# Media, Power, and Depoliticization: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Koko Networks Closure in Kenya

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## Abstract

*The closure of Koko Networks, a clean cooking fuel company operating in low-income urban settlements in Kenya, provides a case for examining how media discourse constructed the energy transition and its political implications in Global South contexts. Widely framed as a climate technology innovation aligned with market-led sustainability and the global decarbonization agenda, Koko's shutdown exposed the fragility of privatized approaches to essential services. This paper employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, to analyze how Kenyan media represented the closure and structured its political meaning. The study analyzed a corpus of four publicly available digital media texts from major Kenyan outlets focusing on linguistic and discursive features, including lexical choice, modality, agency attribution, nominalization, and sourcing patterns. It further situated these discursive practices within the political economy of media by considering how reliance on elite sources and institutional logics shaped news production. The findings showed that media discourse predominantly framed the closure through market and regulatory logics, presenting it as a consequence of financial nonviability and policy misalignment. Discursive strategies such as nominalization and passivization obscured decision-making authority, while elite actors, including investors and policymakers, were privileged as authoritative voices. In contrast, affected communities were largely represented as aggregated consumers rather than political subjects. The findings showed that media discourse did not merely report the closure but participated in the depoliticization of the energy transition by obscuring decision-making authority, privileging elite actors, and limiting the articulation of alternative political claims.*

**Keywords:** Energy Transition, Media Discourse, Koko Networks Closure, Political Economy of Media

## Introduction

On January 31, 2026, Koko Networks, a clean cooking fuel company serving over 1.5 million low-income homes in Kenya, announced its abrupt closure. Within days, more than 3,000 bioethanol fuel stations in Nairobi's informal neighborhoods became quiet (The Star, 2026). Margaret Auma, a casual worker in Kibera, faced an unenviable choice: return to charcoal smoke in her one-room residence or find money for liquefied petroleum gas, which she couldn't afford. However, the story that surfaced in Kenyan media was not solely about the removal of services. It was a struggle over meaning itself: how to describe what had happened, who bore responsibility, and what it revealed about energy transitions in situations of structural inequity.

The closure of Koko Networks in Kenya represented a disruption in a widely celebrated model of market-led clean energy transition. Positioned as integral to Kenya's "green transition" infrastructure and supported by international capital, including the Microsoft Climate Innovation Fund, Koko had been framed as a successful integration of everyday household energy practices into global decarbonization initiatives (The Kenya Times, 2026). Its sudden collapse, therefore, unsettled not only a business model but also the broader narrative that market-based climate solutions can sustainably address energy poverty. In the aftermath, Kenyan media coverage became a key site through which the meaning of this disruption was constructed. Competing explanations, including regulatory inadequacy (The Standard, 2026), doubts about carbon credit validity (Omondi, 2026), concerns about development priorities (Kizito, 2026), and business risk (Ouko, 2026), were articulated, though largely within technocratic and market-oriented terms that limited the articulation of alternative political claims.

While scholarship on energy transitions in the Global South continues to grow, little is known about how media reporting shapes the political dimensions of these transitions, especially in Africa (Swilling et al., 2022). Evidence from other studies shows that narratives about the energy transition in developing nations are interwoven with discussions of justice, the prioritization of development goals, and power relations between the Global North and South (Fletcher & Weinstein, 2018). However, as Scholten et al. (2020) have pointed out, the scholarly community remains "shockingly quiet" about what decarbonization means for Non-BRICS Global South countries, which are experiencing energy poverty while experimenting with climate technologies. Most existing media framing studies either focus on Western contexts or examine traditional and social media in isolation, and they do not examine how narratives are framed and circulated across different media platforms (Swilling et al., 2022). Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by assessing how major Kenyan discourses constructed a particular period during which a market-based model of climate innovation collided with the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

The paper employs Fairclough's (1989, 1995) three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (CDA). The model enables CDA researchers to analyze the same unit of discourse through three lenses simultaneously: text, discursive practice, and social practice. In this way, media texts are understood not merely as neutral, factual narratives but as sites where power relations are constructed and institutionalized (Fairclough, 1995). Additionally, the model offers a systematic method for analyzing how specific linguistic features, such as nominalization, passivation, modality, and lexical choice, can obscure or highlight issues of agency and accountability (Fairclough, 1989). Furthermore, research has shown that when public policy discourse is commodified, as when energy access is sold via carbon markets, market-based terminology (e.g., "risk," "viability," "market failure") can supplant considerations of rights, accountability, and social protection (Fairclough, 1993). As noted above, the range of representations of the same topic in Kenyan media, from The Standard's focus on "State Silence" to Business Daily Africa's focus on the "authenticity" of carbon credits and The Kenya Times' reportage of new replacement infrastructure while providing voices from the grassroots perspective of Kibera residents, demonstrates how discursive choices shape what is considered acceptable, contestable, or beyond debate in relation to energy transitions.

The empirical focus on periods of breakdown or disengagement offers analytical value. As Fairclough (1992) argues, discourse analysis is useful during social transitions, when established discursive practices become visible and open to contestation. The Koko closure highlights broader tensions in how the energy transition is envisioned and executed in the Global South, including tensions between climate urgency and energy access, market efficiency and social protection, and global decarbonization ambitions and local survival strategies. Kenyan media coverage reflected these tensions through competing narratives: government officials defending carbon-credit quota protection across multiple sectors (Omondi, 2026); civil society analysts questioning carbon-market-centric approaches (Olingo, 2026); and affected communities in Kibera navigating the material consequences of the collapse of the financing model. At the same time, these narratives remained largely contained within technocratic and market-oriented frames that limited the articulation of alternative political claims. This study therefore contributes to understanding how media discourse participates in the depoliticization of the energy transition by shaping how such moments are rendered intelligible while constraining the terms of political debate.

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Fairclough's (1992, 1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA), which employs his three-dimensional model. CDA treats language as a social practice that both reflects and constructs social relations, power structures, and ideologies (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). It enables an examination of how language choices influence the legitimacy of competing rationales for the Koko closure, the allocation of blame, and the marginalization of alternative explanations. It also outlines key CDA concepts, discusses Fairclough's three-dimensional model, and introduces energy justice as a sensitizing notion. Critical Discourse Analysis originated in critical linguistics, pioneered by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak. CDA rests on several core ideas. First, discourse is constitutive; language actively shapes social reality rather than passively mirroring it. Kenyan media's characterization of the Koko closure as "collapse," "shutdown," or "administration" discursively shaped its significance and agency. Second, language is ideological, embodying beliefs about what is considered normal or inevitable, which often serve specific interests. Third, power relations are dialectically interconnected with discourse: language not only mirrors existing power structures but also serves as a platform for contesting or stabilizing those structures. CDA has a distinctly critical stance, aiming to uncover how language practices either uphold or contest social control (Fairclough, 1989, 1992). Fairclough (1993) illustrated that terms like "market failure" and "business viability" can normalize particular social arrangements while sidelining perspectives centered on rights, accountability, and social protection. Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) developed a three-dimensional model that conceptualizes discourse analysis as operating simultaneously at three interconnected levels: text (description), discursive practice (interpretation), and social practice (explanation). This framework bridges micro-level linguistic analysis with macro-level social theory, enabling a systematic examination of how textual features connect to broader power relations and social structures.

The three aspects of Fairclough's framework serve as an overall structure for the analysis. At the descriptive dimension, the textual aspects are examined in detail. Vocabulary choices indicate which terminology is dominant, whether technical, political, or humanitarian. Grammatical analysis determines how agency is represented or concealed through transitivity, nominalization, and voice. Modality analysis establishes the degree of certainty or hedging in truth claims. Intertextual analysis identifies how texts draw upon broader discourses of carbon markets, climate finance, and development. The interpretive dimension focuses on the institutional context and production practices. Sourcing patterns indicate which actors are prioritized as authoritative voices. Genre conventions govern what is considered newsworthy and how stories are structured. Ownership and editorial positioning can shape the range of acceptable narratives. At the explanatory dimension, links to power structures and ideological formations are examined, including whether coverage normalizes market-based climate solutions or subjects them to critique, how marginalized communities are positioned in relation to elite actors, and whether technical and administrative discourse contributes to the depoliticization of governance issues by limiting the articulation of alternative political claims.

The analytical trajectory is organized by a number of systematic parameters. Objective 1, identifying dominant discourses, operates primarily at the textual level to identify explanatory frameworks that structure coverage. Objectives 2 and 3, analyzing agency attribution and community positioning, connect the textual and discursive practice levels through an examination of linguistic features and institutional sourcing patterns that produce authority for particular voices. Objectives 4 and 5 operate at the level of social practice and examine the relationship between local media coverage and transnational ideological formations, as well as how institutional logics shape discursively constructed content. This theoretically grounded approach enables not only a description of what Kenyan media reported about the Koko closure, but also an explanation of the political and ideological work performed by discourse. Where media language naturalized carbon credit dependency as inevitable while obscuring governance accountability, particular political possibilities were foreclosed. Where affected communities' voices were filtered through expert interpretation rather than presented as authoritative, communicative power asymmetries were reproduced. By making visible how discursive practices construct energy transition at the margins, this analysis contributes to understanding whose interests are served when market-led climate interventions are communicated primarily through technocratic or inevitability frames, and how such representations participate in the depoliticization of energy transition.

## Literature Review

This literature review addresses four interrelated scholarly domains that provide a basis for examining how Kenyan media portrayed the closure of Koko Networks. The research is framed through examination of: (1) Global South energy transitions and clean cooking initiatives; (2) media representations of energy and climate issues; (3) critical discourse analysis within media studies; and (4) carbon market dynamics in development discourse. Together, these literatures frame the conceptual foundation of this research, summarizing existing knowledge while highlighting gaps in understanding how media discursively construct and delimit the political meaning of energy transition failure in African contexts.

The volume of research on energy transitions in the Global South has risen markedly in recent years. Nonetheless, studies of energy transitions in developing nations face both geographical constraints and analytical limitations. Swilling et al. (2022) presented a comprehensive framework for analysing energy transitions in emerging nations. The authors argued that energy transitions in developing nations differ from those in high-income contexts due to the simultaneity of addressing energy poverty, economic growth, and greenhouse gas emissions. This underscores that energy transitions in Kenya extend beyond technological substitution to encompass tensions between state capacity, market dynamics, and the pursuit of social equity.

Clean cooking represents an important component of the energy transition in sub-Saharan Africa, as a large proportion of the population continues to rely on solid biomass fuels, which have well-documented impacts on public health, gender relations, and the environment. Biomass combustion contributes to millions of premature deaths globally, disproportionately affecting women and children due to their roles in household energy use (Bennitt et al., 2021). It also contributes significantly to deforestation and environmental degradation (Kyere-Boateng & Marek, 2021). Despite policy efforts, progress toward universal access to clean cooking remains uneven, with many African countries, including Kenya, falling behind SDG 7 targets (IEA, 2023). These dynamics highlight the structural constraints within which market-based solutions operate, particularly in low-income and informal settlement contexts.

Research specific to Kenya reflects contradictions in policy and practice. Government interventions such as subsidies for LPG and the removal of VAT have aimed to increase adoption, yet uptake remains constrained by affordability, infrastructure limitations, and practices such as fuel stacking. Previous initiatives, such as the Mwananchi Gas project, illustrate the challenges of scaling clean cooking interventions, with implementation failures linked to technical, administrative, and institutional shortcomings (Ochieng et al., 2020). While urban areas such as Nairobi show higher adoption rates, access remains uneven, particularly in informal settlements like Kibera, where affordability and supply reliability are persistent concerns. These conditions provide the socio-economic context within which the Koko model emerged and collapsed.

The growing body of literature also interrogates how clean cooking transitions are financed. Acheampong (2023) highlights the importance of institutional capacity and financial access for adoption, while Azubuike et al. (2024) emphasize tensions between global climate finance mechanisms and national development priorities. These tensions are especially relevant to carbon-credit-financed models, which link local energy access to global markets and create new dependencies on regulatory approval and international demand. Such arrangements raise questions about sovereignty, accountability, and the distribution of risk, which are central to understanding the Koko Networks case. Despite these advances, a gap remains. Existing research has paid limited attention to how energy transitions, in moments of disruption or failure, are mediated through communication. Most studies prioritize technological, economic, or policy dimensions, treating communication as secondary or instrumental. However, discourse plays a constitutive role in shaping how such events are understood, debated, and acted upon. The way the energy transition is described influences what is considered legitimate, inevitable, or contestable. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining how Kenyan media discourse not only represented the closure of Koko Networks but also structured its political meaning, including the extent to which competing interpretations were enabled or constrained within technocratic and market-oriented frames.

## Media Framing of Energy and Climate Issues

According to media framing scholarship, journalism is a powerful medium for making climate and energy issues understandable to the general public. Entman's (1993) foundational work describes framing as the selection of parts of reality to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral judgments, and solutions. When applied to energy transitions, framing analysis reveals how media coverage shapes whether disruptions are perceived as technological failures, governance deficiencies, market corrections, or systemic injustices, each with different implications for responsibility and political response.

Research on climate and energy media coverage has grown, yet geographical and methodological disparities persist. Stecula and Merkley's thorough investigation examines how news is created within political, economic, and institutional landscapes that shape journalistic norms and ideals, resulting in coverage that reflects uneven power dynamics. The literature is dominated by studies on European and North American media, which examine how climate change is portrayed in terms of economic costs vs benefits, scientific uncertainty against consensus and human responsibility versus systemic change. A longitudinal analysis of American news media from 1988 to 2014 demonstrates a shift in the dominance of economic frames, emphasizing mitigation costs, and benefit frames, emphasizing green jobs or efficiency improvements (Stecula & Merkley, 2019). German media coverage of renewable energy policy shows a temporal shift from initial optimism to cost-focused frameworks, with consequences for political leverage in achieving ambitious goals (Lück et al., 2018). According to an analysis by Finnish broadcasters, climate action is increasingly portrayed as subservient to economic policy objectives, with mitigation and adaptation treated as separate technical challenges rather than as transformational social processes (Vikström et al., 2023). Research reveals that media framing of energy transitions frequently subordinates climate mitigation to economic policy aims, normalizes market-led solutions, and elevates elite sources over disadvantaged people.

The most significant aspect of this study is that scholars are now entirely focused on energy transition framing. In their analysis of South African media coverage of the COP26 Just Energy Transition Agreement, Okoliko and Iqani (2025) examine the framing used by newspapers and Facebook users. Okoliko and Iqani's research reveals a significant disparity: The deal was framed as a 'watershed moment' of opportunity and progress in mainstream media; however, Facebook comments expressed a high level of skepticism about the deal, using the frame 'this will just be money for them to steal,' reinforcing concerns about corruption and a lack of trust. The findings of this study demonstrate how different types of media provide a platform for competing discourses, with marginalized viewpoints frequently receiving more exposure on social media than in traditional journalism. However, African contexts are substantially underrepresented in this literature. According to Si et al. (2025), energy justice messaging on social media platforms is geographically imbalanced, with Global South perspectives marginalized in dominant hashtag networks around SDG7. Where African energy journalism is researched, the focus is on South Africa, with East Africa, particularly Kenya, receiving almost no scholarly study. Furthermore, existing research focuses on policy creation or implementation phases rather than moments of breakdown or failure. The Koko shutdown is precisely the type of disruptive occurrence that, according to Fairclough (1992), typically reveals naturalized discursive practices; however, the study lacks frameworks for analyzing how such failures are mediated in African media ecologies.

Furthermore, most studies on media framing rely on quantitative content analysis to count frame frequencies rather than on qualitative discourse analysis to examine how language choices shape meanings and legitimize power dynamics. This limitation of the method results in a limited understanding of the ideological role of language used by the mass media. Theoretically, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as a systematic approach to examining the language used in the mass media, will allow an examination of how grammatical features, lexical choices, and sourcing patterns can obscure or enhance agent status, lend narratives legitimacy, and hierarchically position social actors.

**Critical Discourse Analysis in Media Studies**

Critical Discourse Analysis has been successfully applied to media texts across a variety of contexts, demonstrating how journalistic language reflects and reproduces power imbalances, ideological assumptions, and social hierarchies. CDA researchers argue that media discourse actively constructs reality through linguistic choices that have ideological consequences, often naturalizing sectional interests as universal common sense (Fairclough, 1989, 1993, 1995). In African contexts, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has revealed how media representations of public problems either uphold or contest prevailing power structures. Albertus et al. (2015) use CDA to investigate South African media portrayals of failures in public-private partnerships for information systems implementations, showing how technical framings favor elite narratives, sideline the perspectives of affected communities, and obscure issues of governance and accountability. Chigona et al. (2021) employ Critical Language Analysis to examine South African media coverage of COVID-19 contact tracing programs, illustrating how language around technical adoption normalizes surveillance while marginalizing privacy and rights issues. Bust et al. (2023) examine coverage of the National Health Insurance policy in South African mainstream media, demonstrating that sourcing patterns and framing tactics consistently favor government and business perspectives over those of civil society and affected communities. These studies jointly illustrate CDA's analytical efficacy in elucidating the ideological functioning of media language within African public spaces. Mainstream journalism in African contexts, as in other regions, shows systematic tendencies toward elite-source predominance, technical rather than political framing, and the individualization of structural issues. Nevertheless, none employs CDA in the context of energy transition journalism. This exclusion is particularly significant given CDA's suitability for analyzing how market rationalities infiltrate public discourse about vital services, specifically the dynamics involved when carbon-credit-financed private electricity provision falters. Methodologically, these studies set precedents for employing Faircloughian three-dimensional analysis in African media environments, scrutinizing textual characteristics, discursive practices of production and consumption, and their links to overarching ideological structures. However, they also demonstrate methodological conservatism: the majority focus on elite print media without considering broadcast journalism or the circulation of cross-platform discourse. Furthermore, research applying CDA to failures in infrastructure or service supply is scarce, even though these instances present what Fairclough (1992) describes as privileged analytical sites where typically normalized behaviors become apparent and subject to contestation.

**Carbon Markets and Development Discourse**

Although the studies referenced are among the first to apply a three-dimensional analysis of Faircloughian methodology to an African media environment and by doing so have provided insights into textual features, discursive practices of production and consumption, and how they relate to ideologues, they do, however, demonstrate conservative methodologies. The majority of them focused upon elite print media and have paid no attention to broadcast journalism or how people consume discourse across multiple platforms. Additionally, there has been little research using CDA to investigate failures in infrastructure or service delivery. These failures provide the analytical site described by Fairclough (1992) at which the normally unremarkable becomes subject to contestation. Currently, research on carbon-credit-financed clean cooking is limited; however, this body of knowledge is growing. This literature assesses how carbon financing promotes the development of subsidies for clean fuel technologies, making them available to low-income families when the public sector has failed to do so. Supporters of the carbon credit system say that the use of carbon credits encourages private sector innovation and growth, directs climate funds to enhance energy access, and provides measurable greenhouse gas emissions reductions. Detractors say that the dependence on carbon markets will create vulnerabilities because projects can only be economically viable as long as the credits achieve international prices in a carbon market; there are no issues with regulatory approvals (i.e., permits), and the method used to verify claims of emissions reduction is accurate. Therefore, if any one of these components fails, an entire model of providing services to a community could collapse, leaving those in need of energy access without it. The Koko case illustrates this contrast clearly. Koko's financial model is based upon the sale of carbon credits into the international compliance markets pursuant to Article 6 of the Paris Agreement and the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA); an authorization letter from the Kenyan government is required to verify the credits' legitimacy and allow their issuance within the national carbon quota of Kenya. Once authorization has been delayed or refused, presumably because granting Koko approval for all its credits would utilize up Kenya's entire national compliance market quota and disadvantageously impact other eligible sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, the funding model collapses, service delivery stops, and 1.5 million households lose access to services. This sequence of events also illustrate the conflicting objectives that arise from carbon financed development; national governments must simultaneously determine how best to satisfy competing sectoral interests and comply with quotas, private sector models require regulatory certainty that they can never provide, and affected community members are at risk due to financing models that they do not control. Lee Kinyanjui's statement as Trade Cabinet Secretary that allowing Koko to purchase credits would use-up the national quota capacity, points out an oversight in market efficiency discourse regarding the sovereign management of resources.

However, research on how carbon market arrangements are discursively formed in national media when projects fail is essentially nonexistent. Research examines carbon market policy debates at international climate negotiations, carbon credit verification methodologies, and clean cooking project impacts but does not look into how journalists explain failures, how responsibility is assigned when carbon-financed models fail or how affected communities' perspectives are represented in coverage. This absence has ramifications: if media rhetoric normalises carbon market dependency as unavoidable while hiding governance considerations about who bears risk, specific political choices are barred. When carbon credit disputes are framed in technical-administrative rhetoric rather than as democratic resource sovereignty problems, the political essence of these arrangements disappears.

**Study Positioning**

The four strands of literature reviewed converge to provide the conceptual foundation for this study while also revealing important gaps. Scholarship on energy transitions in the Global South offers substantial insight into clean cooking practices, financing mechanisms, and policy contexts, but gives limited attention to the communicative dimensions through which these processes are interpreted and contested. Research on media representations demonstrates the role of journalism in shaping public understanding of energy and climate issues, yet it remains largely focused on Global North contexts and policy development, with less attention to moments of disruption or failure. Critical Discourse Analysis offers tools for examining the ideological functions of media language, although its application to energy reporting, particularly in African contexts, remains limited. Similarly, literature on carbon markets has examined financial and institutional arrangements but has paid less attention to how such arrangements, including their breakdown, are mediated through discourse.

This study engages these literatures in a complementary manner to examine how Kenyan media discursively constructed the closure of Koko Networks. It addresses a geographical gap by focusing on Kenyan media within the study of energy transitions, a methodological gap by applying a CDA approach to media texts in a field often dominated by framing and quantitative analyses, and a temporal gap by examining a moment of disruption rather than policy formation or implementation. It also brings these strands into dialogue by examining how discourse shapes the intelligibility of energy transition and its implications for inequality and accountability. Rather than documenting media content alone, the analysis examines how discursive practices structured particular interpretations as natural, legitimate, or inevitable, while constraining alternative readings. It focuses on how authority was distributed across actors, how agency and causality were linguistically attributed, how affected communities were positioned, and how global carbon market discourses were invoked or contested. In doing so, the study situates media discourse as a site where the political dimensions of energy transition are negotiated, including the extent to which these processes are depoliticized through technocratic and market-oriented representations

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). CDA has been widely used to examine the relationship between language, power, and ideology in media texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The analysis examined how Kenyan media constructed narratives surrounding the closure of Koko Networks, with particular attention to the intersection of energy transition, carbon-market financing, and the communicative processes through which these issues were rendered intelligible. The approach integrated textual analysis, an examination of discursive practices, and consideration of broader sociocultural contexts to analyze how power, agency, and marginalization were articulated in media coverage.

Data were drawn from a purposive sample of Kenyan media articles published during Koko Networks' closure and the subsequent public debate. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The sample included four publicly available texts from mainstream and alternative news platforms to capture variation in perspective and representation. Articles were identified through targeted keyword searches on clean cooking, carbon credits, and Koko Networks, with selection prioritizing coverage addressing the closure and its implications for energy access and climate finance.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, textual features were coded to identify recurrent linguistic patterns, including lexical choices, modality, nominalization, and agency attribution (Fairclough, 2003).

Second, discursive practices were examined through analysis of sourcing patterns, narrative structures, and the positioning of authoritative voices. Third, the analysis situated media texts within the broader sociopolitical context, including regulatory debates, sectoral interests, and the conditions affecting communities reliant on clean cooking solutions. Across these stages, particular attention was paid to how agency, causality, and authority were constructed, and to the extent to which alternative perspectives were enabled or constrained.

To enhance analytical rigour and transparency, the coding process was supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, enabling systematic comparison across texts. Reflexive practices were incorporated throughout the analysis, including the use of analytic memos to document interpretive decisions and the acknowledgment of researcher positionality, consistent with qualitative research standards (Tracy, 2010). This methodological approach enabled an examination not only of what media reported about the Koko closure, but also of how discursive practices contributed to shaping its interpretation, including the extent to which the event was framed in ways that limited or displaced political contestation.

## Findings

The analysis revealed consistent and patterned discursive constructions across the four media texts, through which the closure of Koko Networks was rendered intelligible. While each outlet advanced slightly different emphases, the coverage converged around a set of dominant discursive strategies that framed the closure as a technical and market-driven outcome, limited attribution of responsibility, and constrained the articulation of alternative political interpretations.

### Construction of the Closure as Market and Regulatory Inevitability

Across the dataset, the closure was primarily constructed through economic and regulatory explanatory frames. Media Outlet 1 described the event in financial terms, stating that the company "would be unable to meet its financial obligations, forcing a shutdown," and emphasized that "once the call was made, the shutdown was swift and total." These formulations positioned the closure as the logical consequence of economic constraints, rather than as a decision open to political scrutiny.

Media Outlet 2 similarly foregrounded structural and financial limitations, noting that the company "was unable to bridge the gap between low retail prices and operating costs" following the government's refusal to issue a Letter of Authorization. The emphasis on "bridging the gap" and "financial sustainability" reinforced a market-oriented logic in which viability was presented as the primary determinant of continuation. Media Outlet 3 reinforced this framing by attributing the closure to the internal logic of the business model, reporting that the company "was facing bankruptcy because selling carbon credits is key to our business model." Here, the failure was located in the model's economic structure, further naturalizing the shutdown as an inevitable outcome.

Across all outlets, references to the state were framed in procedural terms. Media Outlet 2 reported that "the Kenyan government declined to issue a key approval," while Media Outlet 3 noted that the government "blocked its sale of carbon credits." These constructions presented regulatory action as an administrative condition rather than a politically contestable decision. The cumulative effect was to construct the closure as an outcome of systemic alignment failures, rather than as a site of political negotiation.

**Obfuscation of Agency through Linguistic Strategies**

A central feature of the coverage was the systematic obscuring of agency through nominalization and passive constructions. Media Outlet 1 repeatedly referred to “the shutdown” and “the closure” as self-contained events, stating that “the closure was communicated through mass text messages” and that “fuel distribution stopped” without specifying the actors responsible for these actions.

Similarly, Media Outlet 2 employed passive constructions such as “approval was not granted” and “the company has entered administration,” while Media Outlet 3 stated that the company “was forced into administration” following regulatory developments. In these examples, agency was either removed or redistributed across abstract processes, including “the market,” “the model,” or “regulatory constraints.”

Even where decision-making was implied, it was often relegated to the background. Media Outlet 1 referred to “two days of intense internal meetings” after which “the decision to shut down” was reached, yet the specific actors and deliberative processes remained unspecified. These linguistic strategies served to diffuse responsibility across systems rather than to locate it within identifiable actors, thereby limiting the potential to attribute accountability to corporate leadership or state authorities.

**Hierarchies of Voice and the Privileging of Elite Actors**

The analysis showed a consistent privileging of elite and institutional voices across all outlets. Media Outlet 1 highlighted the scale of international investment, noting that the company had raised “more than US$100 million… from major international investors, including… the Microsoft Climate Innovation Fund.” Media Outlet 2 similarly emphasized financial exposure, referring to “a $179.6 million MIGA guarantee” and lender-backed facilities tied to the company’s operations. These references positioned investors, financial institutions, and global capital as central actors in the narrative. Media Outlet 4 extended this emphasis by citing industry and policy voices, including statements that the model’s failure “should stop us in our tracks” and that “markets that serve low-income communities cannot be built on fragile economics alone.”

In contrast, affected populations were largely represented through aggregation rather than direct voice. Media Outlet 1 reported that “up to 1.5 million households… relied on KOKO’s ethanol fuel,” while Media Outlet 3 stated that the closure “could push about 1.5 million households back to dirtier fuels.” These representations quantified impact but did not provide sustained accounts from users themselves. Where experiential effects were referenced, they were described in generalized terms. For example, Media Outlet 1 noted that households “woke up to find a service they depended on abruptly unavailable” and that workers were “left reeling,” yet no direct testimonies were included. This pattern positioned affected communities as passive recipients of disruption, rather than as actors capable of articulating claims or contesting outcomes.

**Technocratic Framing and Global Intertextuality**

The coverage was characterized by a strong technocratic orientation, with extensive use of specialized terminology related to climate finance and carbon markets. Media Outlet 1 provided detailed explanations of the business model, stating that “carbon credits… were sold on international markets” and that revenues were used to subsidize fuel and stoves. Media Outlet 2 and Media Outlet 4 extended this framing by referencing global governance mechanisms, including “Article 6 of the Paris Agreement” and “CORSIA,” thereby situating the case within broader international regulatory frameworks.

While these intertextual references provided context, they also contributed to a form of discursive distancing, in which causality was located within complex global systems. Even critical perspectives remained within this register. Media Outlet 4, for instance, highlighted concerns that carbon credit models were based on “fragile economics” and that emissions reductions may have been “overstated,” yet these critiques focused on system design rather than broader questions of equity or accountability.

**Depoliticization and the Legitimation of Market-Based Explanations**

These discursive patterns contributed to the depoliticization of the closure. By foregrounding market and regulatory logics, obscuring agency, privileging elite actors, and embedding the narrative within technocratic frameworks, the media texts limited the extent to which the closure could be understood as a political issue.

Across outlets, the closure was consistently presented as a rational response to structural constraints. The emphasis on “financial sustainability,” “regulatory approval,” and “market viability” framed the event as an outcome of impersonal systems rather than contested decisions. Alternative interpretations, including those centered on energy justice, social protection, or the risks of privatizing essential services, were marginalized or subordinated. As a result, media discourse did not merely describe the closure but participated in shaping its meaning by constraining the range of legitimate interpretations. The coverage contributed to the normalization of market-based approaches to energy transition, even in the context of failure, while limiting the articulation of alternative political claims.

## Conclusions

This study examined how Kenyan media discursively constructed the closure of Koko Networks and, in doing so, shaped the political meaning of the energy transition through language. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings showed that media coverage did not serve as a neutral reflection of events but as a site where interpretations were produced, stabilized, and rendered legitimate (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Across the analyzed texts, the closure was consistently framed through market and regulatory logics, with discursive strategies such as nominalization, passivization, and selective sourcing obscuring decision-making authority and limiting the visibility of accountability. The analysis further showed that media discourse privileged elite and institutional actors, particularly investors and policymakers, while marginalizing the voices of affected communities. This uneven distribution of communicative authority reflects broader patterns in media studies, where access to discourse is closely tied to power and institutional positioning (van Dijk, 1991). At the same time, reliance on technocratic language and intertextual references to global climate governance frameworks embedded the coverage in dominant narratives of climate capitalism, in which market-based solutions are normalized as the primary pathway to the energy transition (Fletcher & Weinstein, 2018).

These patterns contributed to the depoliticization of the Koko Networks closure. By framing the event as an inevitable outcome of financial and regulatory constraints, media discourse narrowed the range of interpretations available for public debate and limited the articulation of alternative political claims. This finding aligns with broader critiques of depoliticization, which highlight how complex socio-economic issues are frequently reframed as technical or administrative problems, thereby displacing questions of power, responsibility, and justice (Mouffe, 2005; Tufekci, 2017).

The study contributes to debates about the energy transition in the Global South by showing that disruptions and failures are critical sites for examining how dominant narratives are maintained or contested. While much of the literature has focused on the adoption and scaling of clean energy technologies, this analysis highlights the importance of examining how such initiatives are represented when they falter. In the case of Koko Networks, the breakdown of a market-led model did not lead to a corresponding expansion of critical or justice-oriented discourse. Instead, media representations largely reproduced existing frameworks that prioritized market rationality and technocratic governance. These findings suggest that the communicative dimensions of the energy transition are central to understanding how policy options, accountability, and social outcomes are negotiated. If media discourse constrains the articulation of alternative perspectives, particularly those grounded in lived experience and structural inequality, the scope for democratic contestation is correspondingly limited. Future research may build on this analysis by examining a broader range of media platforms, including vernacular and community media, as well as audience reception, to further interrogate how energy transitions are communicated and contested across different publics.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study point to the need for greater attention to the communicative dimensions of energy transition, particularly in contexts where market-based models intersect with conditions of inequality. Several implications emerge for media practice, policy engagement, and future research.

First, there is a need for greater reflexivity in journalistic practice when reporting on complex socio-technical issues such as clean energy transitions. The analysis showed that reliance on technocratic and market-oriented language contributed to framing the Koko Networks closure as inevitable, thereby limiting scrutiny of the decision-making processes. Journalistic approaches that more explicitly interrogate agency, responsibility, and the distribution of risk would expand the range of interpretations available for public debate. This includes critically examining the assumptions embedded in policy and investment narratives, rather than reproducing them as neutral explanations.

Second, the findings suggest the importance of broadening the range of voices represented in media coverage. The predominance of elite and institutional actors, coupled with the limited presence of affected communities, reinforced asymmetries in communicative authority. Incorporating perspectives from users, workers, and community-level stakeholders would provide a more grounded account of how energy transitions are experienced and contested. Such inclusion is particularly relevant in contexts where access to essential services is uneven and where policy outcomes have differentiated social impacts.

Third, there is a need for more critical engagement with market-based climate interventions within media and policy discourse. The framing of carbon-credit-financed models primarily in terms of efficiency and viability obscured broader questions related to accountability, sustainability, and equity. Greater scrutiny of how these models operate, including their vulnerabilities and distributive consequences, would contribute to more informed public deliberation about their role in addressing energy access challenges.

Fourth, the study highlights the value of integrating communication analysis into energy transition research and policy processes. Communication is not merely a channel through which policy is conveyed, but a constitutive element in shaping how policy problems are defined and solutions are legitimized.

Interdisciplinary approaches that bring together media studies, political economy, and energy policy analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how transitions unfold in practice.

Finally, future research should extend beyond national-level mainstream media to examine alternative and community-based communication spaces, as well as audience reception. Such work would offer insight into whether and how different publics interpret and contest dominant narratives, and the extent to which alternative discourses of energy justice and accountability circulate outside institutional media.

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