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**The Australian News Media and Climate Change:
How Frames Impact the Response of Individuals in an
Anthropocentric Society**

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ISP Ethics Review

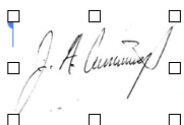
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Program: Cairns: Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology

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Abstract

News media plays an instrumental role in shaping opinions and perceptions on climate change due to it being such a wide-reaching institution. The discourses of news media are able to use frames to determine the discursive context in which a concept or issue is discussed by promoting a central theme or message. This study aims to use critical discourse analysis to determine how climate change is framed in news media, and how these frames depict the forms and scope of possible climate action. The study also analyzes if these forms of action are predominantly anthropocentric in nature. Critical discourse analysis entails looking at how the use of linguistic elements can structure meanings and relations to larger structures or institutions and, for the purposes of this study, how news media constructs these relationships.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Effectively Communicating Climate Change

Effective communication regarding climate change has become an increasingly prominent issue within various forms of public media since it first became an international issue in the 1980s. There is widespread debate regarding the causes and implications of climate change across the globe, including how anthropocentric ideas have influenced how people perceive climate change. The term anthropocentric has been highly debated, but the purpose of this study can be defined as the view that humans are the most important thing in existence, which makes the environment lose all intrinsic value (Calarco 2020: 18). This view characterizes climate change as significant for its impact only on humans rather than on all life, including the natural world, beyond its benefits for humans. Disbelief in human impact on the environment is having devastating effects, and this disbelief arguably stems in part from how public media has framed the issue (Moser 2010). Climate change communication is often centered around human interests, such as economics or tourism attractions, rather than the intrinsic value of the environment itself. Humanity holds so much power over the Earth and its ecosystems, so communicating the effects of climate change in a way that reaches, and actually influences, wider audiences is becoming increasingly important. News discourse is a force in its own right, meaning that it has the ability to shape opinions and perceptions through the way issues are communicated. The public debates that take place across mass media are also vital in constructing the perceptions of the issue, which adds to the importance of news media coverage of climate change.

1.2 Anthropocentrism

Calarco defines anthropocentrism as, “the view that human beings (in opposition to animals and other nonhuman beings) are of supreme importance in ethical, political, legal, and existential matters” (18). Some key characteristics of anthropocentrism include focusing solely on human interests, a moral hierarchy that distinguishes humans as above all nonhuman beings, and attention from institutions only being given to human existence rather than animals or the environment (Calarco 2020: 18). This can be seen within news media coverage of climate change because articles are written primarily from human perspectives, ultimately reinforcing an instrumental view of the nonhuman world (Calarco 2020: 18). Anthropocentric perspectives view issues such as climate change as mattering only to the extent that they affect human interests due to seeing human beings as having a higher moral value than their non-human counterparts (Calarco 2020: 19). This concept is vital to understanding media coverage of climate change because climate action is only encouraged for the purposes of maintaining human life, rather than protecting ecosystems as having value in and of themselves. Calarco states that, “anthropocentric ideas, attitudes, and dispositions are enacted through a robust and interlocking series of practices and institutions” (20). One such institution is news media, as reporting often focuses solely on why individuals should care about certain issues, which always comes back to how it will affect humans.

1.3 Climate Change in News Media

Climate change emerged as an issue in public media in the 1980s, although early reporting focused mainly on the scientific findings which consisted of confusing

language and data analysis reports (Moser 1, 2010). Most media coverage of climate change happened following severe weather events or panel discussions regarding policy decisions, making it a passive issue for a lot of people (2010). Individuals hear about climate change so regularly that, to some, it has become either an imperceptible issue or one that seems too daunting to take on.

While there are other methods of spreading information, such as social media, news media are particularly important because they are able to frame issues as politically, socially, or culturally important. As Wang and Richardson state, “the relative inaccessibility of peer-reviewed research for the general community highlights the need for journalists and media workers to communicate the relatively complex and inaccessible scientific knowledge of climate change in a manner that is digestible to a general audience” (2020: 4). The global response to climate change is dependent on many political and social factors which news media coverage must inform the public about, as the wide reach of news media is critical in determining which responses can be taken. There has been a global uptake in the coverage of climate change since it first appeared in the 1980s, although responses and informative value differ extensively between different countries (Schmidt 2013). In Australia, economic factors often determine the media’s role in framing climate change due to the country’s reliance on fossil fuels and large greenhouse gas emissions (Wang and Richardson 2020).

There are extremely polarized views regarding climate change that are shown throughout various print publications (Wang & Richardson 5, 2020). Progressive

accounts of climate change tend to replace individual blame with institutional targets, which means denouncing governments for their inaction and complacency. While these accounts do address the failure of institutions to foster change, they do not usually offer valid alternatives (Gunster et. al, 2018). Conservative accounts regarding climate change seem to focus on the cynical idea that change is not possible under the current political and social conditions which ultimately discourages action due to a lack of support (2018). In the study conducted by Wang and Richardson, it was found that almost all political perspectives involving climate change do not offer valid solutions in news media (2020). Media representations do have the ability to alter attitudes surrounding climate change, although motivating individuals and institutions to produce real solutions can not be achieved with the amount of polarization between political viewpoints and economic factors rather than the focus being placed on the environment itself.

1.4 COP26 and the Rise in Media Coverage of Climate Change

The United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) is an international convention regarding the state of climate change and how to handle it. As a key mechanism for enabling global action and decision-making on climate change, the annual COP is extensively reported on by news media across the globe. COP26 took place in Glasgow from October 31, 2021- November 12, 2021 and is important because the main outcome of the COP was an internationally endorsed commitment to achieving net zero emissions globally by 2050 in order to maintain a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius warming. In Australia, this would mean adopting a long-term emissions reduction plan, requiring a lot of changes to be made within society. Despite awareness

of the impacts of climate change becoming increasingly urgent, it can be argued that COP26 fell short of what would be necessary to slow global warming on an international scale.

1.5 Aim of the Study

This study aims to critically analyze articles from four different Australian newspapers to determine which ways of framing climate change are most commonly used to report on or discuss this issue. Once the frames were distinguished, the prevalence of anthropocentric ideologies was assessed in comparison with references to the importance of the natural world itself. This means looking at how often human-centered institutions or things such as the economy are mentioned as the main drivers behind why climate action should be taken

Research Questions

1. How has climate change been framed in Australian newspapers? Have certain frames appeared more often than others in the media coverage?
2. How do these frames depict the forms and scope of possible climate action? Are these forms of action predominantly anthropocentric in nature?

2.0 Methods

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

For the purpose of identifying the different frames employed in media coverage of climate change issues, this study makes use of critical discourse analysis, which is an

approach to language that sees it as a social process and thus tied to power dynamics (Mills 1997: 10). Critical discourse analysis entails looking at how the use of linguistic elements can structure meanings and relations to larger structures or institutions, excluding the assumption that these words have meaning by themselves (1997: 13).

Mills states that “one of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1997: 17). Discourse, in that sense, is the use of language to construct concepts, which ultimately shape ideologies that can then be further debated and reconstructed: “Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity” (Mills 1997: 15). This happens through a grouping of statements that construct values and, therefore, give meaning to particular objects or institutions. A given discourse, that is, is able to provide “a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about, in that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions, and prohibitions of social and individual actions” (Fowler & Kress 1979: 68).

The power dynamics within discourse can be understood as how language use is identified by the institutions it is related to, the positions from which it comes, and how it constructs those positions for the reader or viewer (Mills 1997: 11). The repetition of particular discourses can therefore colonize an area of the social world by privileging the perspective of a particular institution. But a discourse does not exist by itself; rather, it exists in relation to other discourses through contrast, opposition, or sometimes

agreement. This means that different discourses compete to shape the interpretation of various texts through continual dialogue and conflict with other positions, creating a dynamic relationship within a larger system of discourses that is subject to continuous shifts in perspectives (Fowler & Kress 1979: 68). Discourse can therefore be structured in reaction to other discourses, such as how the “discourse of environmentalism has been structured in reaction to government economic and strategic development policies, and also in reaction to ecological disasters” (Mills 1997: 11).

Maynard discusses power dynamics as, “the relationship between the media’s decision of what frame and topic to write about and their power to determine what is important for the public since they can act as gatekeepers who filter information and set public agendas” (2017: 179). Critical discourse analysis involves breaking down these concepts based on the linguistic elements of a particular discourse and relating them to which messages are being highlighted.

2.2 Media Framing

Media framing is an aspect of a discourse that constructs particular perspectives and opinions by highlighting the importance of a certain message (Maynard 2017: 179). Frames can determine the discursive context in which a concept or issue is discussed by promoting a central theme through the use of certain linguistic elements. “The elements in an article create a pattern, which determines its frame; this specific pattern of variables can be present in many articles in a sample, thus identifying articles using the same frame” (Maynard 2017: 179). Frames can be used to construct which

concepts are worthy of public attention and, furthermore, shape how a topic is discussed. Due to this, framing in mass media is able to alter and construct public perceptions of issues such as climate change.

Table 1: Common Frames Across News Media Headlines (adapted from Armstrong et. al 2018)

Frames	Examples from News Headlines
Economic Benefits and Challenges	“Climate change will cost Australia hundreds of billions of dollars: UN report”
Catastrophic Events, Negative Outlooks	“‘Atlas of human suffering’: More drought, fire and flood, less snow and coral, UN report says”
Scientific Uncertainty	“‘Science works best in times of crisis’: Chief Scientist eyes key challenges”

Media discourse often has a reproductive effect, in which it identifies the dominant ways of making sense of an issue and reproduces those perceptions. The concept of framing is essential to understanding the different ways that communication is able to evoke emotions and ideas, particularly surrounding climate change. Audiences can interpret news discourse in many ways, and framing causes certain messages to seem more important which ultimately changes the way information is assessed (Armstrong et. al 2018). Frames can be thought of as hidden messages that determine how a story is interpreted and they will often lead to a certain way of thinking. Framing can be done in several ways, including using specific wording to guide the reader to a conclusion,

appealing to a reader's prior knowledge to activate certain emotions, or calling more attention to aspects of a story (2018). People tend to evaluate statements based on how they are presented and which parts are emphasized, meaning that viewpoints can be altered based on how a message is framed. For example, if a reusable shopping bag is labeled as 70% recycled material it is more likely that a customer will buy it than if it was labeled as 30% non-recycled material. This concept can be applied to a majority of the communication people are consuming regarding climate change, including within news media.

2.3 Common Discourses on Climate Change

The ways in which climate change is addressed are often seen as 'common sense' within mainstream media. There is a tendency for communicators to perpetuate the "status quo" when it comes to climate change and sustainable actions, meaning that alternate ideas and discourses are often silenced (Yacoumis 2017). According to a survey conducted by Tranter and Booth in 2015, there is a correlation between news reporting and public opinions involving climate change and sustainability in Australia. There is a heavy focus on the concept of hegemony which can be defined by Gramsci as, "the process by which ruling elites secure consent to the established political order through the production and diffusion of meanings and values" (1971). This means that discourses are being constructed that support those in groups of concentrated power and can also have the ability to influence the general public to believe the frames being perpetuated. The meanings and values that are common across news discourse tend to support certain established political systems and follow the views that are most common in the current political landscape. Examining these media frames can help to

understand how the public will address climate change and what actions people are going to be willing to take.

2.4 Data Collection (Sources, Time Period, and Sample)

To identify common frames employed in Australian news coverage of climate change issues, this study undertakes a qualitative, critical discourse analysis of media coverage of COP26 in four different Australian newspapers: *The Australian*, *The Herald Sun*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The West Australian*. The database ProQuest was chosen due to its inclusion of the selected newspapers, in addition to a wide range of articles from the selected time period. A sample size of 50 articles was collected from the database using a keyword search and individually coded for the primary, secondary, and tertiary frames within each. A date range was chosen based on the increase in media coverage of climate change leading up to and following the COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021. The articles selected for the sample were published between October 1, 2021 and December 1, 2022.

2.5 Coding and Coding Variables

Discourse can be analyzed through the use of coding variables, definitions, and the values associated with this in order to determine which frames are most commonly used and, therefore, which messages are being uplifted or diminished. After collecting an archive of sources, a coding scheme was developed to investigate the discourse and identify the primary and secondary frames. The items recorded on the coding sheet include the title of the article, the author, the date it was published, the visual elements,

as well as the framing techniques and lexical analysis used to produce the primary narratives.

Fowler and Kress identify several important aspects of critical linguistics, including grammar, transformations, and classification. Grammar can be categorized as either transitive or of a certain modality, which informs the reader of the actions occurring and the relationships being constructed (Fowler and Kress 1979: 199). When conducting critical discourse analysis, linguistics can be coded for grammar usage to determine how both messages and relationships are being constructed. Transformations respond to linguistic processes that create meanings by emphasizing parts of the sentence, which is useful to code for as they give insight into the frames being constructed (Fowler and Kress 1979: 207). Classification looks at the lexical features of the text and has the ability to create new perspectives through various word choices. Coding for the specific words chosen by communicators can determine which frames are being perpetuated.

3.0 Results

3.1 Primary Frames

There were 8 primary frames distinguished across all four newspapers: politicization, economic influences, catastrophic events, anti-politicization, respect for science, denialism, corporate versus governmental responsibility, and anti-alarmism.

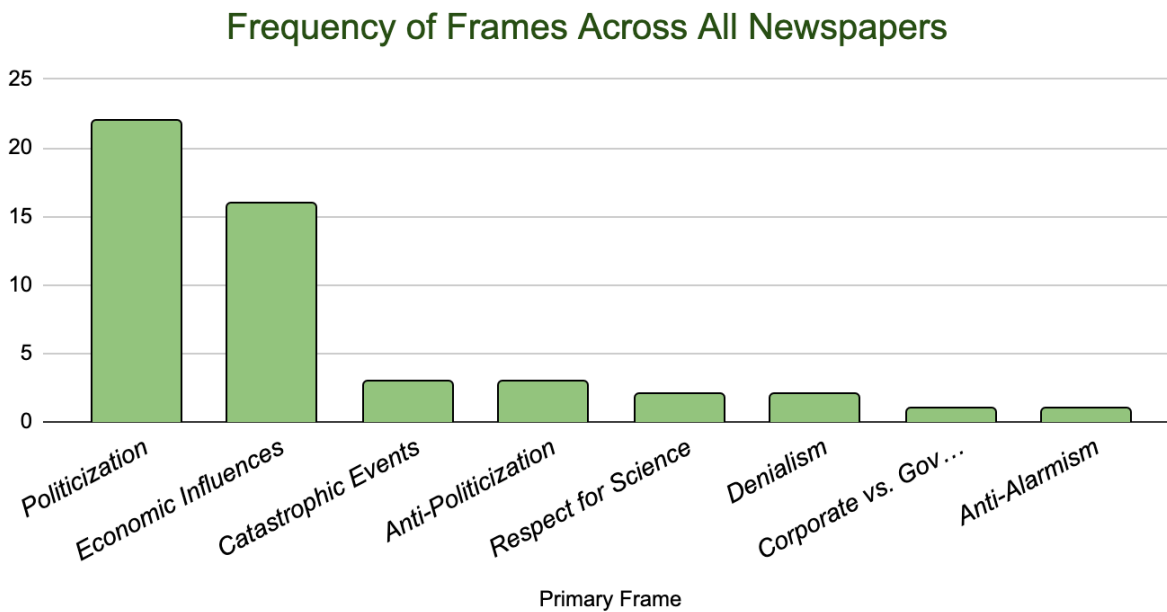


Figure 1: Frequency of Frames Across All Newspapers

Politicization

The politicization frame was the most frequent across all four newspapers, with 22 articles utilizing it as the primary frame. This frame was distinguished by using critical linguistics to analyze the diction and grammar used in the article, with a specific emphasis on certain languages. The words *policies*, *elections*, *party*, *votes*, and *negotiations* were common across articles with the politicization frame, as climate change is being framed as a political issue. The grammar across these articles was conducive to politicized language, such as removing personal pronouns and only referring to the input of politicians. This creates an “us versus them” narrative, meaning

climate change is framed as politics against nature and the way to solve it is through political methods.

Economic Influences

The economic influences frame was found to be the second most prevalent across all four newspapers, with a total of 16 articles. This narrative frames climate change as only of interest in an economic sense, meaning that it is only talked about in terms of costs or funding. Common words across articles with the economic influences frame were *investors, energy cost, green economy, finances, tariffs, taxes, and bills*. This frame is fundamentally anthropocentric because the natural world does not use currency, which can be seen through the grammar usage in the sample. Many of the articles talk about how Australia has an “expensive future” due to natural disaster costs and green-energy funding. Economic interests are a driving factor for the politicization frame as well, typically citing the voices of politicians regarding funding for green energy or natural disaster relief.

Catastrophic Events

The catastrophic events narrative was the primary frame for 3 articles, placing a heavy emphasis on how nature is unstoppable and what the effects of climate change will be on humans. Common diction within this narrative includes *bushfires, floods, fatal, catastrophe, warming, and heat waves*. The grammar used across the articles within this narrative typically had an aggressive tone, positioning nature as an enemy to humans and as something individuals should be afraid of. Phrases such as *storms lash*

and *loss of life and property* construct a narrative that separates humans from the natural world.

Anti-Politicization

The anti-politicization narrative was the primary frame for 3 articles, which constructs climate change as an issue that should be separated from politics. Common terms and phrases across these articles were *gaining votes*, *politicians*, and *politics won't matter if we cannot inhabit the planet*. This frame criticizes politicians for using climate change as a way to sway voters and benefitting from the harm being done to the planet. It also criticizes the use of emissions reduction plans as a “cure-all” remedy for climate change, as the issue runs much deeper than reducing carbon outputs.

Respect for Science

While several of the articles coded referenced scientific findings, only 2 out of the 50 articles coded utilized respect for science as the primary frame. The majority of the articles made a brief connection to reports or climate findings but did not explicitly give scientific context or cite scientists, so only the articles that placed an emphasis on science were coded as this frame. The common terms in this narrative include *studies show*, *climate scientists report*, *sustainability claims*, as well as quotes from experts in the field. These findings demonstrate that although science is an integral aspect of climate change, most articles do not thoroughly explain why the scientific findings are important and rather focus on using science to back up political or economic agendas.

Denialism

The denialism narrative was found to be strong in 2 of the articles that were coded. This frame makes the claim that climate change is either not relevant or non-existent to both humans and nature. The common diction for this frame includes *routine weather changes, the land mass is not shrinking, not real, and no studies support*. The grammar within this narrative tends to construct a nonchalant dynamic towards climate change which leads readers to believe it is not an issue for the present, and that there are more important things to focus on.

Corporate versus Governmental Responsibility

The corporate versus governmental frame was found to be strong across 1 of the articles that were coded. This frame constructs the narrative that either corporations or the government hold the responsibility to solve climate change, and that these institutions are responsible for worsening the state of the climate. The common terms and phrases associated with this frame are *meaningful actions, corporate power, governmental responsibility, and industry groups*. The grammar within this frame creates a divide between corporations and the government, which does not allow these institutions to work together and ultimately constructs an anthropogenic approach to climate change.

Anti-Alarmism

The anti-alarmism frame was also found to be the primary frame in 1 article. This frame constructs a dynamic that is consistent with the denialism frame, as it reduces the

sense of urgency surrounding climate change; although, it does not discredit climate change altogether. The common terms and phrases coded for in this frame include *radical action*, *climate extremists*, *doomsday*, and *non-urgent*. This frame is perpetuating the idea that even though climate change is happening, it is not necessarily going to affect humans right away. The benefit of this frame is that it reduces the fear that is usually surrounding climate change, which could ultimately increase connections between humans and the natural world.

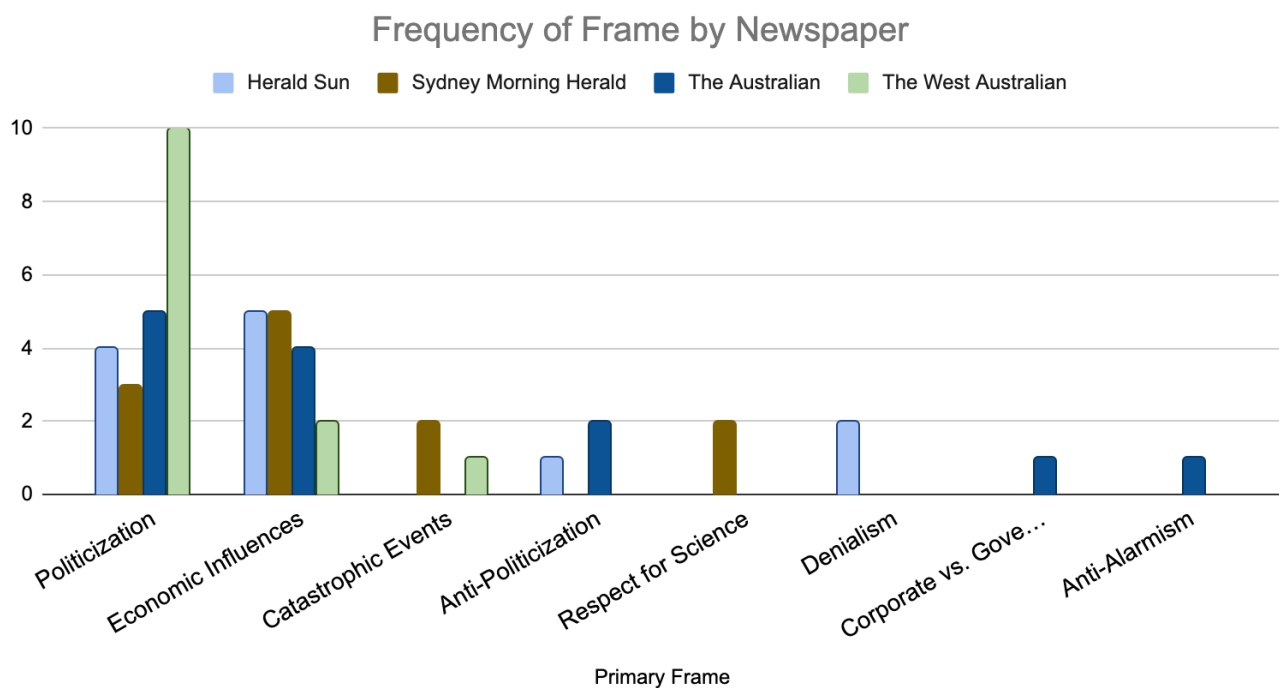


Figure 2: Frequency of Frame by Newspaper

Primary frames sorted by the newspaper, including *Herald Sun*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, and *The West Australian*.

Comparisons

The frequency of the varying frames differs between each newspaper, although the politicization frame and the economic influences frame are still overwhelmingly present across all of the newspapers that were analyzed. The denialism frame was only present in the *Herald Sun*, which could be attributed to it being a politically right-leaning publication.

3.2 Secondary Frames

The secondary frames were found to be similar in content to the primary frames, but not every article had a secondary frame if its primary frame was coded to be extremely strong. Secondary frames were coded for using underlying linguistics that was either furthering a certain economic or political agenda or constructing messages that were not as clear as the primary frames.

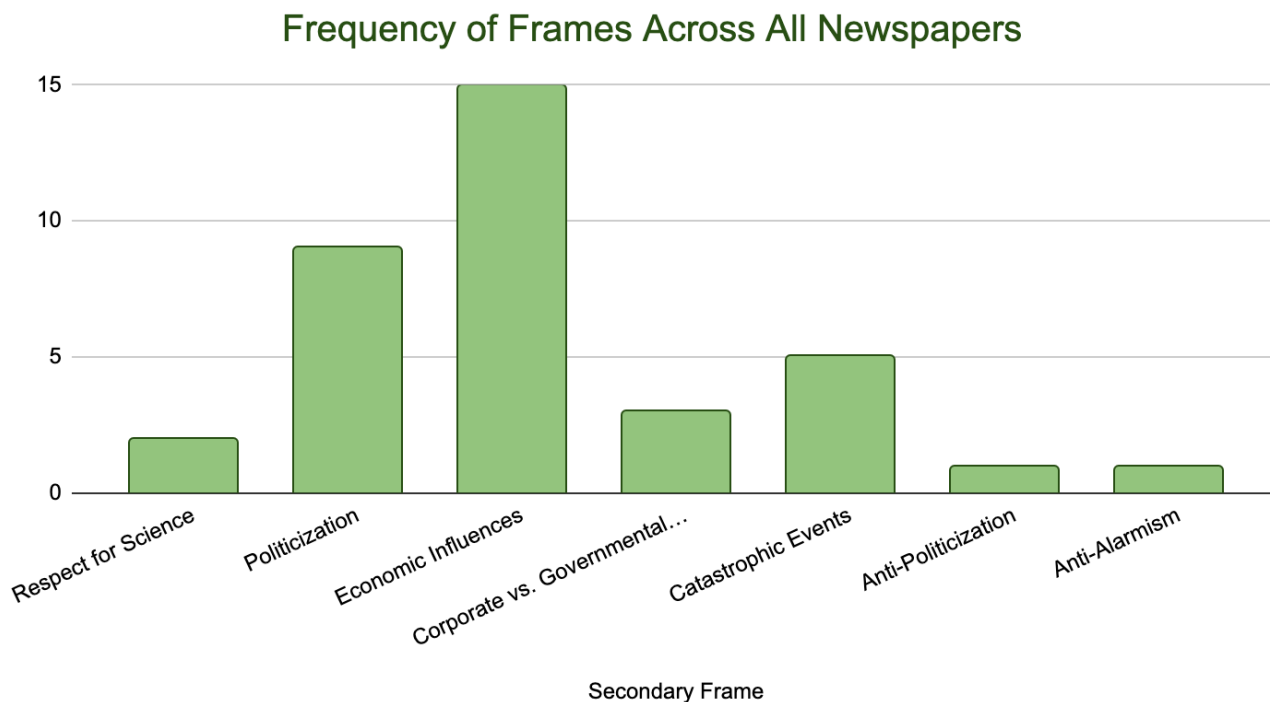


Figure 3: Frequency of Secondary Frames Across All Newspapers

Analysis of Secondary Frames

There were only 7 secondary frames found across the sample of 50 articles: respect for science (2), politicization (9), economic influences (15), corporate versus governmental responsibility (3), catastrophic events (5), anti-politicization (1), and anti-alarmism (1).

Out of the sample size, only 36 articles were found to have secondary frames. An interesting intersection between primary and secondary frames is the relationships between politicization, respect for science, and denialism. Despite the primary frame of denialism being relatively uncommon, it was only present in conjunction with the politicization frame. Similarly, when the voices of experts or scientists were present the

politicization frame was absent which demonstrates a divide between politics and science.

3.3 Anthropocentric Framing

A tertiary frame was coded for across all four newspapers in order to determine how frequently human interests were placed above environmental interests. This was determined by utilizing critical linguistics to analyze the language used when speaking about nature. Common terms and phrases when speaking about environmental interests include *ecosystems, native flora and fauna, habitat protection, feral pest management, and there is no negotiating with nature*. Common terms and phrases when climate change is framed as a human-centered issue were *a fragile planet, liveable future, energy prices, political causes, agricultural production, and economic implications*. The differences were also distinguished by grammar usage, meaning that if an “us vs. them” narrative was present the article would be coded as human-centered.

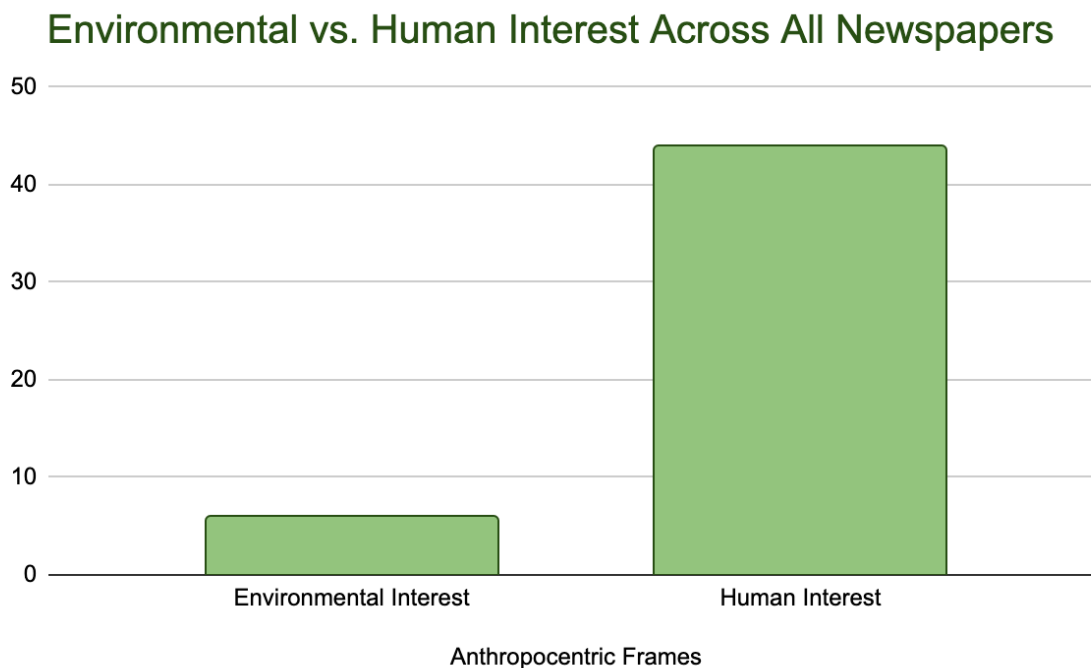


Figure 4: Environmental vs. Human Interest Across All Newspapers

The overwhelming majority of the articles coded showed a human-based interest, with 44 out of the 50 articles being framed with anthropocentric tendencies. Only 6 articles showed an environmentally focused interest, which is not necessarily surprising as news media tends to place emphasis on what will matter to its readers (humans).

4.0 Discussion

The overwhelming majority of the articles coded demonstrated anthropogenic ideologies which severely diminish the intrinsic value of the natural world. Climate change has been framed in several ways throughout Australian news media, although economic influences and politicization were found to dominate the narratives. Both of these frames are inherently anthropocentric, as the natural world has no need for a monetary economy or political institutions. When viewing climate change through a human-centered lens it becomes hard to understand the intrinsic value of ecosystems and non-human individuals, which could ultimately damage the environment further due to a lack of respect for the natural world. Discourses that incorporate respect for science or environmental interest beyond how climate change impacts humans are not as common as political or economic-based discourses, which demonstrates how anthropocentrism is dominating modern society and depicts the forms and scope of climate action that is willing to be taken. News media constructs meanings and values that tend to support certain established political systems and follow the views that are most common in the current political landscape, which furthers anthropocentric

mindsets. Since differing opinions and viewpoints do not tend to be common in mainstream media, a stagnant dynamic is established that emphasizes political and economic reasonings behind climate action. The articles that advocated for environmental interests focused on removing the idea that emissions reductions would fix global warming and, rather, emphasized working for ecosystem conservation and management. Anthropocentrism places humans above all other non-human beings, stemming from a moral hierarchy that is reinforced by news media. Since mainstream media caters to these anthropocentric views, real climate action can not be accomplished without encompassing the intrinsic value of the natural world.

5.0 Conclusion

Effective communication regarding climate change is extremely important in determining the scope of action that individuals are willing to take. News media coverage of climate change is an integral part of determining these actions, as the wide reach of news media and the ability of journalists to make scientific jargon digestible to the general public differ from other forms of communication. There is widespread debate regarding the causes and implications of climate change across the globe, but anthropocentric ideas have dominated the discourses in which climate change is discussed. News media is able to frame climate change according to the social and political landscape which furthers the credibility of certain messages and almost always comes back to how humans are going to be impacted. It can be argued that lasting change for our environment can not be accomplished with the current dynamics between politics and the economy because the importance of ecosystems themselves is not being emphasized. Rather, discourses predominantly focus on how to maintain the planet as

being liveable for humans with the least amount of economic drawbacks. This anthropocentric mindset is ultimately harmful to the planet because it does not recognize the intrinsic value of nature in a social, political, or economic sense. The solution to this issue involves changing the language used to discuss the environment in general, because utilizing frames of environmental interest could ultimately sway the perceptions of individuals when it comes to climate change.

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Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP

Student Name: Laura Joelsson

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Title of ISP/FSP: The Australian News Media and Climate Change: How Frames Impact the Response of Individuals in and Anthropocentric Society

Program and Term/Year: Cairns: Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology. ASE SP 23

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Laura Joelsson

12 May 2023

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