow violence. Using a deductive strategy, it examines selected media illustrations rather than comprehensive case studies, employing critical discourse analysis to trace how narrative form, framing, and language shape public understandings of long-term ecological harms, particularly as they affect marginalised communities and dominant temporal assumptions. Although the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Hindu*, and *The New York Times* differ in formal ownership and funding structures, during case illustrations, this study classifies them as corporate

media because they function within the same dominant regime of mediated visibility structured by market competition, platform circulation, and event-driven news values. Their journalism is shaped less by ownership form than by their insertion into capitalist attention economies that privilege immediacy, spectacle, and crisis over historical and structural causation. It is this shared political economy of visibility that renders them analytically comparable as corporate media.

Taken together, these insights lead to the paper's broader conceptual argument: addressing the representational challenges of slow violence requires not only the refinement of journalistic techniques but also a deeper rethinking of the narrative imaginaries that structure public engagement with ecological crisis. It further argues that, when informed by the ethical and relational insights of the environmental humanities, mass media can make invisible harms visible, amplify marginalised experiences, and foster a more meaningful ecological understanding in a climate-fragile world.

2. MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN REPRESENTING SLOW VIOLENCE

Contemporary media systems are shaped by deep historical inheritances and structural constraints that profoundly influence how environmental issues are represented, perceived, and understood. The difficulty of narrating slow violence cannot be fully grasped without situating journalism within these broader political, economic, and epistemic formations. Modern corporate media developed within traditions that privilege immediacy, spectacle, and events – practices that stand in tension with the incremental, dispersed, and temporally elongated nature of slow violence. Because slow violence unfolds beyond the perceptual thresholds of conventional news values, its representation in mainstream journalism is not only a professional challenge but a crisis embedded in the very architecture of media systems Nixon (2011).

Historically, the norms of journalism emerged alongside the rise of industrial modernity. As newspapers became tied to capitalist markets and mass readerships, the criteria of newsworthiness reflected the logics of novelty, disruption, and event-driven temporality. These conventions were strengthened by the emergence of telegraphy, photography, and later broadcasting, which collectively fostered an orientation toward the dramatic and the visually arresting. Mass media's role became tied to the circulation of discrete, time-bound events that could be easily consumed and narrated. Within such a structure, stories that unfold slowly, without a clear moment of eruption or catastrophe, fall outside the boundaries of what journalism is culturally and institutionally primed to recognise as news. In the digital age, these tendencies have intensified. These dynamics are embedded within the political economy of corporate media, where profit maximisation, shareholder interests, and advertising-driven revenue models decisively shape news priorities. Corporate consolidation and market competition further narrow the range of issues deemed commercially viable, marginalising forms of reporting that demand long-term commitment, field investigation, or cross-regional analysis. Consequently, stories requiring sustained engagement struggle to survive in editorial environments structured around speed, spectacle, and monostable attention. Slow violence, which inherently resists reduction to episodic events and instant visual drama, is therefore routinely sidelined by the profit-oriented logic of contemporary media production.

These structural constraints are inseparable from the broader representational crisis that slow violence unveils. Mainstream media relies heavily on visuality – on images that can capture a crisis in a single frame. Yet the most consequential

environmental harms today often lack photographic immediacy. Toxic chemical exposure, groundwater contamination, biodiversity loss, or the gradual encroachment of sea levels cannot be easily represented through dramatic visuals. Even when visual proxies exist – such as smog-choked skylines or cracked arid landscapes – they only offer surface-level glimpses of deeper structural processes. Imaging technologies, despite their growing sophistication, remain ill-equipped to portray the long temporal horizons and systemic interdependencies that define slow violence. This mismatch between visual regimes and environmental temporality contributes to the invisibility of long-term ecological degradation.

Environmental humanities scholars argue that this is not merely an aesthetic problem but a structural and political one. Modern modes of perception themselves – what we consider visible, recognisable, or emotionally compelling – are shaped by centuries of capitalist, colonial, and techno-scientific rationality. These regimes of perception normalise certain forms of harm while obscuring others. Slow violence disproportionately affects communities whose stories have historically been marginalised: indigenous groups, racialised communities, informal labourers, and residents of the Global South. For many of these communities, environmental degradation is entangled with histories of dispossession, extraction, and structural inequality. Yet because their suffering does not fit the spectacular templates of dominant media discourse, their experiences often go underreported or are framed reductively through crisis imagery that erases context and agency Bødker and Morris (2022).

This representational injustice is reinforced by journalistic reliance on official sources – government agencies, scientific institutions, corporate spokespeople – who possess the institutional legitimacy that news organisations depend upon. The reliance on such authorities marginalises the experiential knowledge of frontline communities and perpetuates hierarchies of credibility. These dominant science communication models focus narrowly on the accurate transmission of scientific facts, instead of emphasising questions of power, meaning-making, and environmental justice. Moreover, media narratives often emphasise proximate causes rather than structural or historical ones. Coverage may focus on a polluted river or a community displaced by rising seas but fail to trace the longer chain of extractive practices, policy decisions, or colonial legacies that made such harm possible. As a result, the public receives fragmented snapshots rather than systemic ecological understanding.

Spatial and temporal complexity compounds this representational crisis. Slow violence often flows across borders and scales, linking distant geographies through supply chains, trade networks, and extractive industries. A single toxic spill or warming trend may be the culmination of decades of industrial practice, regulatory neglect, and cumulative emissions originating far from the site of harm. Journalism's focus on locality and immediacy makes it difficult to represent these trans-scalar dynamics. Similarly, journalism's narrative conventions – stories with beginnings, crises, and resolutions – break down when confronted with harm that lacks a clear origin point or endpoint, and whose consequences may extend across generations. Slow violence manifests not as a singular rupture but as a prolonged condition of harm, eroding the narrative grammar on which mainstream storytelling depends Bødker and Morris (2022). Additionally, the rise of misinformation and climate denialism has intensified public confusion, placing even greater pressure on journalists to simplify narratives in order to maintain engagement. Simplification, however, often comes at the cost of obscuring slow violence's structural drivers. The ideological pull of technological optimism – common in many mainstream outlets –

further narrows the range of stories told, focusing on innovations and solutions rather than the enduring inequalities and histories that shape environmental vulnerability.

While the preceding constraints expose the epistemic and narrative limits of journalistic form in apprehending slow violence, they do not fully account for the ways in which visibility is also actively managed and strategically distorted by powerful economic actors. Beyond problems of representation and scale, the contemporary media landscape is increasingly shaped by deliberate corporate interventions that seek to deflect responsibility, manufacture doubt, and discipline public attention. Roy (2004) aptly reminds us that "the corporate media doesn't just support the neo-liberal project. It *is* the neo-liberal project. This is not a moral position it has chosen to take, it's structural. It's intrinsic to the economics of how the mass media works" (para. 6). Political and economic forces thus further exacerbate these representational barriers. Media organisations dependent on advertising revenue may hesitate to challenge such actors directly. Analyses of concrete media cases reveal how the structural limitations and representational challenges surrounding slow violence manifest across different geopolitical contexts and journalistic cultures. These cases also demonstrate how alternative storytelling practices can interrupt dominant media logics by foregrounding long durations, distributed agency, and the lived experiences of vulnerable communities.

3. ANALYSING MAINSTREAM NEWS REPRESENTATIONS OF SLOW VIOLENCE

Critics often expose the paradox that even as people across the world directly experience extreme weather and environmental disruptions, climate change is still often portrayed in the corporate media as a remote and future-oriented problem. In her Foreword titled "Timescapes of Climate Change: A Challenge for the Media", Barbara Adam observes that although recent protest movements and youth-led activism have intensified public awareness and urgency, deep structural tensions persist between how climate change unfolds over time and how journalism traditionally represents events. Bødker and Morris (2022). Recent BBC reports on flooding in south-east England Askew (2025) and the catastrophic floods and mudslides in Sri Lanka Sri Lanka Declares State of Emergency After Floods and Mudslides (2025) function as instructive case illustrations of what Rob Nixon conceptualises as the representational dilemma of slow violence. In both reports, climate disaster is framed through the aesthetics of instant crisis – rising waters, infrastructural damage, and escalating death tolls – thereby privileging sudden rupture over cumulative causality.

In the UK-focused report, flooding is constructed as a consequence of exceptional rainfall and strong winds, reinforced by official warnings and technical risk assessments. While the report documents immediate danger and disruption, it disarticulates the event from the deeper temporalities of climate change, urban planning failures, and long-term vulnerabilities produced through infrastructural neglect. This displacement of causality exemplifies Nixon (2011) claim that slow violence is routinely masked by narratives that prioritise proximate triggers over structural drivers. Responsibility is subtly shifted onto naturalised weather systems, while the slow erosion of environmental resilience produced by policy decisions and capitalist land use remains largely unspoken because it lacks the visual drama and newsworthiness that drive media attention.

The Sri Lanka report likewise foregrounds numerical magnitude – hundreds dead, thousands displaced, and widespread destruction – yet offers limited

interrogation of the historical and geopolitical forces that intensify disaster in the Global South. Although the scale of suffering is emphasised, the report transforms structural vulnerability into a moment of humanitarian emergency, centred on rescue, survival, and appeals for aid. In Nixon (2011) terms, this framing converts slow violence into an instant spectacle of victimhood, displacing attention from the slow accumulation of risk shaped by colonial extraction, ecological depletion, uneven development, and climate-adaptive inequality. The crisis is thus rendered as tragic but temporally isolated, rather than as the violent outcome of long-standing environmental injustice.

Across the BBC Sri Lanka Declares State of Emergency After Floods and Mudslides (2025), Askew (2025), *The Guardian* Ellis-Petersen and agencies (2025), *The Hindu* The Hindu Bureau (2025), and *The New York Times* Mulkey (2025), a strikingly similar narrative economy shapes how climate-related slow violence is rendered visible. Although these outlets differ in funding structures, ownership models, or national context, their reporting on climate disasters – whether Himalayan flash floods The Hindu Bureau (2025), Ellis-Petersen and agencies (2025), or the Amazon's long-term rainfall decline driven by deforestation Mulkey (2025) – remains tethered to event-driven visibility. These outlets repeatedly illustrate this tension: each covers climate harm primarily when it crystallises into an acute moment of disaster or a newly published scientific study, thereby foregrounding immediacy while leaving the long duration of structural degradation underexamined.

Taken together, these reports exemplify the core contradiction Nixon identifies between slow violence and dominant media temporality: while environmental harm unfolds incrementally, corporate media remain calibrated to the rhythms of sudden catastrophe. This produces a form of visibility without historical depth, in which suffering is rendered spectacularly visible at the moment of crisis but stripped of the slow processes that made it inevitable. Climate disasters are thus repeatedly re-naturalised as exceptional events rather than politically produced outcomes of capitalist development and uneven global adaptation. In this way, the case illustrations demonstrate how corporate media reproduce the symptoms of slow violence while systematically obscuring its structural and temporal foundations.

4. BEYOND EVENT-CENTRED NEWS: LONG-FORM AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA

Even within these constraints, alternative modes of storytelling have emerged, offering more ethically grounded and epistemically robust approaches. Long-form investigative journalism, documentary film, interactive multimedia projects, and community-based reporting challenge the dominance of event-driven narratives by foregrounding duration, context, and relationality. These practices reflect principles advocated by the environmental humanities: attentiveness to more-than-human worlds, sensitivity to deep time, and recognition of interdependence. They offer narrative strategies capable of capturing the slow unfolding of harm, tracing causal chains across space and time, and foregrounding the voices of those most affected.

The investigative reporting series by ProPublica (2020) on *climate migration* provides a model for narrating slow violence across temporal and spatial scales. Their multi-part projects trace the cumulative effects of heat stress, crop failure, and land desertification across Central America, linking these phenomena to U.S. agricultural policy, international trade regimes, and shifting weather patterns. Rather than presenting migration as a sudden, isolated crisis, these narratives

embed it within a web of long-term environmental and political processes. By combining data visualisation, field reporting, and historical analysis, ProPublica exemplifies a media practice aligned with the environmental humanities' commitment to relationality and deep time. The incorporation of local testimonies further counters the epistemic marginalisation of frontline communities, highlighting ways of knowing that rarely appear in event-driven media.

An illuminating example for understanding slow violence is the documentary *Save Soil – Our Very Body* Sadhguru (2022), which foregrounds the largely invisible crisis of global soil degradation. Unlike corporate media that rely on catastrophe imagery, the film emphasises the incremental erosion of soil organic matter – a process neither spectacular nor easily captured in conventional news cycles. By tracing how declining soil health unfolds over decades through unsustainable agricultural practices, policy neglect, and extractive industrial regimes, the documentary situates soil exhaustion within broader histories of ecological dispossession. Scientists and experts function not as distant authorities but as interpreters of long-term environmental processes that remain imperceptible in everyday life. The film's narrative strategy highlights how soil extinction operates as a form of slow violence, materialising through reduced crop yields, water scarcity, and escalating climate vulnerability – harms that disproportionately affect agrarian communities and low-income populations yet rarely achieve media visibility. In foregrounding processes that are temporally diffuse and institutionally obscured, the documentary challenges dominant visual regimes that privilege sudden disaster over chronic degradation. Its call for regenerative policy action and public engagement thus becomes not merely an environmental intervention but a counter-media practice that renders the slow violence of soil depletion legible to broader audiences.

In the digital sphere, interactive multimedia projects further expand the representational possibilities for narrating slow violence. *The New York Times*' "Losing Earth" project Rich (2018), though critiqued for aspects of its framing, demonstrates the capacity of digital storytelling to weave together archival materials, interviews, and visually rich timelines. Despite its limitations, the project exemplifies how multimedia formats can narrate climate history as a continuum rather than as a series of disjointed crises. Meanwhile, "Toxic America" investigative series The Guardian (2019–2020) uses maps, podcasts, and data visualisation to trace patterns of environmental exposure across communities in the United States, highlighting how toxic infrastructures disproportionately affect racialised and low-income populations. The interactive format allows audiences to explore layered information at multiple scales, enabling a kind of participatory temporal engagement that challenges the linearity of traditional news narratives. Such projects embody what environmental humanities scholars call expanded environmental literacy, enabling audiences to understand ecological harm as embedded in social, political, and economic systems.

Nevertheless, these examples also highlight persistent tensions. While interactive and long-form formats offer greater narrative flexibility, they remain constrained by institutional dependencies, platform logics, and audience engagement metrics. Even sympathetic media outlets operate within economies that prioritise visibility, shareability, and emotional resonance. This can lead to the aestheticisation of environmental harm or the privileging of narratives that align with existing audience expectations. Furthermore, many of these innovative projects emerge from well-resourced media organisations, raising concerns about unevenness in global media capacity. As a result, environmental injustices in the

Global South often remain underrepresented in digital storytelling due to disparities in technological access, funding, and institutional partnerships.

Another layer of complexity emerges when examining community media and activist-produced content. Grassroots media initiatives in places such as the Niger Delta Stakeholder Democracy Network (2023), Environmental Rights Action (2024), or the Ecuadorian Amazon Amazon Frontlines (2019), Amazon Frontlines (2023) offer counter-narratives to corporate and state-controlled representations of environmental harm. These community-led projects often deploy video testimonies, citizen science, and participatory mapping to document long-term ecological degradation. Their media practices foreground epistemologies rooted in lived experience, cultural memory, and ancestral knowledge, challenging dominant scientific and journalistic frameworks. Yet these forms of media circulation often remain at the periphery of mainstream platforms, raising questions about the infrastructural inequalities that govern whose stories become visible and whose remain marginal.

5. CONCLUSION

The challenges of narrating slow violence in contemporary media thus reveal tensions at the heart of how societies perceive, value, and respond to environmental harm. As this study has argued, mass media occupies a paradoxical position: it is indispensable for shaping public understanding of ecological crises, yet structurally constrained by journalistic conventions, economic pressures, and representational norms that impede sustained engagement with protracted forms of harm. Slow violence unfolds across extended temporal horizons and dispersed spatial scales, eluding the event-driven logic that anchors traditional newsworthiness. It resists spectacular visuality, undermines narrative templates centred on rupture and resolution, and demands interpretive frameworks that far exceed mainstream media's habitual modes of storytelling.

The case illustrations examined here demonstrate both the limitations and possibilities inherent in contemporary media practices. Instances of episodic crisis reporting show how protracted ecological harm becomes visible only when it aligns with news cycles or spectacular imagery. Such coverage, while occasionally impactful, often fragments environmental narratives, severing immediate events from the deeper structural conditions that produce them. Conversely, long-form investigative journalism, documentary film, interactive multimedia projects, and community-led media initiatives illustrate alternative pathways that can disrupt dominant representational logics. These approaches, grounded in sustained engagement, contextual depth, and the amplification of marginalised voices, embody narrative strategies that resonate with environmental humanities principles. They highlight how media can render visible the unseen, connect distant scales of impact, and cultivate forms of ecological understanding grounded in empathy, responsibility, and historical awareness.

At the same time, these more promising models underscore the unevenness of media infrastructures and the structural barriers that limit their broader adoption. Innovative storytelling practices often require resources, institutional support, and temporal flexibility that many newsrooms lack. Furthermore, media systems continue to operate within larger political-economic contexts marked by commercial pressures, platform-driven visibility, and the pervasive circulation of misinformation. These structural forces make it difficult to sustain the forms of attention and interpretive nuance demanded by slow violence. The challenge,

therefore, is not only to reform journalistic techniques but to rethink the cultural and economic frameworks that govern media production and consumption.

As environmental crises intensify in the twenty-first century, the ethical responsibilities of mass media assume heightened urgency. Media do not merely report environmental change; through their narrative frameworks, they actively shape public understanding, political priorities, and the horizons of collective response. By reframing how environmental crises are narrated, media can play a pivotal role in fostering public engagement, informing policy debates, and cultivating imaginative capacities adequate to the complexities of a climate-fragile world Boykoff (2011). Yet the unfolding climate emergency, accelerating biodiversity loss, and proliferation of toxic landscapes increasingly generate forms of harm that resist incorporation into dominant, event-centred news paradigms. Addressing these conditions demands media practices capable of conveying complexity without inducing paralysis, and of bearing witness to long-term environmental degradation without reliance on spectacle. Such practices require an ethic of attention attuned to slow, cumulative processes; an epistemic humility that recognises the significance of local and Indigenous knowledges; and a commitment to amplifying voices historically marginalised within environmental discourse. The challenge, therefore, is simultaneously representational and institutional: it entails rethinking not only which stories are told but how they are told, while recognising that the capacity to render slow violence visible is inseparable from broader struggles for environmental justice and planetary sustainability.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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