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The World Without Us.
A CDA of News Media Discourse on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Environment in the UK

Abstract: Government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic have drastically altered patterns of energy demand around the world. Many international borders have been closed and populations have been confined to their homes, which has reduced transport and changed consumption patterns. A decrease in CO_2 emissions and pollution has thus been recorded during forced confinements. This has offered a glimpse of how the world might look like with a drastic reduction of human impact. The present paper explores how facts are framed in news discourse and investigates the recontextualization of the environmental issue in news media. The study analyses a collection of news articles about the consequences of coronavirus on the environment published on the websites of the major news channels in the UK, namely BBC News and Sky News. This CDA investigation studies how the UK news outlets re-mediated scientific knowledge about climate change to emphasise or minimise the positive consequences of confinement on the planet.

Keywords: *climate change*, *COVID-19*, *news discourse*, *critical discourse analysis*, *frame discourse*, *risk*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely overturned lives and habits worldwide particularly due to the national lockdowns imposed in response. We have experienced a meteoric rise in smart working, a collapse in car use, the mandate to wear masks, and the obligation to stay at home except for essential travel.

These changes had an interesting impact on the environment and the Planet, as they also challenged consumption and waste management patterns and caused a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, traffic, and pollution[1]. As a result, concepts like circular economy[2], decarbonisation[3], and sustainable mobility[4] have all become topics of great interest to the populations affected by the pandemic. Everyone has been wondering whether there is a correlation between environmental pollution and the spread of the infamous COVID-19 and whether the restrictions put in place to curb contagion have significantly improved our environment. Looking towards the future, much has been debated and written about the possibility that the COVID-19 economic crisis may pave the way for policies to lower environmental constraints and return to the past.

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[1] Anat Tchetchik et al., "Recycling and Consumption Reduction Following the COVID-19 Lockdown: The Effect of Threat and Coping Appraisal, Past Behavior and Information", *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 167 (2021), article 105370.

[2] Rodrigo Bruno Santolin et al., "Exploiting Circular Economy Enablers for SMEs to Advance towards a More Sustainable Development: An Empirical Study in the Post COVID-19 Era", *Resources, Conservation & Recycling Advances* 19 (2023), article 200164.

[3] Ami Crowther et al., "The Crises of a Crisis: The Impact of Covid-19 on Localised Decarbonisation Ambitions in the United Kingdom", *Energy Research & Social Science* 93 (2022), article 102838.

[4] EIT Urban Mobility, "Full Report: Urban Mobility Strategies during COVID-19" (Barcelona: EIT Urban Mobility, 2021); Nicolás Valenzuela-Levi et al., "Housing and Accessibility after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Rebuilding for Resilience, Equity and Sustainable Mobility", *Transport Policy*, 109 (2021), 48-60.

Right from the beginning, with information and news overlapping rapidly, it became clear that citizens needed safe and reliable points of reference. The global community has been grappling with the question of how our behaviour and lifestyles should evolve/change in response to the current crisis.

This caused people to ask with concern what we must and can do to support these major green challenges during and after the pandemic. Specifically, we must consider how our homes, intermediate spaces, and cities can be transformed to effectively meet the green city challenges in the post-pandemic world.

It soon became evident that this tumultuous time could provide an occasion to reassess what is fundamental in our lives, make a concerted effort to comprehend the challenges of modernity and take away some valuable lessons.

Alongside the constant flow of official government communications, it was clear that there was an important opportunity for the press. Indeed, informed populations are the ones who can make healthier personal choices and can also demand health-promoting policies from their governments. The media can play a powerful role in shaping public opinion and setting agendas for clean air.

1.1 *Climate Change and COVID-19*

The environment is the connection between humans and society with natural systems or resources in our surroundings. Environmental discourse examines multiple aspects, such as air pollution, global warming, hazardous materials, and nature conservation initiatives. These ideologies provide diverse ways of discussing environmental hazards when making decisions on environmental protection matters.

Environmental issues take time to be noticeable, as they stem from complex and connected activities which may have been happening over long periods across broad geographic areas. Many studies[5] argue that the messages and meaning in coverage of climate change by widely circulated newspapers are socially constructed, implying they respond to scientific findings, changing agendas, political contexts, and communicative strategies of institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).[6]

This response is usually tailored according to the newspaper's editorial stance. Furthermore, it has been suggested that media attention towards environmental issues like climate change closely follows government activity, focusing on policy decisions taken or presented by prime ministers or other critical governmental figures. Lastly, recent research implies that news outlets often emphasise specific scientific facts while suppressing others and select images that support their predetermined take on broader social policies ranging from state regulation and individual freedom to general economic performance.

Climate change, in particular, is an issue of global concern because of its potential impact on temperatures, ocean acidification and biodiversity. However, as pointed out earlier, it can be difficult for the public to correctly perceive and understand this complex phenomenon.[7] However, extraordinary events such as COVID have suddenly and massively increased the demand for detailed and reliable news.

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[5] Anabela Carvalho and Jacquelin Burgess, "Cultural Circuits of Climate Change in UK Broadsheet Newspapers 1985–2003", *Risk Analysis*, 25 (2005), 1457-69.
[6] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *IPCC* (2014), *www.ipcc.ch*.
[7] Susanne C. Moser, "Communicating Climate Change: History, Challenges, Process and Future Directions", *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 1.1 (2010), 31-53.

Predominantly, individuals have encountered climate change via online and video media coverage,[8] with increased attention linked to greater public concern about the issue.[9]

To better illustrate how climate change affects human beings and societies at large, journalists have focused their reports on the social dimension of climate change[10] and how people are aware of or contribute to it. Furthermore, emphasising topics such as the implications for public health[11] and actions individuals can take[12] has increased engagement with the topic and the subsequent continuous search for news.

When the COVID-19 emergency revealed itself, society worldwide was confronted with pressing questions and the world of information was provided with new responsibilities and possibilities for expression. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic there was a need for society to address critical questions and for the information world to assume new responsibilities and opportunities for expression. Along with updated bulletins on the transmission of the virus and methods of protection, the public also sought clarification on the potential influence of environmental pollution on the susceptibility of individuals to COVID-19. The press dealing with the environment and climate change, therefore, addressed three key questions. Firstly, if and to what extent the virus tends to spread more in areas with higher air pollution. Secondly, if the restrictions to limit contagion had led to a significant reduction in air pollution.[13] This is in light of data from satellite observations showing an evident reduction in pollution levels in all restricted countries. Finally, the degree to which the COVID-19 economic crisis would have paved the way for policies to lower environmental constraints and return to the past.

1.2 *Climate Change in the British News*

In recent years, the impact of climate change has become apparent to more and more people worldwide due to extreme weather events, rising temperatures, changes in sea levels and melting ice caps. This has sparked a new interest in climate and environmental news, leading many media outlets to introduce newly dedicated sections on the subject.

The space and importance given to climate change in UK newspapers and news media have changed significantly in the last 20 years. In the early 2000s, climate change was often treated as a niche issue and received relatively little coverage in mainstream media. As early as 2016, despite the signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change[14] on 22 April 2016 by over 190 countries, including the UK, many British newspaper editors continued to deny the scientific evidence of climate change.[15] The Guardian, Independent, and Mirror titles generally reflected the mainstream consensus. At the same time, the Mail,

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[8] Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui, "Mass-Media Coverage"; Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*.

[9] Yuki Sampei and Midori Aoyagi-Usui, "Mass-Media Coverage, Its Influence on Public Awareness of Climate-Change Issues, and Implications for Japan's National Campaign to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions", *Global Environmental Change*, 19.2 (2009) (2), 203-212.

[10] James Painter and Mike Schäfer, "Global Similarities and Persistent Differences: A Survey of Comparative Studies on Climate Change Communication", in Benedetta Brevini and Justin Lewis, eds., *Climate Change and the Media* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 39-58; Mike Schäfer, "Climate Change and the Media", in James D. Wright, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 853-859.

[11] Matthew C. Nisbet, "Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 51.2 (2009), 12-23.

[12] P. Sol Hart and Lauren Feldman, "The Impact of Climate Change–Related Imagery and Text on Public Opinion and Behavior Change", *Science Communication*, 38.4 (2016), 415-441.

[13] Pratima Kumari and Durga Toshniwal, "Impact of Lockdown on Air Quality over Major Cities across the Globe during COVID-19 Pandemic", *Urban climate*, 34 (2020), 100719.

[14] United Nations / Framework Convention on Climate Change, Adoption of the Paris Agreement, 21st Conference of the Parties (Paris: United Nations, 2015).

[15] Bob Ward, "Why are Some British Newspapers Still Denying Climate Change", *The Guardian* (25 January 2016), *www.theguardian.com*.

Express, Times, Sun, and Telegraph continued to cast doubt on the risks through their opinion columns and leaders.

Some science and environment reporters courageously covered news regarding climate change with factual information. However, certain newspapers dismissed writers who refused to depict the unenlightened viewpoints of their editors and owners. Nevertheless, in recent years, due to the above-mentioned significant increase in the coverage given to climate change, many newspapers and news outlets started dedicating entire sections to the ecological situation and climate change, which thus became independent of weather news.

This shift in coverage can be attributed to several factors, including the growing scientific consensus on the urgency of the climate crisis, the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, and the rise of social and political movements calling for action on climate change[16]. In addition, the UK government has also played a role in raising the profile of climate change in the media, with initiatives such as the Climate Change Act of 2008[17] and the recent commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Overall, the increased coverage of climate change in UK newspapers and news media reflects a growing recognition of the urgent need to address this global crisis and the media's role in raising awareness and driving action.

1.3 *Communicating Risk and Climate Change*

As discussed in previous sections, the topic of climate change has become increasingly polarizing and contentious in recent times. With various public, private, and government stakeholders advocating for different plans of action to combat the effects of global warming, the need for accurate and fair dissemination of information has become even more indispensable. News discourse has emerged as a crucial tool for communicating the risks of environmental and climate change, as it is one of the primary means of transmitting information to the masses.

As our reliance on news media has grown, so have the ethical responsibilities of news authorities to ensure that they accurately and fairly report on climate and environmental topics. News discourse has increasingly become a barometer for public opinion and engagement with climate and environmental issues.

The language used to address climate and environmental risks holds significant weight in shaping public perception of these issues.[18]

It is essential to consider how journalists interpret and discuss environmental risk.[19] Frequently, news reports on climate and environmental topics employ a language rooted in sensationalism to emphasise the severity of the situation and the risk associated with it.

Comparing environmental risk to other disasters, such as natural disasters, places environmental problems into a context that readers can understand and sympathise with. Story titles tend to utilise evocative language such as "Climate Meltdown" or "Global Disaster", which can lead readers to believe that the situation is direr than it is. This can lead to emotional reactions from readers and an oversimplification of complex topics, leading to an incomplete understanding of the actual risks.

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[16] Claire Saunders et al., "Attention to Climate Change in British Newspapers in Three Attention Cycles (1997–2017)", *Geoforum*, 94 (2018), 94-102.

[17] *Climate Change Act 2008, Legislation.gov.uk* (2008), *www.legislation.gov.uk*.

[18] Antonella Napolitano and Maria Cristina Aiezza, "Trump is Erasing Climate Change... Language: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of the US Online Environmental Communications under Obama and Trump", *Lingue & Linguaggi*, 29 (2019), 147-177.

[19] Katherine E. Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk in Institutional and Newspaper Discourse: The Case of Climate Change and Migration* (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 2018); Cinzia Bevitori and Jane Helen Johnson, "Risk and Resilience in a Changing Climate: A Diachronic Analysis in the Press Across the Globe", *Text & Talk*, 42.4 (2022), 547-569.

One commonly employed discourse is that of "crisis," most often used to refer to the issue of global warming – for example, "a crisis of global warming", "Defusing the Global Warming TIME BOMB".[20] This choice implies a sense of urgency and hopelessness and is often accompanied by adjectives or nouns, such as "urgent*", "threat*", "catastrophe*", or "disaster*". As such, it is important to be mindful of the language used in news discourse to ensure that it accurately reflects the severity of the situation while avoiding sensationalism and emotional manipulation.

> Climate change is one of the *most urgent* and pressing challenges we face today, and the UK is a world leader in tackling this problem. (BBC News, 3 May 2019)

> And the worst was yet to come. Climate change posed a *threat* to global food stocks, and to human security (The Guardian, 31 March 2014)

> Climate change *threatens* the World's Food Supply (The New York Times Aug. 8, 2019)

> Beyond that threshold, scientists have found, climate disasters will become so extreme that people will not be able to adapt. (Washington Post, March 20, 2023)

> It is already deadly serious and without *urgent*, *dramatic* change, it will be *catastrophic*. (Sky news 24 November 2018)

Negative emotion-based language, such as "grim", "alarming", or "dire", is used to refer to either the state of the environment or a faltering of progress made in response to the given risk. Typically, these terms are utilized to highlight the severe and lasting consequences associated to the issue of climate change.

> "It is seriously alarming," Amjad Abdulla, a lead author on one of the chapters from the Maldives, told BBC News. (BBC News 8 October 2018)

> Climate talks: 4C rise will have dire effect on world hunger. (The Guardian Tue 1 Dec 2015)

1.4 *Climate Change in the News at the Time of COVID-19*

The news media discourse on the impact of COVID-19 on the environment in the UK has been primarily focused on how lockdowns have reduced air pollution and traffic congestion. Both traditional and online newspapers chose to characterise their discourse by using words that would evoke positive messages that would make citizens reflect on the validity of assuming new and more responsible behaviour in favour of the environment.

The discourse of the news media on the effects of COVID-19 on the environment in Britain has primarily centred on how restrictions have reduced air pollution levels and traffic congestion. Traditional newspapers, alongside those published online, deliberately chose language that would evoke positive messages encouraging citizens to embrace more considerate practices concerning their environmental footprint.

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[20] Arran Stibbe, "Ecolinguistics as a Transdisciplinary Movement and a Way of Life", in *Crossing Borders, Making Connections: Interdisciplinarity in Linguistics* (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2021), 71-88.

2. Aims and Purposes

The present paper explores how the impact of COVID-19 on the environment is framed and recontextualization of the environmental issue in British news media.

The aims of this study are threefold: examining framing techniques utilised by British news media related to climate change; analysing re-mediation strategies employed when communicating scientific knowledge concerning our planet's welfare; evaluating any emphasis or deemphasis placed upon positivity surrounding lockdown measures for attributable impact about preserving nature around us.

3. Methods and Data

3.1 *Corpus*

The study analyses a collection of news pertaining to the impact of the coronavirus on the environment published on the websites of the major news channels in the UK, namely BBC News and Sky News.

The choice of the BBC (online) and Sky News news items is based on an interest in how Western-orientated news media, aimed at a UK-based audience and a much broader international following, interprets information on the pandemics and its consequences.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, articles containing the expressions "lockdown" and "climate change" were selected, with the timeframe for the collection of the corpus ranging from 19 March 2020 to 30 December 2021. The period chosen for the collection of the corpus corresponds to the days immediately after the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020 and the end of 2021,[21] more than a year after the first lockdown with a distinctly different world and readership.

The corpus consists of 54 news articles, with a total of 33218 tokens and 4060 types distributed, as the table below shows:

	Tokens	**Types**
BBC	17,694	2,884
Sky News	15,524	2,644

Table 1. Corpus data

Although the analysis was conducted on a relatively small corpus, it was able to provide valuable insights into the language strategies that online media outlets use to legitimize their messaging and encourage readers to adopt new behaviours. The reliability of this research is heavily dependent on various factors, including the corpus' appropriateness in a general context, its accuracy within topics considered, and relative size for projects carried out over specific periods; with respect to the latter criteria, it can be stated that the chosen corpus was adequately representative based on its duration and content examined.

Given this article's specified timeframe and topic, it is reasonable to conclude that the chosen corpus is an appropriate representation. It is essential to note that size is decisive in assessing whether the sample can be considered representative for research purposes.[22] In this regard, it is therefore worth considering Baker,[23] when he emphasises the importance of quality over quantity.

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[21] World Health Organisation, "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19", *World Health Organisation* (2020), *www.who.int*.

[22] Julia Lavid López, *Lenguaje y Nuevas Tecnologías: Nuevas Perspectivas, Métodos y Herramientas para el Lingüista del Siglo XXI* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2005).

[23] Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 28-29.

> One consideration when building a specialised corpus in order to investigate the discursive construction of a particular subject is perhaps not so much the size of the corpus, but how often we would expect to find the subject mentioned within it […] Therefore, when building a specialised corpus for the purposes of investigating particular subject or set of subjects, we may want to be more selective in choosing our texts, meaning that the quality or content of the data takes equal or more precedence over issues of quantity.

The purpose of this study was to collect a corpus that fairly reflected the information readily accessible to citizens seeking news about COVID-19 and counteractive measures during times of unparalleled adversity.

3.2 *Methods*

The study integrates qualitative and quantitative methods by combining Critical Discourse Analysis with the support of corpus investigation tools.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary methodological framework that considers language as a form of social practice and seeks to uncover the power dynamics behind its use. Scholars such as Fairclough[24] and Wodak and Meyer[25] have pioneered this approach and focus on how journalistic texts portray individual speakers or writers and broader social processes that construct specific understandings of relevant issues at particular historical moments.

CDA uses techniques from sociology, linguistics, psychology, and anthropology – among other areas – to provide a more comprehensive context for the messages communicated by media outlets such as newspapers to uncover their potentially ideological content. Consequently, by aiding understanding not only what a speaker says but also why he or she may have chosen specific words over others, it provides valuable insight into his or her rhetorical choices when conveying information through the written word or prose.

The study also draws on the insights of Arran Stibbe,[26] a leading researcher in the field of Ecolinguistics.[27] Stibbe's work highlights the interconnectedness of language and the environment, situating Ecolinguistics within the broader discipline of linguistics. As such, Ecolinguistics employs similar methods of linguistic analysis as traditional critical discourse studies, but with a focus on the larger ecological systems that sustain all life.

Corpus analysis tools provide invaluable aid to this inquiry, as they enable the researcher to detect themes and arrangements which are not necessarily overly discernible. By examining frequencies, terms used in specific contexts, and commonly occurring words placed side-by-side, researchers can gain valuable insights.

Corpus Linguistics allows scholars to identify patterns of language use in large bodies of text known as corpora, enabling them to understand social contexts at both macro and micro levels.[28] This approach can also provide information on the topics regularly discussed in different fields and genres or sub-genres within those disciplines.

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[24] Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995).

[25] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies,* Third Edition (London: SAGE, 2015).

[26] Arran Stibbe, "Ecolinguistics as a Transdisciplinary Movement and a Way of Life".

[27] The media's coverage of climate change has increased in recent decades, leading to news values that influence and are influenced by readers' understanding of environmental issues. In discourse studies, a new branch of discourse analysis emerged in the 1990s within the broad framework of ecological approaches to languages, namely ecolinguistics (EL). This subdiscipline has identified discourse, or "stories", as a crucial factor in shaping our perception of ecological issues, including those presented in news reports.

[28] Paul Baker et al., *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013).

CADS makes use of qualitative methods combined with linguistic analysis and quantitative corpus tools, such as keywords in context functions, to more easily identify these relationships. This data makes it possible to understand better how particular discourses evolve and how societal norms or conventions change. Corpus linguistics thus represents a powerful methodology that can provide valuable insight into various aspects associated with the complex linguistic behaviour of multiple communities worldwide.

As Goffman[29] suggested, frames can influence how readers understand and interpret reality; however, the framing of a particular phenomenon may vary significantly when exposed to widespread public discourse. According to Entman,[30] frames consist of a range of factual and non-factual elements, such as ideas, evaluations, or judgments associated with a specific issue. This can lead to conflicting interpretations of the same event or issue. According to George Lakoff in "Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment",[31] frames play a crucial role in analysing news discourse on climate change. Frames, as cognitive structures, shape the way information is perceived, interpreted, and communicated to the public. In the context of climate change news coverage, frames influence how the issue is portrayed, what aspects are highlighted or downplayed, and which actors are emphasized. Lakoff asserts that the selection and deployment of frames by media outlets significantly impact public understanding and engagement with climate change, as frames can evoke specific emotions, values, and pre-existing mental models. Consequently, comprehending and deconstructing the frames used in news discourse is essential for understanding the underlying narratives and ideological implications surrounding climate change and assessing how public opinion and policy responses are shaped.

Analysis of the relevant literature suggests that some frames and narratives provide more significant potential for mobilising diverse audiences. Despite being challenging to identify precise language devices, researchers typically ascertain such frames by evaluating components alongside established knowledge pertinent to the subject matter.[32] Reading texts containing frames related to Climate Change Discourse can induce non-expert readers to not only embrace an understanding and perception of science but encourages them to contemplate a desired answer (ranging from mitigation through adaptation).

4. Analysis

This study focused on a selection of discursive resources used to narrate and describe the situation and to encourage action. From an empirical analysis of the texts, three dominant frames emerged: a) exceptionality and magnitude of the event; b) urgency for environmentally conscious behaviour; c) risk for the future.

For the purpose of this research, only the analysis results for the second and third frames will be reported as they are considered relevant to the research at issue.

The linguistic devices used to construct these frames include the use of intensifiers, superlatives and adjectives, support of scientific resources and statistical data, and use of first-person pronouns.

4.1 *Emphatic language*

Intensifiers are emphatic tools that amplify the meaning and add an emotional component to the words they modify, increasing their appeal. An intensifier is thus seen as an aesthetic tool that enhances this attitude or opinion, effectively amplifying any evaluation offered by the communicator. This is

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[29] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1974).
[30] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43.4 (1993), 51-58.
[31] George Lakoff, "Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment", *Environmental Communication*, 4.1 (2021), 70-81, 4.
[32] Andrew Rojecki, "Media Discourse on Globalization and Terror", *Political Communication*, 22.1 (2005), 63-81, 66.

supported by what Bowers[33] stated about linguistic intensity: "the quality of language that indicates the degree to which the speaker's attitude towards a concept departs from neutrality". Furthermore, several scholars have tried to determine potential moderating factors that could explain the influence of linguistic intensity. One such factor is the source's reliability; when a reliable source releases a highly intensive text, it is more likely to be seen as persuasive than one released by an unreliable source.[34] As can be seen from examples 1-10, the expressions accompanying the data on the fall in emissions are typical of discourse commonly encountered in negative or catastrophic communication. On the other hand, intensifiers such as "significant", "significantly" "steep", "biggest", "dramatic" "dramatically" "prominent" and "drastic" effectively convey positive data, predictably flanked by frequent use of "cleanest". In the following extracts, relevant expressions have been highlighted in italics.

(1) Lockdown policies and the resulting reductions in economic activity have seen emissions take a *steep* dive. (BBC)
(2) Science shows *marked* reductions in nitrogen dioxide (NO2) and in particulate matter (PM2.5). (BBC)
(3) Levels of air pollutants and warming gases over some cities and regions are showing *significant* drops as coronavirus impacts work and travel. (BBC)
(4) The global response to the Covid-19 pandemic has driven the *biggest* annual fall in CO2 emissions since World War Two. (BBC)
(5) One of the most *dramatic* changes can be seen in the city of Milan in the region of Lombardy which has been very badly hit by COVID-19. (Sky News)
(6) The analysis provides a vision of what a *drastic* reduction in the burning of fossil fuels can mean. (Sky News)
(7) "And this is the *cleanest* I have ever seen it. It's is [*sic*] less than half of what we normally see in March." (BBC)
(8) Emissions of the planet-heating gas CO2 have also fallen sharply. (BBC)
(9) Air pollution in London has fallen so dramatically since the capital's Covid-19 lockdown (BBC)
(10) Drops in pollution levels were particularly prominent in the city of Wuhan (BBC)
(11) The fall in air and road travel globally has meant pollution levels have *plummeted*, with photos revealing *cleaner* air in cities. (Sky News)

The renewed discourse on climate change is being reinforced by news reports emphasizing the unique nature of the event and the valuable opportunity offered to humanity by COVID-19. The use of intensifiers such as 'unseen in living memory' or 'unprecedented opportunity for us' contributes towards providing an engaging and persuasive, almost fictional message, as can be seen in examples 12-15:

(12) As air pollution *plummeted* to levels *unseen* in living memory, people shared pictures of spotless skies and even Himalayan peaks from cities where the view had been obscured by fog for decades. (BBC)
(13) "Coronavirus is not only having an *unprecedented* impact on how we live our lives, but also how pollution levels around the world are falling as a result of the global shutdown. (BBC)
(14) "We have been given a natural experiment that we *never* ever expected to have to *drastically* those levels of transport emissions. (BBC)
(15) "This was an *unprecedented* opportunity for us to take a close look at how air pollution levels have responded to an *extraordinary* development," (Sky News)

[33] John Waite Bowers, "Language Intensity, Social Introversion, and Attitude Change", *Communications Monographs*, 30.4 (1963), 345-352, 416.
[34] Mark A. Hamilton et al., "An Empirical Test of an Axiomatic Model of the Relationship between Language Intensity and Persuasion", *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 9.4 (1990), 235-255.

The most frequent intensifiers, equally distributed in both subcorpora, are "significant*", "huge*", "drastic*", "unprecedented", "exceptional*", "dramatic*", "most dramatic", "most severe", "like never before", "largest ever", "cleanest ever".

The use of intensifiers and superlatives in the corpus is intended to convey the exceptional nature of all pandemic-related events with a specific focus on the positive environmental outcomes resulting from the global lockdowns.

It has often been observed how natural disasters are discursively represented through the use of intensifiers as well as superlatives, often comparing them to previous disasters known to readers. Here, in contrast to what we are used to observing, even with regard to the pandemic itself where victim narratives are involved, intensifiers and superlatives are used for the heightening and maximisation of the positive consequences of the lockdown in order to promote the true greening of habits globally.

What can be assumed is that intensifiers and superlatives are intended to provoke a direct and indirect effect whereby the characteristics of sensationalist messages influence the reception of news through the perception of sensationalism and exceptionalism. In this way, it is possible to avoid overly technical expressions in a work of 'remediation' that would not bring the lay reader closer to the message to be conveyed.

4.2 *The Number Game*

It must be said, however, that numbers are not absent in the corpora analysed. After all, given the scientific nature of the topic, it would be unlikely not to encounter the use of figures. On the other hand, the use of percentages can pose a problem, as not all recipients can interpret the meaning of such percentages. Percentages can potentially mislead the audience, who may not be able to understand the intended message.

These results seem contradictory in a 'remediation' scenario where the intention is to engage the reader. However, in this regard, it should be noted that the use of percentages is not introduced in the news articles published at an early stage of the pandemic but in those published at a later stage, i.e., when the public had already begun to get used to events and nomenclature, and contexts. Similarly, the use of percentages is found when the press begins to communicate the risk of a return to dangerous levels of pollution once the lockdowns would be over. Very little use is made of numbers and figures except to indicate predictable concepts within the readers' knowledge.

As far as the BBC is concerned, these are only found in 12 articles out of 27 with 64 occurrences. Whereas we find them in 16 out of 27 Sky News articles with 94 occurrences.

(16) Emissions in China are expected to be 5.5% higher in 2021 than in 2019 and are also projected to rise in India, with a 4.4% increase in 2021 relative to the pre-pandemic level. (BBC)

(17) Since 1990 its greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 48.8%, though there is likely to be a rebound in emissions in 2021 as transport and economic activity picks up. (Sky News)

Numbers, figures, percentages, and statistics play a crucial role in specific and scientific communication, guiding and orienting audiences. Journalists utilize these numerical representations to enhance credibility by providing factual, solid, and reliable information.[35]

The inclusion of quantitative data in popular science journals contributes to scientific credibility and reliability. However, it is important to note that hyperbolic language and exaggerated numerical figures are common persuasive strategies in news discourse. These strategies aim to increase the newsworthiness of information and captivate readers' attention.

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[35] Teun A. Van Dijk, "New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach", *Ethnic Minorities and the Media* (2000), 33-49, 46.

On the other hand, it must not be overlooked that the use of percentages can also be seen as manipulative, hence ideological. Percentages can be used to hide or exaggerate the real picture. In this case, it could be posited that as a "remediation", the use of percentages may not have the desired effect, i.e., to convince the lay public that scientific studies are pushing towards more environmentally responsible behaviour.

Concerning the intensification and superlativeness previously discussed, it should be noted that analysis of the articles revealed references to numbers and data which helped establish the superlative effects of lockdown measures concerning climate change.

The inclusion of quantitative data in popular science journals provides a greater degree of scientific credibility and, thus, reliability.[36] At the same time, hyperbolic language and exaggerated numerical figures are common persuasive strategies in news discourse[37] which are employed to increase newsworthiness and make the information more eye-catching for readers.

It should be noted that there is a tendency towards scholarly support for what is presented in both Sky News and BBC articles. The Keyword list shows the use of the word 'Professor' among the most significantly recurring ones within both corpora. Citing a reputable source, such as a scientist's unexceptionable credentials, reinforces the relevance of the message conveyed in the articles. The scientificity of the data is thus complimented and enhanced by a reliable source, increasing the persuasiveness of the discourse.

(18) "Although global emissions were not as high as last year, they still amounted to about 39 billion tonnes of CO2, and inevitably led to a further increase in CO2 in the atmosphere," said lead researcher *Prof* Pierre Friedlingstein from the University of Exeter, UK. (BBC)

(19) "The main reason is that these two countries had two waves of confinement that were really quite severe compared with other countries," said *Prof* Corinne Le Quéré, from the University of East Anglia, UK, who contributed to the study. (BBC)

(20) Professor Oliver Hauser, Associate *Professor* of Economics at the University of Exeter Business School, said ... (Sky News)

4.3 *The "New Behaviour" Frame*

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a catastrophe of global proportions, which has shattered entire countries. However, if we try to look at the positive side of this misfortune, the progress made on the issue of climate change immediately emerges.

The press plays a vital role in providing readers with accurate information, free of that may hinder their understanding of issues that directly affect them. In this regard, it is imperative for the media to provide regular updates on the policies in which the public sector and industries will engage to combat climate change, and the extent to which changes in consumption behaviour by individuals can contribute to strengthening climate action is also strongly emphasised.

Awareness can be translated into action by replacing short-haul domestic flights with train travel, promoting cycling and car-sharing, making homes more energy efficient and reducing food waste.

Within this frame, all examples found make extensive use of first-person personal and possessive pronouns.

Social actors are personalised when they are realised with personal or possessive pronouns, nouns whose meaning denotes human beings.[38] This linguistic construct fosters a sense of collective

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[36] Van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, 87.

[37] Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 9-10.

[38] Theo Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1995), 32-70.

responsibility among groups. In expressions such as *"We have to learn lessons"*, "(we need to) *re-evaluate how we do things*", "we have sampled an alternative urban ambience" or "We have had huge behavioural changes", pronouns are used to share similar attributes among a particular group as can be seen in examples 22 and 23.

(21) *What we're doing* is essentially looking into the future when *we don't have* diesel cars because *we plan to* take them off the roads. (BBC)

(22) "*We need to show the same determination and unity* against climate change as against COVID-19." (CNN)

It seems appropriate to suggest considering this discursive choice as one of the strategies to achieve 'remediation' through personalisation also in the light of the literature[39] pointing out that remediation leads to the subjectivation of discourse and a recipient-oriented discourse. Furthermore, the use of the determiner "our" serves to create a sense of community and shared experience. It acts as both an indication of a person – albeit a universal one – and the transfer of responsibility to the entire human community. In essence, not to someone individually, but everyone at once. This is accomplished by the use of expressions such as "our future", "our homes", "our planet", "our energy", "our jobs" as in examples 23-25:

(23) The important thing to recognise is that we've been given a massive opportunity to boost the economy by investing in green industries - and this can make a huge difference to *our future climate* (BBC)

(24) Humanity's future is inextricably bound to the health of *our planet*. (BBC)

(25) What this requires is systematic work to change how we use carbon to produce *our energy* and how we use energy to heat *our homes* and how we use energy in our transport systems." (Sky News)

The use of the personal pronoun "we", a common element of personalization, serves to portray both the addressors and addressees not just as individuals, but as a collective that has experienced the impact of lockdown measures and is committed to combating climate change. This is evidenced in the examples provided.

(26) *We* must avoid at all costs returning to "business as usual" in our COVID-19 recovery, *we* must oppose any attempts to lock in high-carbon and unsustainable development through recovery packages. (Sky News)

(27) Sky News correspondents as they investigate how global warming is changing our landscape and how *we* all live our lives (Sky News)

(28) "*We have to learn lessons* to deploy the economic recovery from the pandemic. We need growth, jobs and sustainable development," (BBC)

As for the pronouns "they"/"them" and "their"/"theirs", it is important to emphasise that their use is negligible in both corpora. Third-person plural pronouns are never used for disseminating scientific information and knowledge, but mainly to refer to animals or in sentences with reporting verbs. A crosscheck with AntConc[40] provides us with the data projected:

	Total tokens	you	your	they	their	we	our

[39] Helena Calsamiglia and Teun A. van Dijk, "Popularization Discourse and Knowledge about the Genome", *Discourse & Society*, 15.4 (2004), 369-389.
[40] Laurence Anthony, *AntConc* (Version 4.2.0) [Computer Software] (Tokyo: Waseda University, 2022), *https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software*.

BBC	17,694	19	0	67	40	129	53
Sky News	15,534	21	1	28	35	108	33

Table 2. Personal references in the corpus

The absence of meaningful use of first-person personal pronouns with regard to the purpose of the items under analysis is an interesting finding in itself. First-person singular constructions typically convey the speaker's commitment, responsibility and perspective.[41] Conversely, the examined articles emphasize the scientific and authoritative nature of the sources. Notably, first-person singular pronouns are always exclusive, while first-person plural pronouns ("we", "us", "our", "ours") can be either exclusive or inclusive in terms of their semantic reference.[42]

Given the results of the use of personal pronouns, we can say that what is generally relevant for scientific discourse, as well as political discourse, about the role of personal pronouns in a we/self versus they/other (inclusion/exclusion) perspective is not directly relevant here. There is, in fact, no in-group versus out-group. The enemy threatening everyone's health and well-being is pollution and the resulting climate change. Furthermore, scientific and technical information is reformulated by presenting it to the reader in the context of collective personalisation.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic led to numerous changes globally, with governments instituting closures and restrictions in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus.

Prior to these measures, the media discourse on climate change was largely focused on discussing the causes and associated impacts, and potential solutions such as reducing emission rates or moving towards sustainable development strategies. However, during lockdown periods, both traditional and online news coverage on climate change increased. The angles of information started to change. Self-reflection on the role of the media in the climate change debate gained ground, as did a new discourse on the connection between climate change pandemics and lockdowns and the subsequent absence of human presence.

The media discourse pertaining to climate change has shifted its focus towards personal and community stories related to the impact of climate change, such as the discussion of the effects of climate change on people's lives and futures. This shift denotes a move away from the previous emphasis on climate solutions and remedies to solutions for individuals and communities that are directly affected, as well as possible changes in daily habits that can positively affect climate change control.[43]

The press has found a new way to convey persuasive messages, pointing out past mistakes and encouraging readers to re-evaluate the current scenario, ultimately inspiring them to change their future plans and resolutions.

The analysis has documented this noteworthy change in news discourse. Sensationalist language,[44] commonly used in crisis communication, has also been employed to emphasize the positive outcomes arising from the global changes that have occurred.

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[41] Jacinta Ndambuki and Hilary Janks. "Political Discourses, Women's Voices: Mismatches in Representation", *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 4.1 (2010), 73-92.

[42] Ning Zhao, "A corpus-based Comparison Study of First-person Pronoun we in English-language Abstracts", *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 63 (2023), article 101244.

[43] Cinzia Bevitori, "Values, Assumptions and Beliefs in British Newspaper Editorial Coverage of Climate Change", in Christopher Hart and Piotr Cap, eds., *Contemporary Critical Discourse Studies* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 603-625.

[44] Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk*.

The analysis revealed that the media strategically employs powerful discursive techniques. Notably, figures and percentages[45] are frequently utilized to highlight the scientific underpinnings of the data being presented. This serves as a means to convey the accuracy, veracity, and impartiality of the data, positioning these metrics as rhetorical tools that suggest credibility of the information being disseminated.

The use of intensifiers such as adjectives, adverbs, and superlatives is prevalent in the corpus. This is due to the persuasive nature of the genre,[46] which serves a dual purpose. Firstly, to intensify superlativeness and the tangibility of observed changes resulting from lockdowns. Secondly, it helps to intensify the emotional tone of words and expressions, which in turn leads to rational choices. This concept is supported by Lakoff's theory of the importance of frames.

The use of personal pronouns and adjectives is a persuasive technique that promotes a sense of collective responsibility among social groups.[47] This technique personalizes social actors through the use of personal or possessive pronouns, leading to a subject-oriented communication approach. The use of the determiner "our" creates a shared experience and community, addressing not just an individual but every reader and the whole community at the same time. Moreover, the personal pronoun "we" is a common element of personalization that portrays both the addressors and addressees as a collective committed to combating climate change. This commitment is reinforced by the shared experience of lockdown measures and the impact of climate change.

The significance of frames, precisely the 'urgency of environmentally conscious behaviour', is worth noting, which stands out as the most important in raising readers' awareness as they have "direct connection to the emotional regions of the brain", and emotions are indispensable to be rational.[48]

At some point, it seemed that 2020 could become, at least for the environment, the breakthrough year. During the first lockdown, there were widespread images in the press of nature reclaiming its space, including animals wandering into populated areas, views of smog-free cities, and clear streams. However, while cleaning up the air appreciably, lockdowns have not had a significant impact on the planet's temperature. Scientific research indicates that the reduction in pollution may have been overestimated.[49] Efforts to improve air quality in large cities require a more radical and reasoned approach than temporary lockdowns.[50] The promotion of "green lifestyles" has often been used to divert attention from the real polluters.[51] British Petroleum, BP, popularized the concept of a "carbon footprint",[52] but ultimately, behaviour change can only occur if the system changes.

Nevertheless, the narrative analysed in this article has been effective in promoting more conscious lifestyles. By appealing to emotions, citizens have been prompted to make rational decisions. "Emotions

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[45] Van Dijk, *News as Discourse*.

[46] Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk*.

[47] Theo Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1995), 32-70; Marriam Bashir et al., "Climate Change and Global Warming in the Speech of Dr Mahatir Mohamad Delivered at Unga 74th Session: A Political Discourse Analysis", *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 19.4 (2022), 1406-1418.

[48] Lakoff, "Why It Matters", 4.

[49] Guojun He et al., "The Short-term Impacts of COVID-19 Lockdown on Urban Air Pollution in China", *Nature Sustainability*, 3.12 (2020), 1005-1011.

[50] Billie Giles-Corti et al., "What Are the Lessons from COVID-19 for Creating Healthy, Sustainable, Resilient Future Cities?." *npj Urban Sustainability*, 3.1 (2023), 29; UNEP, "Inadequate Progress on Climate Action Makes Rapid Transformation of Societies Only Option - UNEP", 2022. *UNEP.org*. https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/inadequate-progress-climate-action-makes-rapid-transformation.

[51] George Monbiot, "The Big Polluters' Masterstroke Was to Blame the Climate Crisis on You and Me", *The Guardian* (Wednesday 9 October 2019), *theguardian.com*.

[52] Mark Kaufman, "The Carbon Footprint Sham. A 'Successful, Deceptive' PR Campaign", *Mashable Social Good Series* (2020), https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-footprint-pr-campaign-sham (; Rebecca Solnit, "Big Oil Coined 'Carbon Footprints' to Blame Us for Their Greed. Keep Them on the Hook", *The Guardian* (Monday 23 August 2021), *theguardian.com*.

are an inescapable part of normal thought. Indeed, you cannot be rational without emotions. Without emotion, you would not know what to want, since like and not-like would be meaningless to you. When there is no like or not-like, nor any judgment of the emotional reactions of others, you cannot make rational decisions."[53]

Despite its still unresolved nature, the journalistic discourse has shown us how it is much better without human interferences: from now on, we should respect our planet.

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[53] Lakoff, "Why It Matters", 4.