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FROM CONFLICT TO SOCIAL ACTION: TRANSFORMATION OF NEWS FRAMING ON CLIMATE CHANGE

 **Enric Sendra-Duro**¹: Jaume I University. Spain.

esendra@uji.es

 **Pablo López-Rabadán**²: Jaume I University. Spain.

rabadan@uji.es

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¹ **Enric Sendra-Duro**: He holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism from the Universitat Jaume I and a Master's degree in Political Analysis and Institutional Consulting from the University of Barcelona. He is currently completing his Doctorate in Communication Sciences at the Jaume I University.

² **Pablo López-Rabadán**: He holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a Doctorate in Communication Sciences from Rey Juan Carlos University. He is a tenured professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at Jaume I University.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article analyzes the evolution of media framing of climate change during the post-pandemic period, using coverage of three United Nations (UN) Conferences of the Parties (COP) as a case study. **Methodology:** Using a methodology based on the updating of established typologies, the study examines three key components of news framing: 1) the generic presentation of the issue (issue frame); 2) the predominant news frames; and 3) the strategic use of keywords in headlines. The sample consists of 671 news items published by six Spanish media outlets representing different professional models and established editorial lines. **Results:** First, there is a shift in thematic framing indicating an opening toward more contextual narratives. Second, the most recurrent news frames revolve around political conflict, human interest, and the economic impact of the green transition. Finally, the headlines reveal the consolidation of the classic term “climate change” over contemporary labels, along with a progressive democratization of the discourse, which integrates the economic dimension and new focal points in news coverage. **Discussion:** The findings identify renewed frames oriented toward action, accountability, and social responses, although these are still conditioned by traditional inertia. **Conclusions:** This article identifies a shift in how the media covers climate change in the post-COVID context and offers recommendations for promoting coverage that focuses on solutions.

Keywords: climate change; media framing; specialization; digital media; journalism; solutions journalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, climate change has ceased to be merely a scientific concern and has become a central focus of global political, economic, and cultural debate. In the realm of communication, it is now more than just an environmental emergency; it constitutes a contested narrative conflict (Lakoff, 2010), where the media play a key role in defining its public image and constructing interpretive frameworks. The complexity of the phenomenon, which is increasingly universal and multidisciplinary, has reinforced the need for broad journalistic coverage that provides in-depth information on the problem, considering its causes, consequences, and potential solutions (Thier & Lin, 2022).

This occurs within a clearly turbulent political and social context, where communication dynamics surrounding global issues have been redefined. This media shift was especially significant during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. The pandemic altered public concerns, displaced other important issues from the media agenda, and consequently modified information dynamics internationally (Rauchfleisch et al., 2023; Sowers, 2024). The change in media priorities notably affected climate change, which disappeared from headlines for months, as journalism reconfigured its efforts toward pandemic coverage, forced by the questions raised by the virus and its implications for social life (Pearman et al., 2021; Stoddart et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the emergence of digital-native media and the influence of social networks have contributed to diversifying news perspectives, offering more pluralistic, interactive, and personalized approaches for audiences. The advance of digitization and the consolidation of online platforms have modified how information about climate change is produced and consumed (Teso-Alonso & Lozano-Ascencio, 2022). Clearly, the current information system is not the same as it was one or two decades ago. The media landscape has expanded considerably, with new media outlets, platforms, and digital profiles; some with questionable journalistic rigor and questionable professional practices. This reality has altered behaviors and routines in the traditional press which, pushed by new competitors, has been repositioning itself in a communicative logic of fierce competition (Negredo-Bruna & Kaufmann-Argueta, 2022), where information concerns have shifted significantly, especially in the era of disinformation and clickbait (Montemayor-Rodríguez & García-Jiménez, 2021).

Academic literature has explored the framing of climate change from various theoretical and media perspectives (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Guenther et al., 2023; Radwan & Ayyad, 2024). However, most of these studies have focused on traditional media, without comprehensively addressing the transformations that have occurred across the entire contemporary ecosystem. Furthermore, much of the research has centered on foreign media, especially from North America (Adame et al., 2025; Shehata & Hopman, 2012; Stecula & Merkley, 2019), highlighting the scarcity of comprehensive and recent studies applied to the Spanish case. although there are significant previous contributions (Águila-Coghlan, 2013; Arcila-Calderón et al., 2015; Gaitán-Moya et al., 2017; Ramos-Vera & Fernández-Castrillo, 2024).

Based on these preliminary considerations, this article aims to analyze the news framing of climate change in Spanish digital media during the so-called post-pandemic period (2021-2023), with the goal of identifying new information dynamics. Thus, the research seeks to provide new perspectives on the role of journalism in shaping news narratives and in constructing an increasingly specialized climate agenda (Sendra-Duro & López-Rabadán, 2025).

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Importance and Theoretical Evolution of Framing Studie

Framing studies constitute one of the most active and established lines of research within current communication studies (López-Rabadán, 2022). Specifically, media framing studies analyze how journalists strategically orient their news reports, highlighting, omitting, or emphasizing different aspects of reality, which conditions the audience's interpretation (Muñiz, 2020). According to classic authors such as Entman (1993), de Vreese (2005), and Matthes (2012), framing is a key technique for identifying and analyzing how the media configure and represent news messages, shaping citizens' perception of social reality. Thus, the framing of a news story (the frame) highlights certain elements of a discourse, establishing a partial and subjective interpretation of a social event (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015).

Framing theory is particularly relevant in journalism and political communication, where the way messages are presented can significantly impact their effectiveness. It is especially important in journalism because media writers and editors make crucial decisions about how they frame and convey news. In doing so, they project messages that support one position or another on a contentious public issue (Küppers, 2024; Lakoff, 2010). With a long and extensive academic history (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2015; Muñiz, 2020), framing is now a valid, functional, and well-established tool (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015) for analyzing the process of constructing and disseminating informational messages through the media.

López-Rabadán (2022) identifies four stages in the evolution of framing studies, from their origins to their diversification within the contemporary digital ecosystem. The first, initial stage was influenced by disciplines such as Sociology and Linguistics, with fundamental contributions from authors like Erving Goffman (1974), who laid the conceptual foundations of framing by linking it to social perception and interpretation. This was followed by a stage of methodological consolidation thanks to the work of Robert Entman (1993), who established four essential functions in the study of framing: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. This contribution marked a significant qualitative advance by consolidating framing as an autonomous object of study within the field of communication. Subsequently, there was a stage of expansion and specialization, with significant growth at the international level and the beginning of specialization in Spain, where the theoretical contributions of Humanes (2001), Sádaba (2001) and Vicente-Mariño and López-Rabadán (2009) stand out.

Finally, the study of framing has entered a stage of diversification and expansion, characterized by a universal approach that analyzes messages in new formats and media, such as digital media, social networks and transmedia platforms (Chen et al., 2023; Civilá & Lugo-Ocando, 2024; Sancho-Belinchón & Ortega-Fernández, 2024).

1.1.2. Current Development of Research on News Framing and Climate Change

Communication studies have devoted considerable attention to analyzing news framing based on topics representative of public debate (D'Angelo & Lombard, 2008). The same issue can be interpreted and presented from diverse informational perspectives, depending on underlying values, interests, and contexts (Chong & Druckman, 2007). These differences in news framing can substantially influence the impact of the message on public opinion (López-Rabadán, 2010).

In this context, the analysis of the framing of climate change in news coverage has become one of the most relevant and recurring lines of research within the field of framing internationally (López-Rabadán, 2022; Radwan & Ayyad, 2024). This analysis allows for the evaluation of how journalistic discourse shapes the presentation of the climate crisis, its political and socioeconomic implications, and the possible responses to this global phenomenon. In this sense, framing determines how the problem is conceptualized (Iyengar, 1991), which aspects are emphasized, what solutions are

offered, and what attributions of responsibility or blame are prioritized in the news discourse (Hansen, 2011). In this regard, several researchers agree that coverage tends toward simplicity, is approached from a place of social disconnection, and lacks depth (Cantero-de-Julián & Herranz-de-la-Casa, 2023). This would be limited to extreme weather events and global events, such as the United Nations Conferences of the Parties (COP), where political leaders, large companies and civil society actors converge (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007).

In this confrontational scenario, climate change has undoubtedly become a matter of public dispute, generating political and social tensions on the media agenda (Küppers, 2024; Lakoff, 2010; Pandey, 2024). Conflict, being a highly newsworthy element, constitutes a key resource for the media, which often resort to this framing strategy to attract audience attention. Consequently, numerous studies have identified the conflict frame as predominant in media coverage of climate change, which can contribute to the polarization of public debate (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Ugwu & Akase, 2024). This framing is conditioned, in the first instance, by the high political sphere and the dynamics of international relations in the pursuit of agreements and the adoption of mitigation measures.

However, academic literature has also emphasized the need to analyze framing holistically, taking into account perspectives such as opportunity, risk, and uncertainty, which more nuancedly reflect the complexity of the climate crisis (Farré-Coma, 2022; Gaitán-Moya et al., 2017; Hansen, 2011; Lopera & Moreno, 2014; Nisbet, 2009; Painter, 2017; Stecula & Merkley, 2019). From this perspective, it would be interesting to know whether the media adopt a negative and alarmist approach or, on the contrary, promote a more hopeful and proactive view of the problem (Bennett, 2009).

While conflict is an inherent part of the climate debate, social action in response to this global problem is also becoming increasingly so. In this sense, emerging frameworks such as economic impact (Chen et al., 2023), climate justice (von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021), and ethics and morality (Badullovich et al., 2020) appear to have gained prominence in journalistic discourse. These informational approaches highlight a more proactive and mobilizing perspective on the climate agenda (Sendra-Duro & López-Rabadán, 2025). In a context dominated by political and economic elites, many voices are calling for accountability and concrete solutions (O'Brien et al., 2010). There are even those who denounce the presence of greenwashing in some media coverage (Moreno & Ruiz-Alba, 2021), questioning the professional ethics and the relationship of the media with their sources of funding.

This panorama, characterized by a diversity of approaches and discursive strategies, highlights the need to delve deeper into the study of the media framing of climate change as a tool to understand and manage its impact on public opinion.

1.1.3. Problem-Solving Journalism as a Proactive Approach to the Climate Crisis

Inevitably, the COVID-19 health emergency temporarily displaced other issues from the initial information stage, generating silences and alterations in the prioritization of the media agenda (Fernández-Reyes, 2021; Lyytimäki et al., 2020; Rauchfleisch et al., 2023; Sowers, 2024; Stoddart et al., 2021). However, the new normal reached between 2020 and 2021 brought with it renewed communication dynamics surrounding global problems, highlighting the interconnection of the health and climate crises and their multiple effects on global health and the reconfiguration of the planet's future (McHugh et al., 2021).

In this new context, and in contrast to media coverage traditionally focused on risks, solutions journalism has emerged as a powerful force. The aim of this professional approach is to report on solutions to social problems in a rigorous and compelling manner, given the avalanche of alarming news (Thier & Namkoong, 2023). Thus, solutions journalism seeks to present useful information, such as opportunities, innovations, and social initiatives in the fight against climate change. This specialization facilitates a renewal of the agenda-setting and allows for a greater connection with the public, in the face of audience fatigue (Benaissa-Pedriza, 2024).

Thier and Lin (2022) advocate for solutions journalism, or constructive journalism, as a way to garner greater public support for climate change adaptation and mitigation. Similarly, the professional associations Covering Climate Now and Solutions Journalism Network (2023) argue that reporting on solutions does not mean ignoring the dangers, but rather presenting a comprehensive climate narrative, raising public awareness, and assisting policymakers in making informed decisions.

In the context of framing, problem-solving journalism would be evident in frames based on climate change adaptation, such as the positive economic impact of the green transition, or in those that highlight transformative human experiences (Thier & Wu, 2024), as they complement the social diagnosis with proposals and alternatives (Vicente-Torrico, 2025). This discursive renewal responds to a growing demand from audiences who require local coverage with an empowering message oriented toward social action (Vicente-Torrico & López-Virales, 2022).

2. OBJECTIVES

The following are the research objectives, designed to comprehensively analyze the strategies used by Spanish digital media in their coverage of climate change. These objectives allow us to delve deeper into the dynamics of news framing and propose improvements in how the issue is covered by the media:

- O1. To analyze the presence of thematic and episodic frames in the media representation of climate change and its consequences when framing it as a structural problem of global scope or as a succession of specific events or facts.
- O2. To identify the predominant frames in media coverage, based on a

proprietary typology that combines both an update of traditional perspectives (conflict, human interest, economic impact, morality, and accountability) and emerging frames linked to environmental justice and social action.

- O3. To conduct a comparative analysis of framing strategies across different digital media outlets in the post-pandemic context (2021–2023), taking into account their professional model and editorial approach.
- O4. To examine the strategic use of keywords in media coverage of climate change, based on their systematic presence in headlines as the primary focal points of news coverage.
- O5. To provide interpretative insights into the predominant framing strategies and suggest recommendations for more rigorous and balanced news coverage of climate change, focused on solutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Technique

To address the aforementioned objectives, this research proposes a mixed-methods approach using the framing theory. On the one hand, it employs a quantitative approach through content analysis, considered by Igartua and Humanes (2004) as a key method in the study of journalistic messages. On the other hand, it conducts a discourse analysis of framing with the aim of identifying and exploring the strategies used by Spanish media in their coverage of climate change.

Specifically, the first block of quantitative analysis uses two reference typologies from framing studies as its methodological basis. First, it distinguishes between thematic and episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991) as an empirical observation prior to the presentation of the issue, applicable to any topic on the media agenda. This classic typology allows us to identify whether climate change is presented as a structural phenomenon (thematic) or as an isolated event (episodic). This dichotomy is key to evaluating whether the coverage fosters awareness and understanding or, conversely, generates a fragmented view that hinders comprehension of the problem. Second, the typology of news framing by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) is adapted to the field of climate news, given the validity and widespread international recognition of these five framings (conflict, human interest, economic impact, morality, and responsibility).

This categorization allows us to observe whether conflict remains a predominant element in the climate debate or whether, on the contrary, a more solutions-oriented communication is emerging. Furthermore, specific variables are incorporated into each framing based on contributions from Nisbet (2009) and recent developments in the field of climate change (Badullovich et al., 2020; von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021), which allows for addressing the emerging dynamics of framing in contemporary and digital contexts.

The methodological proposal (see Table 1) combines research tradition and analytical rigor with versatility, offering a solid and adaptable framework for the study of framing in the context of climate change.

Table 1

Content Analysis Protocol

Problem statement (issue frame)	Description	
Thematic framing	It addresses climate change from a structural perspective, analyzing causes, consequences and/or possible solutions.	
Episodic framing	It presents climate change through isolated events, such as extreme weather phenomena, announcements, specific controversies, or individual stories.	
Predominant (news frame)	Description	Variable
Conflict framing	This frame emphasizes disagreements and tensions related to climate change, such as disputes between countries, between environmental organizations and companies, or between interest groups.	1. Political conflict 2. Social conflict
Human interest framing	It highlights emotional stories related to climate change, humanizing the issue through testimonies, affected communities, threatened groups, or adaptation initiatives.	1. Empowerment (initiatives) 2. Vulnerability (risks and threats)
Economic impact framing	It focuses on the economic costs associated with the climate crisis or the economic opportunities arising from the ecological transition and sustainability.	1. Economic cost 2. Economic opportunity
Moral judgment framing	It addresses climate change from an ethical, moral, or even spiritual perspective, raising questions about intergenerational responsibility or climate justice.	1. Ethics/morality 2. Climate justice
Accountability framing	It focuses on identifying or pointing out those responsible for the causes of climate change. It can assign responsibility to governments, companies, lobbies, or even citizens.	1. Political leader 2. Civilly liable

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the typologies of Iyengar (1991) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), together with proposals from Nisbet (2009), Badullovich et al. (2020) and von Zabern and Tulloch (2021).

Following the guidelines of Nicholls and Culpepper (2020), special attention was paid to the headlines, subheadings, and lead paragraphs of each piece to determine the problem definition and the predominant informational framing. The coding of the news items was carried out independently by two analysts to ensure the reliability of the process. Substantial agreement was obtained between the researchers, calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which reached a value greater than 0.8 in a random sample of 10% of the analyzed corpus, indicating a substantial level of inter-coder reliability.

Additionally, the study is complemented by a keyword analysis to delve deeper into the conceptual semantics of media discourse on climate change, a common practice in *framing research* (Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2009). This exercise allows for the identification of recurring patterns in the terminology used by the media to establish discursive associations. In this case, the study focused solely on headlines, as they constitute the primary point of access to journalistic information, condense the main idea of the news story, and guide the reader's interpretation. The exercise was carried out using the T-LAB data application, employed in other research on journalistic content (López-Carrión & Martín-Sánchez, 2024; Roger-Monzó et al., 2021). The objective was to determine which terms stand out most regularly in headlines and then relate them to the dominant news framing. This complementary analysis reinforces the quantitative dimension of the research and also expands the capacity for interpretation in framing strategies.

The sample definition follows the recommendations of authors such as Adame *et al.* (2025), Anderson (2009), and Bolin and Hamilton (2018), who emphasize the importance of analyzing climate information across a variety of media outlets to observe trends and compare coverage across different communication formats and editorial perspectives. Therefore, the study focuses on the coverage of six Spanish digital media outlets with different approaches and reporting histories (see Table 2). This selection ranges from established publications to emerging digital outlets, ensuring a representative review of the Spanish media ecosystem.

Table 2

Media Sample

Category	Media Outlet	Professional and Editorial Model
Reference Press	<i>El País</i> (progressive) <i>El Mundo</i> (conservative)	They are considered leading general-interest media outlets, given their track record as influential sources that provide comprehensive coverage of topics of general interest from well-established editorial perspectives.
Digital Press	<i>elDiario.es</i> (progressive) <i>El Confidencial</i> (conservative)	They are classified as quality digital native press, characterized by their specialized focus: the first, with a social and committed perspective, and the second, focused on the economy-business and national politics.
Commercially Oriented Digital Press	<i>HuffPost</i> (progressive) <i>OkDiario</i> (conservative)	They are digital media outlets with an accessible and direct communication style, through a journalistic strategy based on infotainment and the digital environment, driven by the dynamics of clickbait.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Although the sample focuses on news framing and does not include social media, the presence of digital natives, who operate within the emerging dynamics of cyberjournalism and online platforms (Hubner & Dixon, 2023), allows for a connection with an increasingly consolidated line of digital research in framing studies (Hopke & Hestres, 2018; Nisbet & Newman, 2015). Furthermore, it is considered a highly significant sample, both due to the volume of information analyzed and the incorporation of prevailing trends in digital climate change coverage, including aspects of immediacy and multimedia inherent to the current information ecosystem.

Finally, the analysis uses as a case study the media coverage of the three United Nations Conferences of the Parties (COPs) held after the health crisis: Glasgow (Scotland, 2021), Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt, 2022), and Dubai (United Arab Emirates, 2023). These events constitute annual news milestones of particular relevance to the climate agenda. The news items were extracted from the MyNews digital newspaper database using the search terms “COP26,” “COP27,” and “COP28.” The resulting corpus comprises a total of 671 news items, providing a broad, representative, and suitable empirical base for a comprehensive comparative analysis.

4. RESULTS

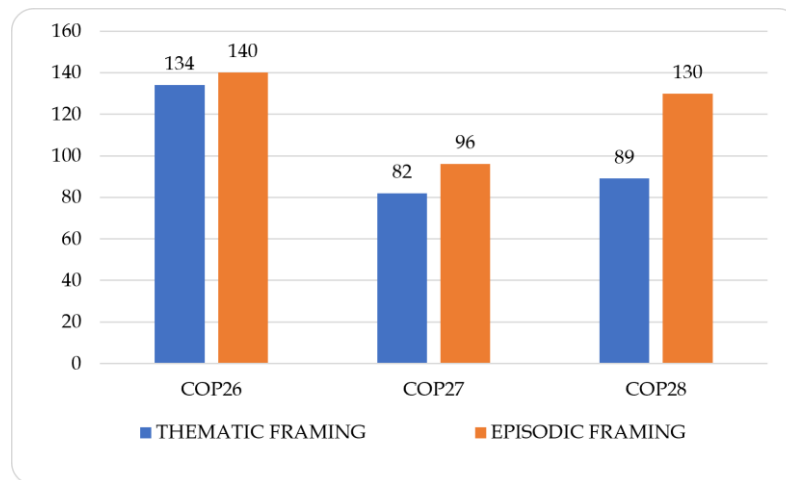
4.1. From the Dominant Episodic Perspective to the Current Advance of the Thematic-Contextualizing Approach

The classification of the 671 news items analyzed reveals a predominance of the episodic framing (366 items; 55% of the sample). This majority result suggests that, in the context examined, the media tend to represent climate change as an isolated phenomenon, without addressing the problem comprehensively and focusing on specific moments and events. This would constitute the most representative framing across the three climate conferences analyzed (Figure 1). This fact highlights the persistence of news strategies centered on isolated narratives, such as political announcements and specific conflicts, without contextualizing their implications. While this journalistic approach may initially capture the audience's attention, it tends to fragment the perception of the urgency of the climate crisis, reducing it to disconnected episodes and thus weakening the media's understanding of a complex problem.

However, the fact that 45% of the news items use a thematic framework (305 news items) underscores a significant attempt by the media to present climate change as a structural phenomenon, comprehensively addressing its causes, consequences, and potential solutions. This journalistic approach is more prevalent in COP26 and COP27, while its focus diminishes in COP28, likely influenced by the political dimension of the event.

Figure 1.

General Distribution of the Thematic and Episodic Framing at Each Summit (n=671)



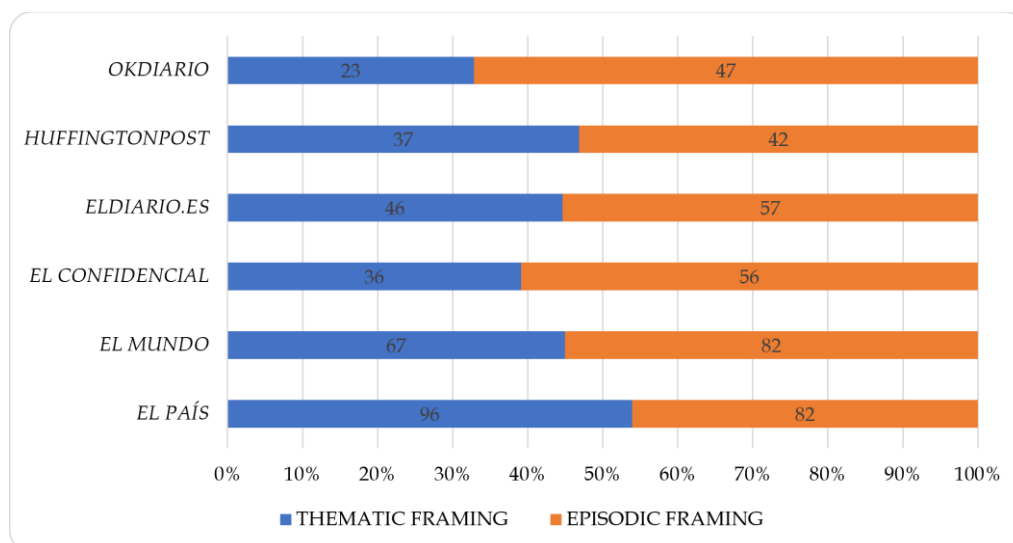
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Although the episodic format is clearly the most representative in the analyzed sample, a certain balance is observed in the informational treatment of the two framing perspectives, a fact that would allow for a broad approach to the media representation of climate change. This comprehensive coverage addresses both the immediate political and social debate, as well as the risks and threats arising from global warming and the responses to this challenge.

Furthermore, the disaggregated analysis by newspapers (Figure 2) shows differences and nuances in the professional and editorial orientation regarding the informative representation of climate change.

Figure 2.

General Distribution of the Thematic and Episodic Framing Based on the News Source (n=671)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The leading newspapers are distinguished by their high degree of thematic coverage. *El País* stands out as the publication with the highest proportion of thematic news items (136 thematic news items compared to 42 episodic ones), representing 52.75% of its coverage with a structural approach. This figure would position *El País* as the only newspaper with a specialized focus. *El Mundo*, for its part, presents a fairly balanced coverage (67 thematic news items compared to 82 episodic ones; 55.03% episodic), although it lags behind its main competitor. *El Mundo*'s news approach combines elements of interpretive and event journalism, depending on the context and the dynamics of the news agenda.

In the realm of digital journalism, *El Confidencial* and *elDiario.es* exhibit a fairly similar approach, with a predominance of episodic framing. *El Confidencial* maintains a majority of episodic news items (56 news items versus 36 thematic ones; 60.87% episodic). This pattern is consistent with its professional model, which presents journalism focused on explaining processes and structures of political and economic power. *elDiario.es*, on the other hand, shows a slightly more balanced proportion (57 episodic versus 46 thematic ones; 55.34% episodic). Although episodic treatment is more prevalent, the weight of thematic framing is relatively greater than that of its digital competitor.

Finally, the commercially oriented digital press reflects the diversity of its professional offerings. *HuffPost* presents a nearly balanced profile (37 episodic news items versus 42 thematic ones; 53.16% episodic), reflecting a diverse journalistic approach that complements immediate action with structural analysis. Meanwhile, *OkDiario* stands out as the publication with the strongest episodic focus (47 episodic news items versus 23 thematic ones; 67.14% episodic). This data suggests a tendency towards confrontational journalism and polarizing narratives online, which would diminish the perceived severity of climate change as a global phenomenon.

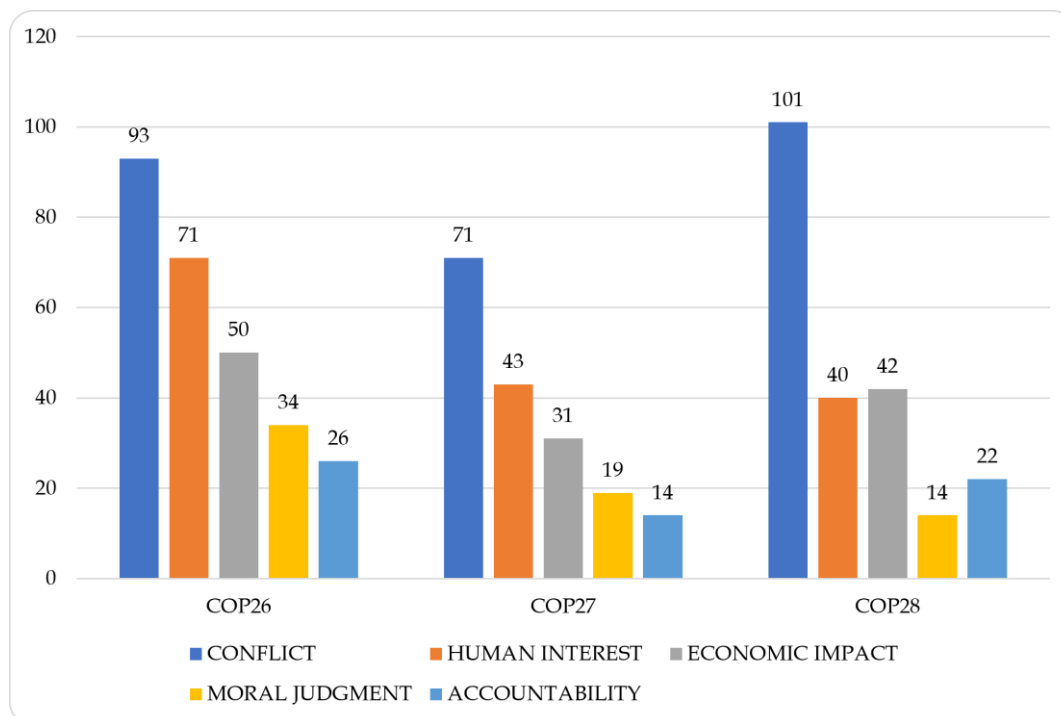
In terms of editorial sections, media outlets considered progressive (*El País*, *elDiario.es*, and *HuffPost*) present a more balanced approach (51.92% episodic; 48.08% thematic), which would suggest a greater interest in the global context of climate change. Meanwhile, in conservative media, the episodic approach is clearly more prevalent (61.01% episodic; 38.99% thematic), prioritizing immediate news, statements, and specific controversies. In this area, the percentage difference is largely due to the volume of *OkDiario*, which shows a much higher proportion of episodic coverage than the rest.

4.2. Conflict, Human Interest, and Economic Impact as the Most Prominent News Framings

Longitudinal analysis of the news framing used in the coverage of the three climate summits (COP26, COP27, and COP28) confirms a significant transformation in the media representation of climate change. While the conflict framing remains predominant, a gradual trend toward diversification and pluralism in reporting is identified, with a greater presence of framing linked to collective action and the economic opportunities associated with the green transition (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Informative Framing at Each Summit (n=671)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

First, the conflict framing is the most recurrent across the three events, peaking at COP28 (101 news items). This data would confirm that confrontation—whether between countries, institutions, economic interests, or social figures—remains the central focus of climate coverage and that the media continue to primarily report on the diplomatic and negotiating nature of the conflict. Examples include the news items from *El País* and *El Mundo*, respectively: “The European war over nuclear and gas erupts at the Glasgow Climate Summit” (Planelles, M. & de Miguel, 2021) and “Maximum tension at the end of the Climate Summit: the inclusion of a loss and damage fund restores hope for COP27” (Fresneda, 2022).

Secondly, the human interest framing shows a steady decline across the three summits (from 71 at COP26 to 40 at COP28), but it remains a key factor. This decrease could be interpreted as a possible integration of the human element within other frames, especially those of moral judgment or economic impact, which show increases. Emotionality would be reconfigured, becoming a cross-cutting dimension rather than an autonomous frame. Example: “Do we have too many visitors? The impact of tourism on fragile territories” (Galvín, 2021).

Third, the focus on economic impact increased significantly at COP28 (42 news items), surpassing human interest for the first time. This surge suggests a pragmatic reformulation of the news discourse, presenting the ecological transition as a process

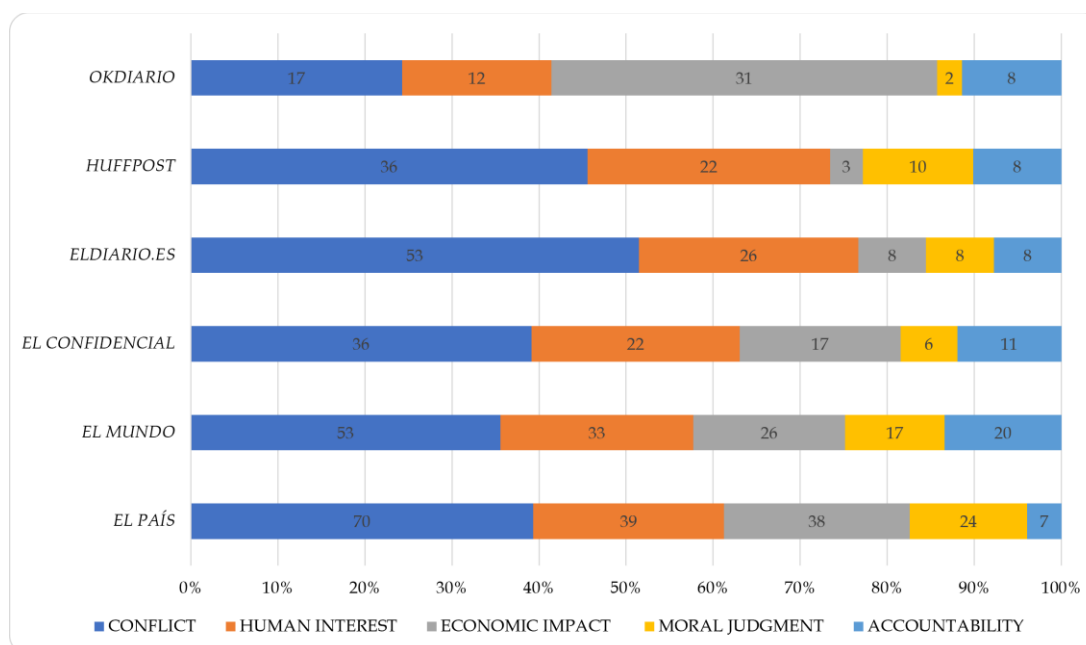
with both economic benefits and costs, especially in terms of investment and job creation. This trend is evident, for example, in headlines from *El País* such as “Accelerated investment in renewables, the best antidote to future oil crises” (Fariza, 2023) and from *El Confidencial*: “Spain’s sunshine makes the country the eighth most attractive for renewable energy investment” (Cotizalia, 2022), both of which include economic factors as their main news focuses.

Fourth, the moral judgment framing, a classic element in framing studies, also shows a steady decline across the three conferences. Finally, although less prevalent, the responsibility attribution frame remains relatively stable. This reflects a sustained tendency to point fingers and demand binding measures. Some examples of this journalistic denunciation are: “Twelve of the richest men pollute as much as two million households” (Fresneda, 2023) in *El Mundo* or “The 10 most hypocritical moments of world leaders at the Climate Summit” (Sleigh, 2021) in *HuffPost*. Its slight increase at COP28 (22 mentions) could be interpreted as a sign of the social commitment of environmental journalists in a contentious debate.

Even more significant is the analysis by news outlets (Figure 4). Overall, the results indicate that the representation of climate change in the media is not homogeneous: it responds to different professional models and editorial lines that influence the configuration of news framings.

Figure 4.

News Framings Based on News Headline (n=671)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

On the one hand, the mainstream press presents diversified, balanced, and multidimensional coverage, addressing climate change from a pluralistic perspective.

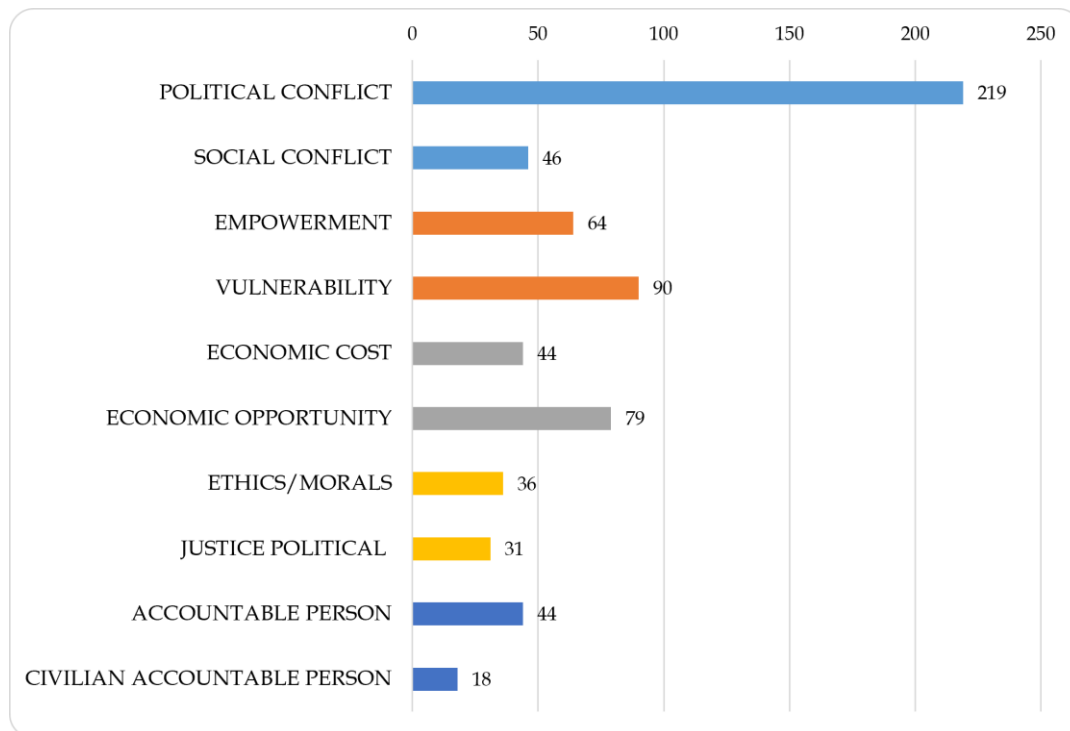
El País exhibits intensive use of the conflict framing (70 news items), but combines it with a strong presence of the economic framework (38 news items) and human interest stories (39 news items), suggesting a comprehensive approach that integrates political analysis, the green transition, and the humanitarian component. *El Mundo*, while sharing with *El País* a high presence of the conflict framing (53 news items) and human interest stories (33), stands out for its number of news items attributing responsibility (20). This editorial approach seeks to highlight concrete consequences, but also to scrutinize and hold accountable the actors involved in climate action (or inaction). Thus, the mainstream press positions itself as the professional model that best highlights the cross-cutting and multi-causal nature of climate change.

Digital-native media are characterized by a strong emphasis on conflict framing, although they diverge in how they integrate other frames. In the case of *elDiario.es*, it articulates its coverage from a critical and structural perspective, with more than half of its content focused on conflict (53 news items) and human interest stories (26 news items). It maintains a lower representation of economic or moralizing frames, which would reflect more social editorial priorities. In contrast, *El Confidencial* presents a more hybrid approach; it focuses heavily on conflict (36 news items), combining the political dimension with frames of economic impact (17 news items) and accountability (11 news items), aligning with its profile as a media outlet geared towards decision-makers. Although there are nuances between them, their coverage is similar to that of the traditional press, demonstrating a relatively significant professional and editorial convergence.

Finally, commercially oriented digital media outlets exhibit a more utilitarian, emotional, and even sensationalist approach, characterized by simplified framing and less structural coverage. *HuffPost* strikes a balance between conflict (36 news items) and human interest (22 news items), complemented by elements of moral judgment (10 news items). This profile suggests a more immediate and emotional approach, geared toward narrative impact and digital strategy. *OkDiario*, on the other hand, displays a distinct pattern: its coverage is dominated by economic impact (31 news items), with less emphasis on conflict (17) and a discreet presence of moral judgment (2). This orientation of the publication suggests an economic or business-oriented strategy, where climate change is addressed as a market phenomenon, devoid of ethical or structural considerations. Both outlets prioritize virality, accessibility, and connection with their audience, adhering to a professional model focused on clicks and immediate news.

Figure 5.

Specific Variables of the News Frames (n=671)



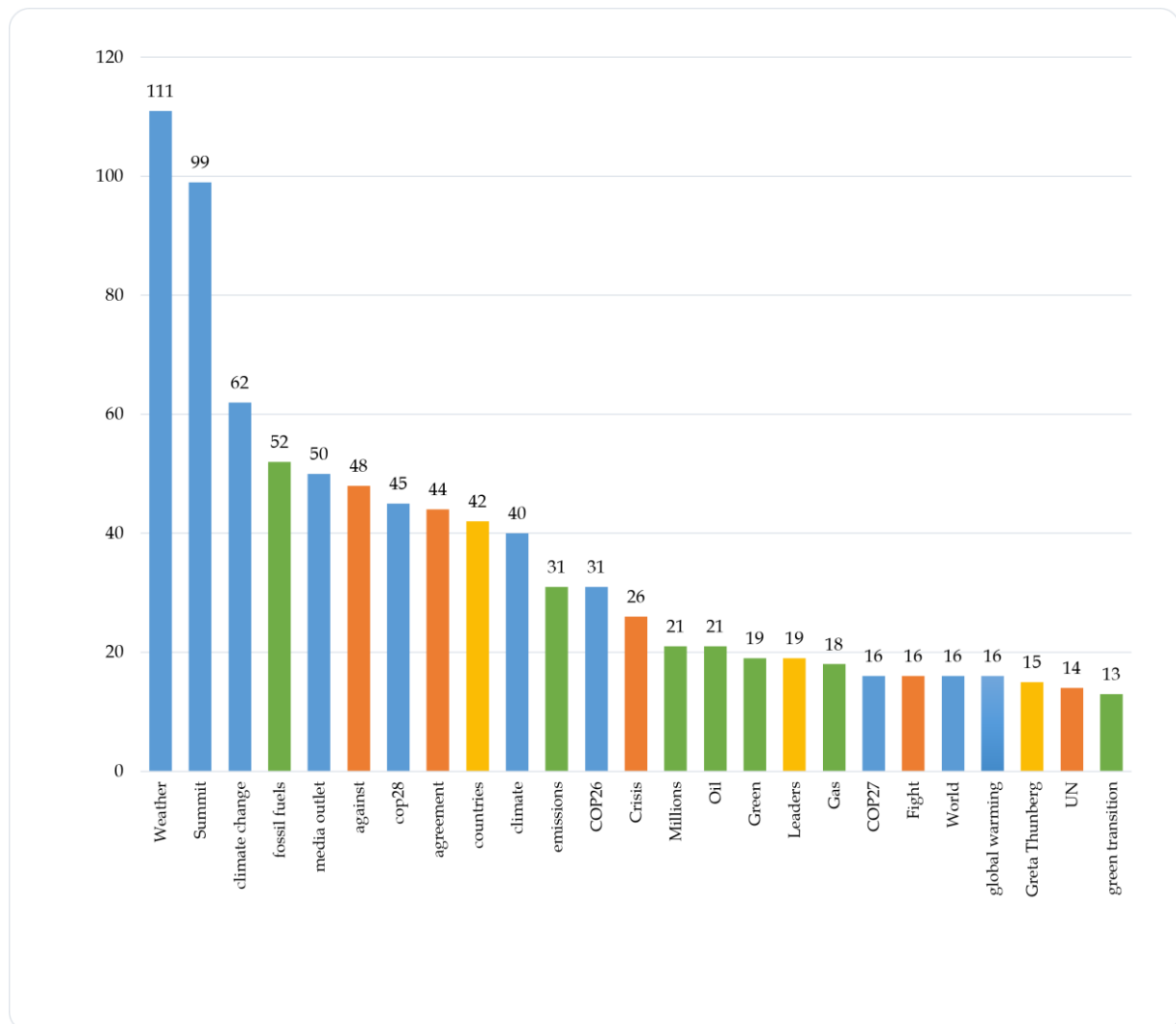
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding the specific variables of each framing (Figure 5), political conflict is the main source of dispute in the discursive confrontation (219 news items). This is essentially due to the diplomatic dimension of the contest, where institutional leaders from around the world converge. In the human interest section, the vulnerability approach is more prevalent (90 news items) than the empowerment approach (64 news items), reflecting coverage focused on the causes and risks of global warming. In the economic sphere, the opportunity frame is clearly predominant (79 news items), where a positive perspective on business and sustainability, in contrast to its adaptation costs, is gaining prominence. In the ethical/moral frame, a balanced approach between the two variables is observed, with an emerging justice frame (31 news items) that has yet to fully take off. Finally, in terms of attributing responsibility, the media mostly hold politicians (44 news items) responsible for the actions or inaction resulting from the climate crisis.

4.3. Framing and Strategic Use of Keywords: From Institutionality to Collective Action

Statistical analysis of headlines reveals the most frequently repeated concepts and keywords in media coverage of the COPs (see Figure 6). In this lexical map, four key trends can be identified that shape discursive cores and reinforce their articulation with the news frames previously observed.

Figure 6.
Representation of Keywords in News Headlines (n=885)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

First, regarding the definition of the problem, the media overwhelmingly prioritize the term "climate change" and the related lexicon ("climate," "summit," "COP," "media"). In this context, the label "climate change" shows signs of consolidation, although the term "crisis" has emerged as a new contemporary expression, already occupying a middle ground in media coverage. At the same time, the concept of "global warming," which for decades was the primary source of information and scientific reference, is playing a less prominent role.

Secondly, in line with the prevailing conflict framing, expressions that reinforce political confrontation ("against," "struggle," "crisis") and institutional negotiation ("agreement") stand out. These terms reinforce the diplomatic dimension of the conflict in headlines and highlight the public dispute over the narrative in the media.

Third, concepts such as "fossil fuels," "emissions," "millions," "oil," and "green" point to a diversified approach where climate change is also addressed as an economic and

geostrategic problem requiring action, measures, and new regulations. This lexicon aligns closely with the economic impact frame, as it alludes to both investments and opportunities for sustainable solutions, and it recreates a more contextualized view of the problem. However, it is also evident that the concept of “green transition” is still developing, as is the consolidation of the “green” label in the media.

Finally, the fourth trend reveals changes in content personalization and news focus. The diplomatic nature of the conflict explains why “countries,” “leaders,” and the “UN” are the main protagonists at the summits. However, the emergence of “Greta Thunberg,” a leading figure in climate activism, as the most frequently mentioned name in headlines also explains a news approach centered on social empowerment, which connects with various news frames, including conflict, ethics/morality, and human interest.

Taken together, these four identified trends suggest a democratization of climate discourse, where the institutional and participatory aspects are balanced.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Studying media *framing* of climate change is a key activity for understanding news coverage of the greatest political, economic, and social problem of our time (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018). This analysis is especially significant in the so-called post-pandemic era, marked by profound social transformations that have profoundly affected society and, consequently, journalism and its professional practices (McHugh et al., 2021). In this context, climate change is no longer perceived merely as a complex and distant threat, but also as an active (Küppers, 2024; Lakoff, 2010) and urgent arena of debate regarding the kind of society we want to build in the future. In general, analyzing news framing in coverage of United Nations Conferences of the Parties (COPs) leads to several conclusions.

First, the episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991) has become the dominant strategy in presenting the issue in the analyzed media (O1), suggesting a still superficial treatment of climate coverage (55% of news items). This finding is consistent with previous research, which warned of a superficial and decontextualized approach to climate change coverage in Spain (Cantero-de-Julián & Herranz-de-la-Casa, 2023). However, the identification of 45% of the items with a thematic perspective represents a substantial advance by projecting the climate crisis in a general way and not merely as a succession of isolated events. Overall, the data point to coverage that is beginning to balance the immediacy of the agenda with a deeper analytical background oriented towards a comprehensive understanding of the problem.

Second, the results show signs of diversification and increasing narrative sophistication. Conflict is the most frequent news framing (O2), a trend consistent with previous research (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Ugwu & Akase, 2024), especially in relation to international negotiation dynamics. However, there is an increase in framing linked to economic impact, due to the opportunities offered by the ecosocial transition and the green economy (Chen et al., 2023; Stecula &

Merkley, 2019). This broadening is evident, for example, in headlines such as “Accelerated investment in renewables, the best antidote to future oil crises” (Fariza, 2023) in *El País* or “Spain’s sunshine makes the country the eighth most attractive for renewable energy investment” (Cotizalia, 2022) in *El Confidencial*, which include economic factors as their main focus. Thus, far from being anchored in a representation centered exclusively on political confrontation, the evolution of these frames reflects a progressive shift in the agenda toward social action and the search for solutions, indicating a proactive approach (Bennett, 2009). In parallel, the enduring presence of a framing of responsibility stands out, its objective being to identify those responsible for the climate crisis and the main protagonists of these gatherings (Hansen, 2011).

Although the human interest framing is diminishing, its focus remains significant, especially when addressing the planet’s vulnerability and the consequences of climate change, from an emotional perspective that seeks to connect with social stories. Likewise, an emerging climate justice frame linked to activism is being considered (von Zabern & Tullock, 2021), although it is still a minority view and unevenly distributed within the media ecosystem.

Third, the analysis broken down by newspaper and professional model (O3) reveals distinct coverage patterns. The mainstream press (*El País* and *El Mundo*) stands out for its comprehensive approach, combining explanatory and critical frameworks and addressing the various ethical, political, and economic dimensions of climate change. Digital-native media outlets (*elDiario.es* and *El Confidencial*) adopt similar approaches, albeit with different emphases: while *elDiario.es* prioritizes the social and participatory dimension, *El Confidencial* tends to frame climate change from an economic-business perspective and with a focus on political oversight. Conversely, the commercially oriented digital press (*HuffPost* and *OkDiario*) exhibits a lighter, less in-depth treatment, with a tendency towards simplification or sensationalism, particularly in the case of *OkDiario*. Overall, the data suggest that news framing of climate change in the post-pandemic context is shifting towards more active and demanding forms of representation. Although differences are observed between professional models, they do not seem to excessively determine editorial lines, which are more visibly manifested on the conservative side of the political spectrum.

Finally, the lexical analysis of keywords in the headlines (O4) provides a complementary semantic dimension that reinforces the results obtained in the area of framing, revealing four key trends: the consolidation of the term “climate change” versus emerging expressions such as “crisis”; the prevalence of the conflict framing in language; the growing attention to the economic impact and environmental challenges; and the personalization of the narrative, with shared protagonism between institutional actors and activists.

Beyond the results, it is important to consider the context in which this evolution is taking place (O5). Although climate summits can be understood as isolated events (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007), after three decades they constitute the main arena for political communication in the context of climate change. They are the “election

campaigns” of the climate agenda. The media, aware of this centrality, have substantially improved their coverage with more specialized reporting. Even so, it is worth noting the fragility of framing in contexts of polarization or information fatigue (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2018; Ugwu & Akase, 2024). The persistence of episodic framing highlights the risks of decontextualization and dispersion that still exist in news discourse. Likewise, the excessive institutionalization of the debate can distance citizens, so it is advisable to broaden the perspective to include all the actors involved (Sendra-Duro & López-Rabadán, 2025).

This evolution in framing raises important implications for environmental journalism and its role in building an informed, critical, and engaged citizenry in the face of the climate challenge. These challenges align with the post-pandemic information perspective, which integrates sustainability, health, and justice (Ho et al., 2023). Therefore, it is recommended to promote specialized training in solutions journalism for practicing professionals (Vicente-Torrico, 2025), with content that connects with the audience from a constructive perspective (Benaissa-Pedriza, 2024; Bennett, 2009).

This positive outlook should be extended to the broader spectrum of climate coverage, which is undergoing diversification (Sendra-Duro & López-Rabadán, 2025). In the area of political information, it is recommended to explore how local governments can contribute to mitigating the effects of climate change. In the socioeconomic sphere, attention should be paid to business initiatives and public-private partnerships, encompassing everything from investments in green technologies to responsible business models and practices, without resorting to greenwashing (Moreno & Ruiz-Alba, 2021). From a social perspective, it is recommended to pay greater attention to the proposals of NGOs, activists, and organized citizens, as coverage has focused excessively on mobilization and protest. Finally, in the cultural sphere, it is recommended to examine how artistic expressions and the digital realm influence perceptions and actions in the face of this global crisis. There are specialized guides aimed at improving coverage from these perspectives, such as “Covering Climate Equitably: A Guide for Journalists” (2020), produced by The Solutions Project, as well as the digital resources provided by the University of Oxford's Climate Journalism Network. Likewise, the need for partnerships between media outlets and universities to facilitate access to expert sources that enhance the quality of journalistic reporting is evident.

Taken together, the data confirm a reconfiguration of news framing in the post-COVID era that, although still marked by traditional inertia, it includes renewed framing in a new information agenda that combines institutionality with the search for solutions and greater discursive plurality.

While this study offers a representative overview of the evolution of media framing of climate change in the Spanish context, it has some limitations. The analysis has broadly considered news items, without differentiating between genres or length, which may partially influence the sample. Furthermore, it has not taken into account other visual resources such as photographs, images, or videos embedded in the news items, which

are relevant in the digital context. Future research should explore the evolution of framing, especially in emerging media and social networks, where new logics of communication and content virality are unfolding.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization: Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Methodology:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Software:** Sendra-Duro, Enric. **Validation:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Formal Analysis:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Data Curation:** Sendra-Duro, Enric. **Drafting and Preparation of the Original Draft:** Sendra-Duro, Enric. **Drafting, Revision, and Editing:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Visualization:** Sendra-Duro, Enric. **Supervision:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo. **Project Management:** Sendra-Duro, Enric. **All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript:** Sendra-Duro, Enric and López-Rabadán, Pablo.

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AUTHORS:

Enric Sendra-Duro: He holds a bachelor's degree in Journalism from the Jaume I University. He has a master's degree in Political Analysis and Institutional Consulting from the University of Barcelona and has also completed postgraduate studies in Political Communication at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Communication Sciences, his research focuses on the evolution of the climate agenda and the transformations of journalism in the digital ecosystem. He has been an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at the Jaume I University and has 10 years of professional experience in the field of public communication.

esendra@uji.es

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8569-2709>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=SVHPapQAAAAJ&hl=ca&oi=ao>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Enric-Sendra-Duro>

Scopus: <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=59210205200>

Academia.edu: <https://uji.academia.edu/EnricSendra>

Pablo López-Rabadán: He holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a doctoral degree in Communication Sciences from Rey Juan Carlos University. He is currently a tenured professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at Jaume I University and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. His research focuses on innovation in journalism, the impact of social media on political communication, and the role of specialized journalism in combating health and environmental misinformation. His scholarly output includes more than 60 published articles, book chapters, and books. He has currently been recognized with two six-year tenure periods by the CNEAI. He has been a visiting researcher at various European universities (Cardiff, Westminster, and Florence) and American universities (Valparaíso and Boston). In 2017, he received the Drago Award from the journal *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*.

rabadan@uji.es

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4828-4933>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=sNLA0egAAAAJ&hl=ca>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Pablo-Rabadan>

Scopus: <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=51663804600>

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