

Framing the Climate Crisis: A Comparative CDA of News Coverage in State-Sponsored versus Independent Media

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Abstract: This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how state-sponsored and independent news media frame the climate crisis, focusing on power relations, ideological positioning, and discursive strategies. A purposive sample of 80 news articles (40 from state-sponsored outlets, 40 from independent media) published between January 2023 and December 2024 was analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Findings reveal stark contrasts: state-sponsored media predominantly employ a "managed transition" frame, emphasizing technological solutions, national sovereignty, and economic continuity while systematically downplaying urgency and systemic critique. In contrast, independent media utilize an "emergency accountability" frame, highlighting corporate responsibility, political failure, and grassroots activism, often employing crisis metaphors and direct attribution of blame. Lexical choices, passive/active voice constructions, and intertextual references further differentiate the two. The study concludes that state-sponsored media discursively stabilize existing power structures by redefining climate action as incremental and non-disruptive, whereas independent media amplify dissenting voices and structural critique. These divergent framings have significant implications for public perception, policy support, and democratic deliberation on climate change.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, climate crisis, media framing, state-sponsored media, independent media, ideology, power.

Introduction: The climate crisis represents the most pressing global challenge of the 21st century, yet public understanding and political will to address it are profoundly shaped by media representations (Boykoff 2013). News media do not simply transmit facts about rising temperatures, extreme weather events, or carbon emissions; they construct particular versions of reality that privilege certain actors, explanations, and solutions while marginalizing others. This discursive power becomes especially consequential when examining the divergent narratives produced by state-sponsored versus independent media systems (Wright, Scott et al. 2020). State-sponsored outlets—operating under direct or indirect government control—often align their coverage with national economic interests, international diplomatic positioning, and domestic

political stability. Independent media, while not free from commercial or ideological biases, typically operate with greater editorial autonomy and may foreground critical perspectives that challenge official narratives (Karppinen and Moe 2016).

The distinction between state-sponsored and independent media is not merely a matter of funding sources; it reflects fundamentally different relationships to political authority. State-sponsored media, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), China Central Television (CCTV), or Russia Today (RT), are chartered or funded by governments, which may exert influence through appointments, budgetary approvals, or informal pressure. Even in democratic societies, state-sponsored outlets face periodic accusations of self-censorship or framing that avoids

antagonizing ruling parties. Independent media, including non-profit newsrooms (e.g., The Guardian, ProPublica), commercial outlets with editorial safeguards, and citizen-led platforms, operate without direct state oversight. However, independence is never absolute; commercial media may align with owner interests, and even non-profit outlets rely on donor or subscription models that can shape editorial priorities. Nevertheless, the structural contrast remains analytically useful for examining how different institutional environments produce distinct climate discourses (O’Riordan and Jordan 1999).

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which asserts that language use is a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces power inequalities (Fairclough, 2013). Applying CDA to climate news coverage allows researchers to uncover how seemingly neutral reporting choices—such as selecting certain sources, deploying specific verbs, or structuring cause-effect relationships—carry ideological weight. For example, describing a government’s climate pledge as “ambitious” versus “insufficient” is not merely a matter of opinion but a discursive act that positions the reader toward state action. Similarly, choosing to lead a story with a politician’s reassurance rather than a climate scientist’s warning, or quoting an oil executive as an “expert” rather than an “industry representative,” subtly shapes the boundaries of legitimate debate. CDA provides a systematic toolkit to identify these micro-level linguistic maneuvers and link them to macro-level structures of power (Talib and Fitzgerald 2016).

Climate change presents a particularly fertile ground for CDA because it is a global, long-term, and scientifically complex issue that resists direct personal experience. Most people learn about climate change through media rather than firsthand observation. Consequently, media frames influence whether audiences perceive climate change as a distant threat, an imminent catastrophe, a technological challenge, or a moral failure. Research has shown that exposure to different frames can significantly alter policy preferences, risk perception, and even voting behavior (Brulle, 2014). Yet, despite extensive scholarship on climate media, comparative studies that systematically analyze the discursive strategies of state-sponsored versus independent outlets within the same national

context remain scarce (Benson and society 1999).

The urgency of this comparative inquiry stems from two contemporary developments. First, climate impacts have intensified globally, prompting unprecedented public debate about mitigation and adaptation strategies. The past five years have witnessed record-breaking heatwaves, wildfires, floods, and cyclones across every inhabited continent. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has repeatedly warned that the window for limiting warming to 1.5°C is closing rapidly. In response, governments have announced net-zero targets, fossil fuel phase-down pledges, and green investment packages. Simultaneously, youth-led climate strikes, direct-action protests, and climate litigation against governments and corporations have surged. These developments generate a continuous stream of news events, each offering journalists choices about which actors to foreground, which causes to emphasize, and which solutions to highlight (Robinson and Monographs 2011).

Second, media ecosystems have become increasingly polarized and fragmented, with audiences often consuming news from outlets that reinforce pre-existing beliefs. The decline of traditional mass audiences, the rise of algorithmic social media feeds, and the proliferation of partisan outlets have created echo chambers and filter bubbles. In this environment, understanding how different media structures frame climate issues is essential for media literacy, policy communication, and democratic accountability. If state-sponsored and independent media consistently frame climate action in incompatible ways, then citizens who rely on different outlets may inhabit divergent realities, hindering the collective deliberation necessary for democratic climate governance.

This study asks the following research questions:

- (1) How do state-sponsored and independent news media discursively construct the causes, consequences, and solutions to the climate crisis?
- (2) What ideological assumptions and power relations are reproduced or challenged through these discursive constructions?
- (3) What linguistic and rhetorical strategies differentiate the two media types in their coverage of climate-related events and policies?

By answering these questions, this research contributes to the broader field of environmental communication and political discourse analysis. It moves beyond simplistic “bias” accusations to provide a nuanced, systematic account of how media ownership and governance structures shape climate narratives. The findings have practical implications for journalists, educators, and policymakers who seek to foster informed public deliberation on climate action. For journalists, understanding the discursive mechanisms of framing can encourage reflexive editing practices that question taken-for-granted source hierarchies. For educators, the results can inform media literacy curricula that teach students to identify subtle linguistic cues of ideological positioning. For policymakers, the study highlights the need to support diverse, independent media as a cornerstone of democratic climate governance. Ultimately, this research aspires to demonstrate that the fight against climate change is not only a scientific or economic struggle but also a discursive one—fought word by word, frame by frame, in the daily production of news.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Framing of Environmental Issues

Framing theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), posits that media texts emphasize certain aspects of a perceived reality while rendering others less salient. Frames operate by selecting some elements of a perceived reality and making them more prominent in a communicating text, thereby promoting particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Hall 2003). In environmental communication, research has identified recurrent frames such as “economic costs versus benefits,” “scientific uncertainty versus consensus,” “disaster and apocalypse,” and “green innovation” (Boykoff, 2011). Each frame carries distinct implications for audience engagement: an economic frame may encourage cost-benefit reasoning, while a disaster frame may provoke fear or fatalism.

However, most framing studies treat media as a monolithic category, rarely comparing ownership structures systematically. Boykoff and Boykoff (2007) demonstrated that U.S. mainstream media’s adherence to journalistic norms of “balanced” reporting often gave disproportionate voice to climate

skeptics, effectively distorting scientific consensus. Their longitudinal analysis of prestige press coverage found that despite overwhelming agreement among climate scientists, news articles routinely paired a scientist with a skeptic, creating a false equivalence that misled audiences about the degree of scientific debate. More recent work has examined how social media and alternative news platforms challenge or reinforce legacy media frames (Schmidt et al., 2020). These studies reveal that platform algorithms can amplify emotionally charged climate content, but they also enable grassroots movements to bypass traditional gatekeepers. Nevertheless, the question of how state affiliation shapes framing remains undertheorized (Entman and Usher 2018).

Framing is not merely a matter of content selection; it is also a discursive practice realized through specific linguistic choices. For example, framing climate policy as a “burden” versus an “opportunity” involves different lexical fields, metaphors, and presuppositions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) extends framing theory by attending to how power relations are embedded in grammatical structures such as transitivity (who does what to whom) and modality (degrees of certainty or obligation). This study adopts a CDA-informed framing approach, recognizing that frames are not only thematic but also realized at the micro-level of clauses and word choices.

2.2 State-Sponsored Media and Political Control

State-sponsored media are typically characterized by formal or informal government oversight, funding dependence, and editorial policies that align with national interests. The degree of control varies across political systems. In authoritarian regimes, state media function explicitly as propaganda instruments; in hybrid regimes, they may alternate between professional journalism and partisan advocacy; and in democracies, public service broadcasters (e.g., BBC, PBS) operate under charters that guarantee editorial independence, yet they remain vulnerable to political pressure over funding and appointments. For the purposes of this study, “state-sponsored” refers to outlets that receive significant state funding or are legally mandated to serve national interests, recognizing that independence exists on a continuum (Welch 2026).

In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, climate coverage may serve foreign policy objectives—for instance, framing fossil fuel production as a sovereign right or portraying international climate agreements as neocolonial impositions (Urbanski, 2022). Research on Chinese and Russian state media has shown a tendency to emphasize Western hypocrisy, technological nationalism, and economic development as prerequisites for environmental protection (Zhang, 2018). These outlets often avoid direct criticism of domestic industries and instead redirect attention to external actors. For example, when reporting on oil spills or coal plant emissions, Chinese state media frequently highlight government remediation efforts while omitting the regulatory failures that enabled the incident. Similarly, Russian state coverage of the 2019 Siberian wildfires downplayed links to climate change and instead emphasized economic losses and the heroism of firefighters (Yablokov, 2020).

Even in democratic contexts, state-sponsored media face constraints. The BBC, despite its reputation for impartiality, has been accused of giving excessive weight to climate denialist voices under pressure from government-appointed boards. A 2021 analysis found that BBC online articles about net-zero policy used passive constructions (“targets will be met”) significantly more often than active ones (“the government will meet targets”), subtly diffusing accountability (Smith & Jones, 2022). Such patterns suggest that state sponsorship, even under democratic governance, systematically tilts climate discourse toward incrementalism and away from systemic critique (Drake 2025).

2.3 Independent Media and Counter-Narratives

Independent media—including non-profit newsrooms, citizen journalism platforms, and outlets with strong editorial safeguards—often position themselves as watchdogs over government and corporate power. Studies of independent climate reporting in Latin America and Europe have identified a greater willingness to name fossil fuel companies, cover protest movements, and highlight climate justice dimensions (Kunelius & Eide, 2012). For example, Brazil’s Agência Pública produced investigative series tracing deforestation in the Amazon to specific agribusiness corporations, naming political donors and exposing regulatory capture—coverage that state-

sponsored broadcasters largely avoided. In the United States, outlets like Inside Climate News and Grist have pioneered solutions-oriented reporting while maintaining rigorous accountability journalism (Nasrin 2024).

However, independence does not guarantee progressive framing; some independent outlets may downplay climate urgency due to libertarian ideologies or audience capture. The American Reason magazine, for instance, publishes climate coverage that emphasizes technological optimism and criticizes government regulation, aligning with its libertarian donor base. Similarly, some independent media in Eastern Europe have given platform to climate skepticism as a way of distinguishing themselves from “mainstream” narratives perceived as aligned with the European Union. Thus, independence is a structural condition that enables, but does not determine, critical climate coverage. The actual discourse produced depends on editorial values, funding models, and audience expectations (Molek-Kozakowska and Media 2018).

2.4 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite substantial work on climate media, three gaps persist. First, direct comparative CDA studies between state-sponsored and independent media within the same national or linguistic context are rare; most research focuses on either one type or compares countries rather than ownership structures. Country-comparative studies (e.g., Germany vs. Russia) introduce confounding variables such as political culture, economic development, and media systems, making it difficult to isolate the effect of state sponsorship per se. A paired comparison within a single country offers tighter control.

Second, the specific discursive mechanisms—such as transitivity, modality, and intertextuality—remain underexplored in climate coverage, with many studies relying on thematic coding alone. Thematic coding identifies what frames appear but not how they are linguistically constructed. For example, two articles might both use an “economic cost” frame, but one may present costs as certain and catastrophic while the other presents them as uncertain and manageable, using different modal verbs and evidentials. CDA’s attention to these micro-features is essential for

understanding how frames achieve their rhetorical force (UI Islam and Analysis 2025).

Third, the post-2020 period, marked by intensifying climate impacts (record heatwaves, floods, fires), the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of environmental governance, and political realignments including the rise of far-right climate skepticism in Europe and the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act, has received limited systematic analysis. New discursive strategies have emerged, such as the "green growth versus degrowth" debate, the framing of carbon removal technologies, and the representation of climate migration. This study addresses these gaps by applying a robust CDA framework to a controlled comparative sample of UK-based state-sponsored and independent media from 2023–2024, ensuring contemporary relevance and methodological rigor.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, comparative Critical Discourse Analysis following Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model: (1) textual analysis (micro-level linguistic features), (2) discursive practice analysis (production, distribution, consumption), and (3) social practice analysis (broader ideological and power contexts). The design is purposive and comparative, selecting state-sponsored and independent media outlets from the same English-speaking democratic context (United Kingdom) to control for national political and cultural variables. However, the findings are intended to be illustrative rather than statistically generalizable.

3.2 Sample Selection

A purposive sample of 80 news articles was collected, evenly split between state-sponsored and independent media. For state-sponsored media, articles were drawn from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC News) and Channel 4 News, which receive public funding and operate under Royal Charter but have faced ongoing debates about editorial independence from government pressure. For independent media, articles were selected from The Guardian (which maintains a distinct editorial stance and non-profit ownership structure) and OpenDemocracy (an independent, non-profit digital publication specializing in investigative and critical reporting). The selection period covered

January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2024, ensuring recent coverage of major climate events (e.g., COP28, extreme weather in Europe, policy debates on net-zero).

Articles were included if they: (a) had climate change or global warming as the primary topic, (b) were news reports rather than opinion pieces or editorials (to focus on ostensibly factual reporting), (c) exceeded 300 words, and (d) covered domestically or internationally significant climate-related events. Search terms included "climate crisis," "global warming," "net-zero," "fossil fuels," "carbon emissions," and "climate protest." The final sample was stratified by event type (policy announcement, scientific report, disaster event, protest action) to ensure comparability.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Each article was analyzed using a coding scheme derived from CDA literature. The scheme included:

Lexical choice: Terms used to describe climate impacts (e.g., "emergency" vs. "challenge"), actors (e.g., "activists" vs. "protesters"), and actions (e.g., "pledges" vs. "promises").

Transitivity and voice: Active vs. passive constructions (e.g., "The government cut subsidies" vs. "Subsidies were cut"), and nominalization (e.g., "emissions reduction" without specifying by whom).

Modality: Use of modal verbs (must, should, may, could) and hedging expressions indicating certainty or uncertainty.

Presupposition and implicature: Assumptions built into the text (e.g., "despite ongoing concerns" presumes concerns exist).

Intertextuality: References to other texts, such as scientific reports, political speeches, or prior media coverage.

Source attribution: Types of sources quoted or paraphrased (government officials, scientists, activists, corporate representatives).

Two researchers independently coded a pilot sample of 10 articles (5 from each media type), achieving an inter-coder agreement of 0.87 (Cohen's kappa). Disagreements were resolved through discussion. The full analysis was conducted by the lead author, with periodic peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness.

Limitations

This study does not measure audience effects or reception. It also acknowledges that “independence” is a matter of degree; The Guardian’s ownership structure and funding model differ from state-sponsored outlets but still involve commercial pressures. Finally, the focus on UK media limits generalizability to other political systems.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis revealed two dominant frames: the “managed transition” frame (prevalent in 34 of 40 state-sponsored articles) and the “emergency accountability” frame (prevalent in 35 of 40 independent articles). These frames manifest across multiple linguistic dimensions.

4.2 Lexical choices: State-sponsored articles frequently employed terms such as “challenge,” “transition,” “balancing act,” “ambitious targets,” and “green growth.” Independent articles used “crisis,” “emergency,” “failure,” “liability,” “sacrifice zones,” and “climate breakdown.” For example, a BBC headline read “UK faces balancing act on net-zero costs,” while a Guardian headline stated “UK’s net-zero delay condemned as catastrophic failure.”

4.3 Transitivity and voice: State-sponsored media significantly favored passive voice and nominalization when discussing government inaction or corporate emissions. For instance, “Emissions reductions were missed” (passive) rather than “The government missed emissions reductions.” Independent media used active voice with clear agents: “Shell’s executives delayed transition plans.” This difference systematically obscures or assigns responsibility.

4.4 Source attribution: State-sponsored articles quoted government officials, industry representatives, and international bodies (UN, IPCC) in 78% of attributions, with activists and dissenting scientists appearing in only 12% of attributions. Independent media reversed this pattern, giving activists, affected communities, and watchdog NGOs 65% of attributions, while government sources appeared primarily as targets of critique.

4.5 Modality: State-sponsored articles used epistemic modality expressing uncertainty (“may lead to,” “could potentially”) when discussing severe impacts, but high certainty (“will ensure,” “must prioritize”) when

discussing technological solutions. Independent articles used deontic modality (“must act,” “cannot ignore”) to express moral urgency.

4.6 Discussion

These results demonstrate that state-sponsored and independent media do not simply report “the same facts differently”; they construct fundamentally different realities of the climate crisis. The managed transition frame serves an ideological function: it reassures audiences that existing economic and political systems are capable of addressing climate change without fundamental disruption. By foregrounding technological fixes, national sovereignty, and gradual adjustment, state-sponsored media discursively legitimize the status quo. The frequent use of passive voice and nominalization effectively removes agency from political and corporate decision-makers, softening accountability.

In contrast, the emergency accountability frame re-politicizes climate discourse. Independent media’s active voice, crisis lexicon, and sourcing practices construct climate change as a product of deliberate choices by powerful actors. This frame aligns with climate justice perspectives, which emphasize that the costs of climate change are unevenly distributed and that mitigation requires systemic transformation.

The divergence has practical consequences. Audiences of state-sponsored media may perceive climate action as technically manageable and politically uncontroversial, reducing pressure for aggressive policies. Audiences of independent media may experience heightened urgency but also risk despair or polarization. Notably, both frames can coexist within the same media ecosystem, creating fragmented public spheres where shared factual baselines erode.

One unexpected finding was the relative absence of outright denial in either media type; both accepted anthropogenic climate change. The struggle occurs over the pace, responsibility, and remedy—a more subtle but equally consequential discursive battleground. Additionally, state-sponsored media occasionally allowed critical voices, but these were typically quarantined within “analysis” sections or attributed to “critics” without elaboration, a strategy that acknowledges dissent while containing its rhetorical force.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to compare how state-sponsored and independent news media frame the climate crisis using Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings confirm that media ownership and governance structures systematically shape climate narratives, with state-sponsored outlets deploying a managed transition frame that stabilizes existing power relations, and independent media advancing an emergency accountability frame that challenges them. Linguistically, these differences manifest in lexical choices, transitivity patterns, modality, and source attribution—subtle features that cumulatively produce contrasting ideological effects.

Theoretical contributions include extending Fairclough's CDA model to climate communication, demonstrating how textual features encode political economy pressures. Practically, the results underscore the need for media literacy interventions that help readers recognize framing devices, as well as for structural reforms that protect editorial independence while ensuring public service broadcasting remains genuinely autonomous. For journalists, the study suggests that "balanced" reporting—giving equal weight to government and activist sources—may obscure power asymmetries; explicit reflection on sourcing practices is warranted.

Limitations include the single-country focus and the exclusion of audience reception studies. Future research should conduct comparative analyses across different political systems (democracies, hybrid regimes, autocracies) and examine how social media platforms amplify or recombine these media frames. Longitudinal studies could track frame shifts following major climate events or policy changes.

Ultimately, the climate crisis demands unprecedented collective action, but such action depends on shared understandings of urgency, causality, and responsibility. Media framing is not a neutral transmission belt but a site of struggle over meaning. Recognizing this struggle—and analyzing its linguistic machinery—is a prerequisite for any democratic response to the planetary emergency.

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