

# Responsibility and the Media

A critical discourse analysis of climate change representations in the U.S and Nigerian news outlets

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### **Abstract**

Scientists have reached a consensus that human activities have contributed to global climate change, yet its outcomes affect societies disproportionately. Often the least responsible countries are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This study will therefore be looking at vulnerable countries and highest carbon emitters, by engaging in a critical discourse analysis of climate change representations in the U.S and Nigerian news. Through the analysis of the Nigerian floods in 2018 and the U.S Campfires in 2018, functions of systemic functional linguistics and critical discourse analysis such as frame analysis, transitivity analysis, deemphasis/emphasis were used as tools to investigate how responsibility was discursively constructed in the media. The analyses show that the media coverage of Nigerian floods present frames of 'government accountability' and 'victim accountability' while the U.S Camp Fires media coverage present frames of 'heroism' and 'victims'. No explicit mention of climate change is present in the texts and responsibility is discursively constructed away from climate change and human activities as a responsible agent and towards the actual fires themselves, government, or victims.

### **Keywords**

Systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis, frame analysis, transitivity analysis, news discourse, climate change, responsibility, media, power, linguistics.

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# 1. Introduction

Natural disasters have been reported daily across the globe, inciting discussions of global warming and the impacts of climate change. Everything from forest fires, floods from increased sea levels, amongst other extreme weather conditions have vastly affected communities and their people. In the wake of The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2021 report, a discourse on the human influence on our warming climate has begun to take exponential effect globally with activists pleading for more action to be taken. Despite extensive media coverage of climate disasters, and the plethora of solutions that scientists have provided us, human-induced climate change issues continue to rise. While it is no doubt that climate change and the increased global temperatures will have a negative effect globally, some countries, particularly developing countries, or those that depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood, are being disproportionately affected (IPCC 2001b). On the other hand, not all countries have contributed to the warming of the climate to the same degree and many of those that are most affected, have some of the lowest carbon emissions to date. China and the U.S currently contribute to the most carbon emissions emitted globally (Friedrich et al., 2020).

The media play an extensive role in the way we experience the world. Jones, Jaworska, and Aslan (2021) assert that they not only affect the *kinds* of messages we transmit, but also “who can receive them, and what recipients can do with them” (p. 4). Likewise, mass media has the power to reach more people than ever before and as a product of modern society, it is essential for the societal response to the challenge of climate change (Schmidt, Ivanova & Schäfer, 2013). This leads to the question then, what implications does this have in regards to the role of mass media in shaping societies’ views on the challenge of climate change? Despite the notion of climate change as a result of anthropogenic driven carbon-emissions being widespread, and these natural disasters receiving plenty of coverage, they are often not associated directly with climate change (Berglez & Lidskog, 2017). The way mass media portrays the climate crisis is crucial for determining the amount of public engagement it generates which in turn is essential for policy action (Nisbet, 2009). This in turn, makes the role of mass media and how they represent climate change discourse to the public, extremely important and necessary to analyze. How the media represents and frames natural

disasters, and whether there are explicit links to who or what is being held responsible for these disasters can have real consequences for society and the degree of mobilization or action taken. This study aims to explore how responsibility is discursively constructed in climate change discourse.

Bohensky and Leitch (2013) explored the media framings of the 2011 Brisbane floods by examining any perceived links between the floods and climate change as well as any perceived roles of government in managing the flood. They demonstrated that the main narratives between the floods and climate change relationships were; belief that a relationship could be made, denial of a relationship, confusion about the relationship, and belief of the relationship as evidential proof of climate change (p. 479).

Additionally, Major and Atwood (2004) in their analysis of Pennsylvania newspapers found that the press was concerned with problems in terms of conflicts and losses instead of solutions by focusing on environmental issues such as sewage, water pollution, and landfills (pp. 17-18). These previous studies are amongst an abundance of literature that focus on media attention or climate change and environmental disaster reporting.

While examining perceived links between natural disasters and climate change will be explored in the section of analysis, this study intends to build on the growing literature by engaging in a critical discourse analysis of climate discourse and the discursive strategies that are used to allocate responsibility. In this manner, Liu and Li (2017) undertook a comparative analysis of the representations of China's smog in Chinese and Anglo-American English language newspapers applying corpus linguistic methods such as keywords, collocates, and so on combined with a critical discourse analysis in which they analyzed the socio-political factors behind these particular ways of representations. I will likewise engage in a critical discourse analysis of representations of Nigeria's floods in Nigerian English language news media, and representations of the U.S. Californian 'campfire' in American news media by applying different linguistic methods such as systemic functional analysis with aspects of frame analysis and transitivity analysis. A critical discourse analysis approach was used to allow the revealing of the power relations hidden within linguistic structures (Jones, Jaworska, & Aslan, 2021, p. 6) while the application of frame analysis, and the method of systemic functional analysis with its functions of transitivity analysis are particularly useful in

studying the processes that are at play between different players. Specifically, I will analyze coverage from the 2018 Nigerian floods from the news media sources The Punch and the Vanguard, as well as the 2018 Californian ‘campfire’ coverage from CNN News and Fox News.

In the following section I will elaborate on the analytical framework for this study by defining theoretical terms and engaging in previous literature. In the third section, the methodology is outlined. In the fourth section, the results are presented and analyzed. In the fifth section, the results will be further exemplified in the discussion. Finally, the last section will be a conclusion that will sum up and tie together this study.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

The following section will outline the theoretical terms and frameworks that will be used to analyze how responsibility is discursively constructed in climate change discourse by using the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics. Section 2.1 will provide a condensed summary on critical discourse analysis, sub-section 2.1.1 will illuminate how this is applied in terms of language and responsibility and subsection 2.1.2 will explore the concept of ‘deemphasis’ or the ‘unsaid’. Section 2.2 will explain frame analysis and section 2.3 will summarize systemic functional linguistics briefly while section 2.3.1 will outline the aspects of transitivity analysis that will be applied for this study.

### **2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) involves the analysis of texts that can uncover underlying ideological elements in that text through the closer analysis of language and grammar (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). Language and society are seen as deeply intertwined, power relations are seen as discursive, so consequently, a CDA approach reveals the power dynamics that are concealed in these linguistic constructions (Machin & Mayr 2012; Fairclough, 2015; Jones, Jaworska, & Aslan, 2021). Fairclough (2015), breaks down the semantics of *critical* and *discourse* even further. They demonstrated that the *critical* “is not just identifying features and types of discourse which are open to

criticisms of various sorts (e.g. are false, or manipulative), it is also asking: *why* is the discourse like this?” (p. 7). In essence, it is the search for explanatory relational reasoning between the discourse and the other elements at play such as power and ideology. *Discourse* is consequently, “a relational view of language” (Fairclough, 2015, p. 7). Building on sociolinguistics conventions it strives to critique these relations between discourse and power and “as a basis for action to change that existing reality in particular respects” (Fairclough, 2015, p. 6). Additionally, according to Fairclough (2015), “discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes to the achievement of social continuity or social change” (p. 67). It is this emphasis on discourse and its relations to power as well as the ‘basis for action’ that is behind the reasoning of applying a CDA approach to this study. Adopting tools from CDA to this study can aid in revealing any power dynamics that are in the media discourse of climate change representations. Identifying these ‘hidden’ structures can hence, positively encourage mobilization and social change.

### 2.1.1 Language and Responsibility

Just as Fairclough (2015) was concerned with the relationship between language and power, Chomsky (2016) argues for the individual ‘responsibility of intellectuals’. According to Cambridge Dictionary, Responsibility is “something that is your job or duty to deal with” (Responsibility, n.d.). When navigating through different news outlets, most individuals set out to find sources that are ‘objective’ news reports since that is the primary method in which they extract information about global events. However, due to the competitive nature of the media landscape, the press often engages in discursive strategies to ensure optimal traffic to their pages. Whether it be through click bait headlines, or sensationalism (Jones, Jaworska & Aslan, 2021), the media landscape is constrained by market forces (Molek-Kozakowska, 2018). In spite of this, Chomsky (2016) asserts that the more privileged a person is, the greater responsibility they have due to the fact that they have more access to resources. In this regard, the media’s ability to reach wide audiences attests a greater responsibility especially considering “how media portrayals in interaction with cultural forces shape public views of complex policy debates such as climate change” (Nisbet, 2009, p. 16). But beyond simple media responsibility, we can also investigate how responsibility is being allocated within the press itself. Within the climate change discourse, is climate change

being held responsible for natural disasters, or is it governance, individual social actors or even structural developments? These questions can be addressed by analyzing texts in a linguistic framework through frame and transitivity analysis which will be explored below. Following Fairclough's (2015) literature on power and discourse, we can then conclude that like power, responsibility is discursively constructed.

### 2.1.2 Deemphasis/the 'unsaid'

Since CDA can reveal concealed power dynamics in discourse, drawing upon a CDA framework also entails investigating discursive strategies that are in place to handle the exchange of knowledge. This can be achieved through a closer analysis on the aspects of the text that are absent or obscured and the explanatory reasoning as to why. As van Dijk (1991) argues, "meanings can be emphasized for instance, by exaggeration or hyperbole, or deemphasized, perhaps by understatement, litotes, or other forms of mitigation" (p. 219). In their study of how the press represented ethnic minorities, van Dijk found it a pattern in which the media emphasized aggressive or negative properties of black people. In other words, 'hyperbolism' was strategically used "to emphasize and dramatize the negative events and actions in which the left, blacks, and anti-racists are involved" (p. 220). Likewise, Fairclough (1995) adds, CDA "encourages analysts to be sensitive to absences from the text" (p. 18). These discursive strategies don't simply determine what is written in the news, but also what is omitted which Molek-Kozakowska (2017) emphasizes "has important implications for a broader sense-making about climate change as an issue to confront through mobilization" (p. 75). Thus, a critical discourse analysis approach entails not only the relations between discourse and power, but a closer look at discursive strategies used to direct focus to particular areas in the text and investigate the implications of these choices. In the case of news media, considering what is emphasized or deemphasized in news articles can lead our focus to what is absent in the texts and consider what implications this may have on climate change discourse.

## 2.2 Frame Analysis

First introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) and further exemplified in frame analysis by George Lakoff (2004), frames go hand-in-hand with "the processes through which people signal 'what's going on' in a communication" (Jones, Jaworska & Aslan, 2021,



p. 26). While Goffman (1974) was interested in how frames were used in everyday interactions, framing in media discourse can also be useful in understanding ‘media reception’ and how individuals interpret media narratives based on their own expectations about how and what stories should be told (Jones, Jaworska & Aslan, 2021, pp. 26-27). As Nisbet (2009) illustrates, frames “can be used to pare down information, giving greater weight to certain considerations and elements over others” (p. 16). Thus, a frame analysis approach provides us with the emphasized construct of the text, for instance, Nisbet (2009) found that conservative commentators tended to push frames of *scientific uncertainty* and *economic consequences* when it comes to climate change discourse in the U.S. While on the contrary, liberal commentators had a tendency to dramatize the climate change discourse. Both approaches further reinforce partisan divides and affect the level of public engagement and policy action which highlight the importance of analyzing frames for a critical discourse analysis. Similarly, Molek-Kozakowska (2018), through their study in which they applied discourse analysis using frames, narratives and news values, found that “some frames and narratives are more likely to mobilize diverse audiences” (p. 75). They assert that the amount of focus on risk in climate change discourse had to be alarming yet not alarmist, intense, but also manageable. The theoretical framework of frame analysis will be applied to this study to investigate what frames are being pushed in the climate change discourse and whether there is a distinction between frames presented in the U.S versus Nigerian news discourse.

### **2.3 Systemic Functional Linguistics**

A Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to the qualitative analysis of texts investigates how language functions to make meaning while considering the context of situation (Thompson et al., 2019). Developed by Michael Halliday, Systemic Functional Linguistics “provides an unrivalled platform for modelling, analyzing, and interpreting multimodal texts, interacts and events involving language and other resources” (Thompson et al., 2019, p. 36). Halliday asserts that texts are “ a construct of meaning that is formed out of a continuous process of choice among the innumerable interrelated sets of semantic options” (Thompson et al., 2019, p. 36). In other words, language is a semiotic system in which the language used is selected by the interlocutors whether intentionally or unintentionally depending on their circumstances and this contributes to

the processing of meaning. Examining these choices and including transitivity as an aspect of systemic functional linguistics, can help us determine how responsibility is established in these texts. Systemic Functional Linguistics is a broad field however, a focus on transitivity analysis as an aspect of SFL allows us to investigate the processes between actors and participants and moreover, how responsibility is discursively allocated within these processes.

### 2.3.1 Transitivity Analysis

Transitivity is “the study of what people are depicted as doing and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom and how” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 104). Transitivity allows us to interpret agency the “who does what to whom” and action the “doing” through observing participants, processes, and circumstances (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Developed by Halliday (1985), the criteria of the various types of processes are as follows : *material, behavioural, mental, verbal, relational* and *existential* (Halliday, 1985, p. 131). Analysing these processes in news texts allows an inquiry on who the participants are, who is active or passive, and who the subject or objects are. This in turn, enables us to examine how this might influence certain discourses present in texts that are not explicitly stated as well as how responsibility or causation is being constructed through these processes, forming the theoretical framework for this analysis.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Materials

This study includes a qualitative analysis of media coverage of the 2018 Nigerian floods which spanned from September 20th to October 2nd and the U.S coverage will focus on the 2018 “Campfire” which spanned from November 8th to November 25th. One additional month was added to each event to extend the timeframe for relevant news searches. The rationale behind this was to acknowledge that news outlets would be covering the events post-disaster due to the extensive damage, and an additional month would enable as broad a selection as possible for analysis.

To start, the two databases, EM-DAT and Factiva were used to collect the data for analysis. EM-DAT is an international disasters database from the Center for research on the epidemiology of disasters (CRED) which contains core data from 1900 to the present day. In the database, it features statistics such as the disasters geolocation, death toll, total affected, total damages, timeframes, and so on. This database was used primarily to extract exact dates and time frames of the natural disasters this paper would be focusing on. Since the focus of this paper is on the U.S and Nigeria, EM-DAT was also used to determine which climate-induced natural disaster had the most impact. Through this data collection, the 2018 Camp wildfires in California and the 2018 floods in Lagos were selected due to the extensive damage caused by both prospective disasters. The exact dates of the disasters were then taken from the EM-DAT database and one month *after* the disaster was extended in the timeframe for news searches. As mentioned above, this was to ensure that any retrospective discussions on the natural disasters were still open for analysis since the damage of both natural disasters were so extensive requiring a large period of time allocated to rebuilding the damage.

The Nigerian media outlets analyzed consist of The Punch, and Vanguard. The Punch was founded in 1971 and on their company website state, “Though a corporate business entity which exists to make profit, it promotes and defends the values of democracy while contributing to the economic development of the country (The Punch, n.d.)” Equivalently, the Vanguard was established in 1984 and claims that “it aims to serve the people through unflinching commitment to free enterprise, the rule of law and good governance” (Vanguard, n.d.). These two news outlets were selected due to the fact that they are some of the most widely-read newspapers in Nigeria and claim to be independently apolitical.

The U.S media outlets chosen consist of CNN News and Fox News. Both are widely circulated news outlets but differ in one considerable aspect: their political affiliations. This was done intentionally due to the partisan division between Republicans and Democrats when it comes to the climate change discourse (Nisbet, 2009). Primarily, the general accepted assumption that Republicans are seen as questioning the validity of climate science will be significant to investigate through the Fox news outlet to determine whether this affects how responsibility is discursively constructed.

To collect news texts, the database Factiva was used as the source of the corpus. For the case of Fox news, not enough data was available for analysis due to the unavailability of relevant data on Factiva therefore, a similar process was done using Foxnews.com using their search bar function. The same keywords were used and the same functions were selected which include date ranges, kind of content (article, video or slideshow). The same process of randomized selection was also applied (explained under methods).

### **3.2 Methods**

Factiva is a research tool which provides access to over 32,000 sources. Searches can be narrowed using dates, source outlets, key words, authors and so on. For the purpose of this study, sources, dates and key words were entered for accurate results. The key words for the 2018 camp wildfires were: *\*fire, \*camp fire, \*disaster, \*wildfire*, and for the 2018 Lagos floods: *\*floods, \*rain, \*downpour, \*disaster*. These keywords were chosen since they discursively relate to each prospective natural disaster. These keywords, combined with their prospective time frames extracted from EM-DAT as well as the chosen news source were entered on Factiva and provided the corpus for this analysis.

In order to avoid bias, 10 news articles were selected from each news source randomly for selection from a pool of relevant articles. For instance, in the case of CNN which received 8,850 hits on Factiva, upon further examination, only 141 articles were relevant to this study. In order to extract 10 articles, I divided the total by 10. Thus, every 14.1th article from the pool of relevant articles was chosen for analysis. If upon further analysis an article was not relevant, another text was randomly chosen. For each prospective country, 2 news outlets were chosen, with 10 articles each, resulting in 20 articles per country and a sum total of 40 articles for in-depth analysis.

In addition to the research question, *How is responsibility being discursively constructed in disaster media reporting?* I designed a checklist of aspects of the news texts to focus on. The purpose was to explicitly state how I would be using frame analysis, transitivity analysis and emphasis/deemphasis to answer my research question.

**Table 1. Checklist for analytical framework**

Steps	Analytical Framework	<i>Further Analytical Questions</i>
Step 1	Frame Analysis	What are the overall frames of these texts? Extract excerpts that represent these frames for closer analysis.
Step 2	Transitivity Analysis	Who are the participants/agents in these excerpts? What processes can we see? Who is being portrayed as doing what?
Step 3	Emphasis/deemphasis	What is being omitted in these texts? Are there differences in emphasis or deemphasis between the Nigerian and U.S representations of climate disasters?
Step 4	Climate change representations	Do the texts make any mention of climate change? If so, in what context? What comparisons between the U.S and Nigerian news outlets can be made?

Although table 1. Checklist for analytical framework above has four steps, the analysis was an iterative process therefore, the steps were not specifically followed in that order. They were rather, used as a guidance in order to answer my research question.

Previous authors have developed their own typology of frames applicable to different media discourses (Nisbet, 2009; Molek-Kozakowska, 2018). I will be developing a new typology relevant to this study using these framing concepts.

## 4. Results and Analysis

The following section describes patterns and trends that were found and are categorized according to the theoretical framework applied to this analysis. A critical discourse approach will be applied in the discussion section below. Due to the limited scope of this study, all aspects of transitivity analysis could not be elaborated therefore, only key findings were analyzed that highlighted how responsibility is discursively constructed in the selected texts.

## 4.1 Media Framing

Table 2 and Table 3 detail some of the frames found in both U.S and Nigerian news outlets. The results of the frame analysis show that in the Nigerian news outlets, the discourse reinforced a *government accountability frame*, in which there was an emphasis on government’s lack of action or pressure from victims for a larger response. Additionally, a *victim/public accountability frame* was reinforced in the discourse which placed responsibility on individuals to remove themselves from their situations. Last, a *social progress* frame was evident in which the news discourse presented a few long-term solutions to the ever-present issue of the floods.

On the contrary, the U.S news outlets produced frames in the discourse in which there was agency given to firefighters as saviours which for the purpose of typology was categorized as *Firefighters’ heroism frames*. Victims were cast as in need of protection, which I labeled as *victims ‘sufferers’ frames*. Finally, there was also what I assigned as *causation frames* in which there was a brief exploration of the causal factors of these climate disasters in which they were linked to the environmental effects of climate change, yet no explicit mention of climate change was made.

Moreover, the following news extracts in table 2 and table 3 are some examples of the types of frames in our selected news outlets. Due to the scope of this study, all news extracts containing such frames were not included. However, these chosen extracts serve as an adequate representation and simplified version of these frames to illustrate the patterns and trends that were established.

**Table 2. Frames in Nigerian News Outlets (The Punch and Vanguard).**

Frames	Explanation	News Extracts
Victim/Public Accountability Frame	An emphasis on individual accountability to remove themselves and help each other from the harms of the flood.	<p>“...most of the victims were reluctant to vacate the place and move to IDP camp as to protect whatever was left of their property” (Ahon et al., 2018).</p> <p>“...we cannot leave everything for the government alone to do. These people, need psychological support, physical support, and all sorts of support, even spiritual support” (Omafuaire, 2018).</p> <p>“If we find out the danger is there, we will no longer plead, we will move them out forcefully” (Ahon et al., 2018).</p>

Government Accountability Frame	An emphasis on the government's responsibility for taking action in alleviating or preventing the consequence of the floods.	<p>“...people were helpless as the assistance promised by the state government in its sensitisation messages had yet to materialise” (Utebor, 2018).</p> <p>“...called on the state and federal government to urgently assist the victims” (Onojeghena, 2018)</p> <p>“Most of those interviewed blamed government for their plight, pointing out that if they had been paid compensation for their lands acquired, their permanent structures would have been erected away from the downstream close to the Zungeru Hydro Electricity Dam” (Mosadomi, 2018).</p> <p>“...there are no shelters provided by the government yet” (Utebor, 2018).</p> <p>“...the victims of the camp said government should have allowed them to die in their various communities instead of bringing them to a strange land and subjecting them to starvation and bad environment” (Okafor, 2018).</p> <p>“...the government owed them a responsibility to ensure that it provided relief and succour to them [victims]” (The Punch, 2018).</p>
Social Progress	A means of solving problems by providing more long-term solutions to the issue of flooding.	<p>“Government efforts to extend support to farmers for maize and plantain production, plans to support farmers on land development and irrigation have been worked out for implementation” (Vanguard, 2018).</p> <p>“The governor, represented by his Special Adviser on Infrastructure and Housing Development, Sen. Emmanuel Agwarivwodo, [...] said that concerted efforts and good policies would be needed to revamp agriculture, reduce hunger and poverty in the country” (Vanguard, 2018).</p> <p>“The traditional ruler or Aguleri, Igwe Christopher Idigo solicited for federal government's assistance that would provide a lasting solution to the problem of flood, noting that building dams in the flood-prone areas would help to absorb waters from River Benue and River Niger” (Ujumadu &amp; Nwaiwu, 2018).</p>

#### 4.1.1 Frame Analysis in Vanguard News and The Punch

In an article entitled “Niger: How government exposed us to disaster – Victims” (Mosadomi, 2018), participants are being quoted as voicing their irritation with government. Direct quotations or personalization's although expressed in this excerpt, were not as common in the Nigerian news outlets. An arguably *non-narrative approach* was more commonly used in the Nigerian press with quotations being interlaced in the articles with “the statement reads” (Onojeghen, 2018) followed by the quote, or even depersonalized quotations in which the author referred to the social actors as “they”

such as “they said” or “one of them said” (Okafor, 2018) followed by a quotation. A non-narrative approach to their news texts utilised an approach that was drier in which facts were presented with little narration, thus leaving an emotional response up to the reader. Unlike the U.S news media, it did not often include a backstory to the victim’s lives, settings, or plots which are the markers to a traditionally narrative approach. The example below is an uncommon instance in which the Nigerian press takes a more narrative approach in which a participant identified as Muhammad is quoted as saying:

“We have lost our homes, valuables, farmlands, harvested crops, livestock, cash, among others, and our continuous staying here will not be of help to us”. Most of those interviewed blamed the government for their plight, pointing out that if they had been paid compensation for their lands acquired, their permanent structures would have been erected away from the downstream close to the Zungeru Hydro Electricity Dam and floods wouldn’t have submerged their homes, farmlands and animals. (Mosadomi, 2018).

The use of a personalized narrative frame was not frequent however, a *government accountability* frame was present in many Nigerian news texts from the pool of data, including the excerpt above. The *government accountability* frames emphasized a stress on more government action for displaced people, famine, and crop and infrastructure damage. Without a narrative frame, the Nigerian news outlets were primarily event-focused, in which a lot of attention was given to government’s delayed response on relocating or temporarily housing internally displaced people. Further, Nigerian news texts had an unparalleled *victim/public accountability frame* surrounding individual responsibility in not just removing themselves from affected areas but also, a reluctance from citizens to leave their farmland and crops and encouragement to the general public to help one another.

*Social progress* frames were also found, with reassuring suggested solutions to flood control such as the building dams and programs to help farmers recuperate losses.

**Table 3. Frames in U.S Media Outlets, CNN News and Fox News.**

Frames	Explanation	News Extract
Firefighters’ ‘heroism’ frames	An emphasis on firefighters as heroes and saviours, a focus on their acts of heroism.	“More than 9,600 firefighters, including many from out of state, are battling wildfires across California” (Karimi & Simon, 2018). “Firefighters worked to protect thousands of students and staff sheltering in place at Pepperdine University on Saturday as flames started reaching the campus overnight, school officials said” (Chavez, 2018).



<p>Victims ‘sufferers’ frames</p> <p>Causation frames</p>	<p>An emphasis on victims and their individual experiences with the fires, evoking emotions of vulnerability and suffering as a result of the fires.</p> <p>Frames where an explanation for the cause of the fires are given.</p>	<p>“We also saw the heroism of firefighters, first responders and volunteers working together to battle the blaze and help the community” (Zinke, 2018).  “As horrible as this has been it’s been amazing to see the resilient spirit of everyone involved and the heroism of those risking their lives on the front lines,” Kardashian West said” (France, 2018).  “The courageous firefighters were able to save my cars and personal items recovered from my home.” (Earl, 2018).  “These firefighters were in the rescue mode all day yesterday” (Casiano, Lieu &amp; Mikelionis, 2018).</p> <p>“ A mother-of-five and nurse has opened up about the emotional moment she called her daughters as flame from California’s lethal wildfires closed in, thinking it would be the last time she would ever speak to them” (McKay, 2018).  “The harrowing escape from fast-moving flames still haunt Dan Newman” (Yan, Almasy &amp; Cullinane, 2018).  “They, like the other families of hundreds missing in the Camp Fire, hope for any news – that their loved ones are still out there but can’t get in touch” (Murphy, 2018).  “Jillian Smalley escaped her neighborhood in Paradise with moments to spare as flames consumed everything in sight” (McLaughlin, Grinberg &amp; Watts, 2018).</p> <p>“The ongoing drought, warm temperatures, insect infestations, poor forest management, continued residential and commercial expansion in the wildland-urban interface and other factors have made the western United States more prone to fire”. (Zinke, 2018).  “Forests are filled with fuel from the floor, where highly combustible, dry pine needles act as kindling to jump-start the tiniest spot fire” (Zinke, 2018).</p>
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#### 4.1.2 Frame Analysis in CNN News and Fox News

In the U.S. media outlets, *hero/victim* frames were found, with the social actors, or participants being quoted and describing their experience with the fires. Firefighters were described as ‘heroes’ while victims of the fires were reported as passive ‘sufferers’. The overall frame had a more narrative approach in which there was more personalization both from heroes and victims in which their experiences and stories

were directly quoted. For instance, in one 915 word CNN article alone, 5 social actors and their stories were highlighted.

“It is overwhelming, I don’t have any word to describe it,” Butte Country Sheriff and Coroner Kory Honea said. [...] Sadia Quint has no idea what happened to her uncle, David William Marbury, who lived in a house in the largely obliterated town of Paradise. [...] The harrowing escape from fast-moving flames still haunt Dan Newman. (Yan, Almasy & Cullinane, 2018).

By applying this narrative frame which highlights victims voices, there is greater weight placed on certain elements over others (Nisbet, 2009, p. 16). In this case, the victims and their trauma are highlighted rather than other socio-political or environmental factors. And since frames only make sense if they align with our ‘pre-existing interpretations’ (Nisbet, 2009, p. 17) and life experience, then we can attest that since no individual is without pain or loneliness, then these frames can be used to evoke certain emotional responses in the audience whether it be empathy or understanding. *Causation frames* were also found with the articles stating various reasons for the extensive fire such as poor forest management, dry pine needles, and warmer temperatures. Yet there was no mention of climate change as a causal factor. Arguably, many causal frames listed are attributes of climate change, such as warmer temperatures, ongoing droughts and insect infestations placing some responsibility on natural causes.

## **4.2 Transitivity Analysis**

The following sections 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 will add to the frames found by applying a transitivity analysis to the excerpts extracted through the frame analysis. Due to the research scope, I will be exclusively focusing on the processes under transitivity analysis that have implications for how responsibility is discursively constructed in line with my research question.

### **4.2.1 Mental Processes in CNN News**

In U.S news reporting, there was abundant use of mental processes which entails clauses in which there are “clauses of feeling, thinking and perceiving” (Halliday, 1985, p. 107). For instance, in a news article entitled “Hundreds still missing in California’s Camp Fire. Their families cling to hope” (Murphy, 2018), there are two main participants highlighted in a narrative approach. Sol Bechtold and Delbert Mack are

quoted in the article when discussing his inability to find his mother and his hope that she has not fallen victim to the fires.

Thanksgiving is a week away, it's been a week since the fire. They, like the other families of the hundreds missing in the Camp Fire, hope for any news -- that their loved ones are still out there but can't get in touch. Whatever Dorothy needs, Del wants his sister to know the whole family is ready to help. "I want her to know that I love her and I miss her," Bechtold said about his mother. "I really want her to come home" (Murphy, 2018).

According to Machin and Mayr (2012), the use of mental processes can be seen as "one device through which listeners and readers can be encouraged to have empathy with that person" (p. 107), by putting us in the mind-frame of the participants who are the subjects of these mental processes. The use of these mental processes in which real-life victims are quoted using these clauses is a tool that the press can adopt in order to evoke more empathy from readers and converge our feelings with theirs. Keeping our focus on the empathy we have for these victims rather than the discourses of responsibility or causation shows us how effective a narrative framework can be.

While all the mental processes from the U.S media texts evoked feelings of loss, sadness and empathy, if the narrative of these quotations were on the other spectrum of emotions such as anger and frustration, we would in turn, according to Machin and Mayr (2012), respectively align our feelings with theirs through our empathy and likewise, experience feelings of anger.

#### 4.2.2 Material Processes in CNN News and Fox News

In both CNN and Fox news, there are several instances of material processes in which the two key participants are the firefighters and the fires. The firefighters act as the actor which performs the action, while the fires serve as the goal, at whom the process is directed (Halliday, 1985). The action is often described using war imagery such as "battle fires", or "battling the blaze" and firefighters are quoted as describing their tasks as "our mission" and "this operation". Actions that have a material result are often in this case, metaphorical or abstract. The participants serve as passive agents in which they engage in a battle against nature. The fires were described using adjectives such as "destructive", "wreaking havoc", "deadly", "massive", and "devastating" and are presented as active agents, an abstraction to be conquered in war. In this manner, the victims of the fires are cast as completely passive in the texts with no agency. Walker, Reed and Fletcher (2020) in their analysis of the 2015 wildfires in northern

Saskatchewan found similar processes in the media. They assert, “the frequent use of militaristic language and metaphor throughout the media accounts, along with the portrayal of the protection of communities and physical property as a predominately masculine role (p. 134)”. Correspondingly, in the U.S media discourse of the Camp Fires, this ‘militaristic language’ reinforces a media frame of the dualism of heroes and victims (Walker, Reed & Fletcher, 2020) and directs agency to the firefighters and their battle against the fires, discursively placing responsibility to a non-human entity; the wildfires.

#### 4.2.3 Grammatical positioning of actions

Both U.S. and Nigerian outlets had instances of *circumstance*, a linguistic strategy for representing social action within a prepositional phrase or subordinate clause (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 114). As illustrated in the headlines from The Punch: “11-year-old pupil disappears after downpour in Calabar” (Affe, 2018), *after downpour in Calabar* is our prepositional phrase beginning with the preposition *after*. Likewise prepositional phrases are seen in this headline from CNN news: “Insurance company goes under after California’s most destructive wildfire” (Yan & Boyette, 2018). This grammatical positioning of actions is often used in newspaper headlines through prepositional phrases “to reduce responsibility for certain actions” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 114). In the case of the 11-year old pupil, *who* is behind their disappearance is deemphasized through the prepositional phrase and the main emphasis is on “11-year old pupil disappears”. *Who* is responsible for the action of her disappearance is therefore unclear and the responsibility is accordingly, vaguely discursively constructed.

#### 4.3 Deemphasized ‘unsaid’

Amongst the pool of selected data for this study, all articles chose to “deemphasize” climate change in their reporting by not mentioning it explicitly at all. Therefore, it is fair to say that there was a massive deemphasis on the role of climate change in these natural disaster reportings. Out of the data selected for closer analysis for CNN news, there was no mention of climate change however, when searching “climate change” as a key word in the data pool of 141 articles there were 17 mentions of climate change. In our selected data for Fox News, there was one mention although it was presented as a

quotation said by a celebrity figure in an article that highlighted the celebrities who were affected by the fires. Neil Young is quoted as saying “We are vulnerable because of Climate Change; the extreme weather events and our extended drought is part of it... Our temperatures are higher than ever here in our hottest summer on record. That has not helped. DT seems to be the denier.” (Earl, 2018). The article ends with the full quotation in which Neil Young asserts responsibility to congress and explicitly disagrees with DT (Donald Trump’s) stance on poor forest management as the cause of fires. There is no follow up by Fox News regarding this quotation. The use of quotation arguably, shows distance from Fox News and the claims made and leaves no room for further discussion. This was the singular instance in which there was an individual being quoted as expressing discontent with the effects of climate change. Even when an opportunity is presented in which there are discussions in the press about the climate, there was no mention of climate change. Take for instance this CNN excerpt:

The ongoing drought, warm temperatures, insect infestations, poor forest management, continued residential and commercial expansion in the wildland-urban interface and other factors have made the western United States more prone to fire (Zinke, 2018).

The ongoing drought, warm temperatures, and insect infestations quoted above are undisputedly all functions of climate change yet the words ‘climate change’ are evaded. Here we are presented with an opportunity to participate in a climate change discourse yet the decision was made not to engage.

Interestingly, none of the Nigerian discourse mentioned climate change as an issue associated to the floods, which is astonishing considering that according to a Times article, Nigeria is amongst the top six countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and the floods which occur annually are progressively getting worse negatively straining their economy (Law, 2019). The absence of climate change as a responsible factor in these disasters was not problematized in any of these articles.

## **5. Discussion**

Jones, Jaworska and Aslan (2021) emphasize how “framing...has to do with the way media producers *contextualize* their messages and the ‘storylines’ they are made part of” (pp. 118-119). For instance, when news stories about climate disasters are described

using dualisms of *heroic* and *victim frames* with firefighters positioned as heroes and saviors, people attribute responsibility to the fires, often regarding them as the cause of their pain, suffering and destruction. However, if news stories frame these natural disasters within the wider sociopolitical context that acknowledges the anthropogenically driven carbon-emissions that are associated with climate change, people interpret these disasters as a “climate disaster”. Without that acknowledgment, there is no explicit link made between these natural disasters and climate change which leaves who or what is responsible, open to interpretation. Even the term *firefighters* holds relevance as it can be seen as a discursive strategy that produces more associations with protection, war, or defense as they *fight* for our safety. Complementary to Berglez & Lidskog’s (2017) findings, this study similarly found that although there was plenty of coverage of these natural disasters, they were not directly associated with climate change.

Both Nigerian and U.S climate discourse had a focus on the losses and conflicts occurred as a result of their prospective disasters. A distinction made between the two countries however, was that in the case of The Punch and Vanguard, an emphasis on *government accountability* frames were found while in the U.S there was only one mention. Ironically, the only mention was made by Donald Trump who is reported to have tweeted “there is no reason for these massive, deadly and costly fires in California [...] Remedy now, or no more Fed payments” (Casiano, Lieu & Mikelionis, 2018). Applying CDA, this could be interpreted as Donald Trump disassociating himself from the government body and placing responsibility away from himself towards a government body in which he actually plays the largest role as president. In particular, it is relevant to note that he announced his plans to pull the U.S from the Paris Agreement a year prior to the fires.

Although the impacts of climate change vary across geographical lines, in California fires were seen as being so extensive that they totalled the size of the city of Chicago. If we take a critical discourse analysis approach, which assumes that language and society are deeply intertwined and are not separate entities (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 35), it can be argued that unlike Californians who most often commute to their place of work, a vast majority of Nigerians depend on their farmland for their business and is a driver on the country’s economy. This could clarify why there was a profound *government*

*accountability* frame in the Nigerian media discourse surrounding the 2018 floods. Nevertheless, focusing on government failure on immediate action to displaced peoples rather than climate change, also takes responsibility away from the issue at large. Although the Nigerian outlets had a presence of *Social Progress* frames in which there was a conversation surrounding solutions instead of such focusing on conflicts and losses, the U.S media provided no solutions but instead, focused on other environmental causal factors for the fires such as pine needles and increased temperatures. What's more, through transitivity analysis with the use of mental processes as an illustration, keeping our focus on our empathy for victims rather than on responsibility is also an effective discursive strategy to direct attention elsewhere. What is being deemphasized here is any narrative of the victims of the fires of floods being upset at the lack of responsibility being taken by policy makers that are responsible for the increased intensity and instance of natural disasters due to climate change. As we have seen, transitivity serves as a powerful tool in linking these processes together which has "implications for how we interpret events, people and actions" (Jones, Jaworska & Aslan, 2021, p. 116). In sum, if responsibility is not a human characteristic, and it is discursively placed to non-human entities, then it is hard to place blame for these disasters and stimulate change.

While I have engaged in a critique of the discourse, the latter part of critical discourse analysis entails an explanation of "how it relates to other elements of the existing reality" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 6). The nature of the media is that due to its competitive landscape, it is funded by advertisers which includes lucrative oil companies. In the 1980's, Exxon and other players in the fossil fuel industry were concerned with the risk that the public would rally behind the scientific consensus that climate change was caused by the burning of fossil fuels and therefore, "engaged in a concerted effort to sow doubt about climate change through strategies such as newspaper advertorials and the funding of 'think tanks' to conduct 'research' designed to promote skepticism about mainstream scientific findings" (Jones, Jaworska, & Aslan, 2021, p. 53). Therefore, a critical look at news media and the source of their funding could shed light on the lack of climate change representations in their texts.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how responsibility is discursively constructed in Nigerian and U.S news discourse on climate disasters. The low number of articles meant that although climate change was not explicitly mentioned in the pool of data, it does not represent all media coverage of the Nigerian floods and U.S fires. The low number of articles may be a limitation of this study but nonetheless, this study with its application of frame analysis, transitivity analysis and critical discourse analysis fulfilled its aim by effectively drawing attention to the presence of certain frames and the distinctions between U.S and Nigerian media. The impacts of frames have a lot of implications in which how responsibility is discursively constructed and “can determine whether society calls upon individuals, industry, or government to take action” (Supran and Oreskes, 2021, p. 697). We are currently amidst a climate crisis in which it is more essential than ever for leaders to take policy action against climate change to ensure our continued survival. The media holds a responsibility in transmitting this information to the public, and misleading frames in which human responsibility for climate change is not adopted, or the explicit link between these natural disasters and climate change are not made, affects the levels of societal mobilization (Molek-Kozakowska, 2018; Nisbet, 2009; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). In other words, discursively silencing climate change and constructing responsibility elsewhere has real implications for local people and their communities. Future studies could investigate how responsibility is constructed on a wider scale, by further examining what is missing or ‘deemphasized’ from climate change coverage and how language is applied for the purpose of giving weight to certain elements over others.



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