

# Framing the Climate Crisis: Media Bias in California Wildfire 2025 Reporting

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**Abstract:** The present study investigates the media framing of environmental and climate change issues, with a specific focus on the coverage of the 2025 California wildfires. Employing a content analysis methodology, it examines news articles from the digital editions of The New York Times (typically characterized as left-leaning) and Fox News (generally considered right-leaning). The analysis identifies recurring patterns related to tone, emotional language, attribution of causality, proposed solutions, allocation of blame, and representations of governmental response. The findings indicate that The New York Times predominantly frames the wildfires within the broader context of climate accountability and systemic governance failures. In contrast, Fox News frequently employs more sensationalist rhetoric, attributes the fires primarily to natural causes, and demonstrates a comparatively limited focus on long-term mitigation strategies. These results underscore the influential role of media framing in shaping public discourse on climate change and emphasize the importance of balanced, objective, and evidence-based environmental journalism.

**Keywords-** Environmental journalism, Media framing, Thematic Framing, Episodic Framing, Media bias

## I. INTRODUCTION

The field of environmental journalism has emerged as a crucial domain for communicating the complex and evolving relationship between ecological degradation and human activity (Hansen, 2020). In an era marked by accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and escalating pollution, the media serves as a powerful force in shaping public perception and influencing policy decisions. One of the most significant tools the media employs in this process is framing—the selection and emphasis of certain elements within a story to promote particular interpretations of events. As Entman (1993) explains, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52).

Framing theory is especially pertinent in environmental journalism, where issues are often complex, contested, and deeply political. Iyengar (1991) identified two primary styles of media framing: episodic and thematic. Episodic framing presents issues through specific instances or isolated events, often lacking broader context, thereby encouraging audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals. In contrast, thematic framing situates issues within broader trends, providing contextual information, statistical data, and

analysis that highlight systemic causes and potential policy solutions. These framing styles significantly influence how environmental crises are understood and prioritized by the public (Iyengar, 1991). Media framing often simplifies the complexity of climate issues or aligns narratives with prevailing political, economic, or cultural perspectives to make them more accessible or compelling to target audiences (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). In the context of climate change, framing has a profound effect on how audiences interpret the urgency, causes, and remedies of environmental challenges (Atwater et al., 1985). For instance, framing climate change primarily as an economic burden may lead to public scepticism or disengagement, while portraying it as a threat to public health or as a matter of environmental justice can motivate greater concern and action (Nisbet, 2009).

This research paper examines how different media outlets employ framing in their coverage of climate-related disasters. Here, it specifically analyses the coverage of a major environmental catastrophe—the 2025 California wildfires—by two U.S.-based newspapers with distinct political ideologies. On January 7, 2025, California experienced one of its most devastating wildfire seasons in recent memory. Over 24 days, fourteen wildfires swept through Los Angeles, San Diego, and surrounding areas, fuelled by unusually dry conditions, powerful Santa Ana winds, and a buildup of flammable vegetation. The fires scorched more than 57,000 acres, destroyed over 18,000 structures, and displaced more than 200,000 residents. The Eaton Fire in Altadena and the Palisades Fire in Pacific Palisades caused the most damage and it is now considered among the most destructive wildfires in California's history. This study attempts to reveal the impact of audience targeting and ideological bias in environmental reporting by looking at how these events were presented in media narratives.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Environmental Journalism, Media's Role in Shaping Climate Change Narratives, Media Bias and Misinformation in Climate Reporting*

Mass media plays a critical role in shaping public knowledge and discourse regarding consequences, and implications of climate change (Schafer, 2015). A growing body of research has explored how different environmental issues are framed by both traditional and digital media (Robbins, 2023). Scholars broadly agree that the way media frames climate change significantly affects public understanding, attitudes, and concern. By emphasising certain aspects—such as political debate, economic impact, or environmental urgency—media outlets guide how audiences interpret the issue (Entman, 1993; McCombs, 2014).

Wildfires have increasingly become a focal point of media coverage, especially as their frequency and severity intensify due to climate change. Several studies have applied media frames to wildfire reporting, noting a tendency toward episodic and human-interest framing rather than thematic or environmental framing (Iyengar, 1991; Yell, 2010; Bourassa, 2013). In his seminal work, Iyengar (1991) found that television news predominantly employs episodic framing, which can lead audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than societal or systemic factors. Analysing Australian newspaper coverage of wildfires, Yell (2010) observed a shift towards more affective content over time, with articles increasingly highlighting personal emotions and dramatic narratives. A content analysis of Pakistani newspapers revealed that 87.4% of environmental news in 'Dawn' and 98.6% in 'Jang' utilized episodic framing, often lacking in-depth analysis of climate change implications (Bourassa, 2013).

Another important aspect is that the media acts as a key agent in producing, reproducing, and transforming the public's understanding of climate change (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014). Roxburgh et al. (2019) noted that extreme weather events like hurricanes and snowstorms prompted spikes in climate discourse on Twitter, particularly when high-profile figures were involved. These findings suggest that social media acts as a barometer for public concern, with potential implications for climate communication strategies. Ko et al. (2024) conducted a pioneering study analysing over 14,000 geotagged tweets during 20 major California wildfires between 2017 and 2021, identifying three dominant climate framings: linking wildfires to climate change, proposing climate action, and attributing broader adversities to climate change. In a comparative study, Da Silva et al. (2019) analysed media coverage in Spain and Chile and noted how wildfires were often framed through lenses of emergency response rather than underlying environmental causes, reflecting a tendency to depoliticize climate responsibility. Here one important point must be noted: that media bias plays a significant role in how wildfires and climate change are reported. A recent study highlights that media coverage of climate change is often biased, with certain weather events—such as droughts, wildfires, and heatwaves—more frequently linked to climate change than others like floods or storms. Rather than grounding these associations in scientific evidence, media outlets tend to prioritize what they perceive as most newsworthy, potentially resulting in an unbalanced portrayal of climate change. Additionally, reporting is shaped by the influence of scientists, corporations, and political figures, all of whom play a role in determining how climate issues are framed and discussed (Brimicombe, 2022). Pralle (2009) examines why climate change remains prominent in political and public discourse despite limited policy progress. Using Kingdon's multiple streams model of 1995, she explains that climate issues gain traction when a recognized problem, viable solutions, and political support align. However, sustaining this alignment is difficult. She also highlights how governments, while acknowledging climate risks, often prioritize economic growth and short-term political goals over environmental action. As a result, climate change competes with more immediate concerns, slowing policy development and implementation (Pralle, 2009).

After the literature review on the climate change, media framing and media representation of environmental reports, this study aims to explore how the coverage of the California wildfire 2025 is framed by different media outlets. This examination thus tries to answer the following research questions:

### III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The study aims to find the following: -

1. How do ideologically distinct media outlets (e.g., The New York Times and Fox News) frame the 2025 California wildfires in terms of causes, consequences, and responsibility?
2. To what extent do these outlets link the wildfires to broader climate change narratives or attribute them to isolated events and human-interest angles?
3. What are the dominant media frames (e.g., episodic vs. thematic, political, economic, environmental) used by each outlet in covering the wildfire event?

### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Framing analysis: An Agenda setting effects:

Framing theory has its roots in multiple academic disciplines, and scholars tend to interpret it differently based on their focus of analysis (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). According to Tewksbury and Scheufele

(2020), the idea of framing is often considered an extension or second level of agenda setting. Framing, as part of agenda setting, refers to the process by which the media not only influence what issues people think about (agenda setting) but also shape how they think about those issues by emphasizing certain aspects over others. This is often called the second level of agenda setting, where the focus shifts from issue salience to issue interpretation (McCombs, 2004). According to Entman (1993), framing also contributes to media bias which can play a critical role in shaping the distribution of political power. He argues that framing is inherently non-neutral, as it selectively highlights certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, thereby favouring specific interests or ideological perspectives. Through this selective emphasis, framing constructs narratives that guide public interpretation, moral judgment, and proposed solutions to social and political issues. This study tries to identify difference in reporting in two different newspapers and explore the way news is framed in coverage of digital version of two newspapers- The New York Times and The Fox news of 2025 California wildfires.

## V. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how the 2025 California wildfires were framed in media coverage. As defined by Krippendorff (2019), content analysis is a systematic method used to draw valid and replicable conclusions from textual data in relation to their contextual use. This technique enables the identification of recurring patterns, underlying themes, and potential biases within media narratives.

For this study, news coverage was sampled from two ideologically distinct media outlets: The New York Times and Fox News. These platforms were selected based on their well-documented political orientations—The New York Times is generally associated with liberal or progressive views, while Fox News is commonly recognized for its conservative stance (Mitchell et al., 2014; Wang, 2024). Pew Research Center (2014) and AllSides (n.d.) have consistently classified The New York Times as left-leaning and Fox News as right-leaning (Pew Research Center, 2014; AllSides, n.d.). The contrasting perspectives of these outlets offer valuable insights into the influence of media ideology on the framing of climate-related disasters.

The analysis focused on digital news articles published in January and February 2025. This time frame was chosen to capture immediate and continuing coverage of the California wildfires, which began on January 7, 2025, and had significant ongoing impacts into February. The use of digital editions is deliberate, reflecting the growing shift toward online news consumption and the significant role that digital media plays in shaping public opinion (Shearer, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2020).

A total of 30 articles from each outlet were purposively selected for analysis. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for this study, as it allows for the deliberate selection of content directly relevant to the research focus, facilitating a more in-depth exploration of how the event was portrayed (Palinkas et al., 2015).

An inductive coding method was employed to analyse the collected articles. This bottom-up strategy involves developing codes and categories directly from the raw data without relying on predefined theoretical frameworks. Articles were read multiple times to identify meaningful content units, which were

then grouped into thematic categories. Inductive coding offers a flexible, data-driven approach (Martin, Camaj, & Lanosga, 2024) that supports nuanced interpretation and ensures findings are grounded in the actual media content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The following coding categories were developed through this process:

- Tone
- Focus on Cause
- Blame/Responsibility
- Impact on Communities
- Framing
- Media Bias

This methodology aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced understanding of how media narratives around the 2025 California wildfires are shaped by ideological perspectives and framing choices.

### Analysis:

#### Tone:

The study analysed the presentation of the 2025 California wildfire news by two different media outlets.

- Tone and Emotional Language: Tone refers to the attitude or emotional flavours a news outlet conveys in its reporting. It's shaped by:
  - Word choice (language)
  - Emphasis (what is highlighted or downplayed)
  - Style (formal vs. informal, alarmed vs. calm)
  - Emotional content (dramatic, neutral, hopeful, angry, etc.)

Even when two outlets report the same event, their tone can differ greatly, shaping how the audience interprets the story.

The New York Times, generally has a serious, urgent, and policy-focused tone. The tone is often alarmist about climate change but empathetic toward affected communities. For example, *'We're in a New Era': How Climate Change Is Supercharging Disasters*, an article published on January 16, 2025 clearly reflects the tone that are highly aligned with The New York Times' editorial and journalistic approach. The headline itself shows the high sense of urgency. The tone conveys the danger and historical significance in the current times. The phrase "scientists say" grounds the assertion in professional agreement, giving it legitimacy and complementing NYT's data-driven reporting approach

Fox News uses mixed tone—sometimes dramatic and emotional, but often critical of state leadership and federal responses. It tends to downplay long-term climate risks.

An article *"California wildfires rage across Los Angeles County, forcing thousands to evacuate their homes"* published on Jan 9, 2025 exemplifies the fact. The article employs urgent and vivid language to convey the severity of the situation. By highlighting that "hundreds of thousands of residents are under evacuation orders" and that "more than 536,600 were without power," the article emphasizes the widespread disruption and emotional toll on the affected communities.

In an article titled *"Pacific Palisades inferno forces thousands to flee California homes"*, phrases like "massive Palisades Fire," "prompting mandatory evacuations affecting tens of thousands," and "people who

abandoned their vehicles to flee on foot" underscore the immediate danger and chaos caused by the wildfires.

In a nutshell, The New York Times had a more restrained and informative tone. Sometimes, they added a tone of concern and urgency. Generally, they avoided excessive sensational language. However, Fox News used highly emotional, dramatic, and fear-inducing language. Occasionally, they balanced it with neutral tones.

### **Focus on Cause:**

The New York Times consistently indicated climate change, human activity, and policy failures as the cause of wildfires. It also proactively discussed policy solutions, sustainable practices, and recovery strategies. It also highlighted preventive measures and long-term change. For NYT fires are linked to global warming, drought patterns, and ecosystem mismanagement—emphasizing the need for climate action. For example, in the article titled ‘*Everything Is Burned Down*’ Sheila Morovati’s Pacific Palisades home was spared, but her neighbourhood was decimated in the Los Angeles fires. For her, climate change looms over the tragic losses.” published in January 9, 2025, discuss the cause of the fire in ways that align with The New York Times’ or a left-leaning perspective, particularly by connecting the disaster to climate change and human impact. “But the conditions that exacerbated this conflagration — soaring temperatures, severe drought, dry vegetation — are all symptoms of an overheating planet.” —This line directly ties the fire's severity to climate change, a key theme in progressive environmental narratives.

*“We’ve had over 100-mile per hour winds. And it’s the driest it’s ever been through January. It’s this complete concoction of all of these climate issues coming together to create the most horrendous fire we’ve ever even experienced. So yeah, this has to do with climate change.”* — says Sheila Morovati. A personal and emotional testimony explicitly blaming climate change — the kind of narrative frequently amplified in left-leaning outlets to humanize climate crises.

On the other hand, Fox News initially attributed natural factors like Santa Ana winds and later included corporate faults as the main cause for the wildfires. It harped on Government mismanagement as one of the primary causes behind wildfire. An opinion piece titled “*Government mismanagement, not climate change, is to blame for California’s destructive wildfires*” (Fox News, January 9, 2025) by Chuck DeVore Fox News frames the wildfires not as natural disasters intensified by climate change, but as consequences of policy failures, particularly by Democratic-led state governance. The article emphasizes:

- Neglect of defensible space around homes by property owners.
- Power companies, under regulatory pressure, failing to maintain infrastructure (e.g., power lines).
- Bureaucratic red tape and environmental lawsuits that prevent timely prescribed burns.
- Restrictions on timber harvesting, leading to unnaturally dense, flammable forests.

Fox News downplays climate change as a significant factor. Instead, it treats weather patterns (like low rainfall) as normal for California, not climate anomalies.

### **Blame/Responsibility:**

The New York Times did not directly blame politicians or immediate human error for the California wildfires. Rather, it divides accountability among systemic problems, such as urbanisation, climate change, hazardous products, and the inability to foresee dangers.

This is consistent with the Times' more liberal, policy-focused approach, which aims to:

Emphasise the urgency of the climate Promote scientific reform Encourage group and preventive measures. In the article titled *“Airborne Lead and Chlorine Levels Soared as L.A. Wildfires Raged”* (by Hiroko Tabuchi and Mira Rojanasakul, Jan. 20, 2025) illustrates how the newspaper assigns blame/responsibility in nuanced and systemic ways—aligned with its liberal editorial stance. “These fires were ‘a wake-up call,’... ‘They are urban wildfires, fueled by the very materials that make up our homes and cities.’”

This place shared societal responsibility—on construction practices, zoning, material choices, and global warming—not just on governance or regulation.

Rather than a political blame game, the article draws attention to the public health crisis caused by toxic smoke and pollutants:

- Lead and chlorine exposure are emphasized, especially how they endanger children and long-term population health.
- EPA safety limits are mentioned, indirectly suggesting a need for stronger regulation and monitoring

On the other hand, A Fox News article titled *“Government mismanagement, not climate change, is to blame for California's destructive wildfires”* by Chuck DeVore, published on January 9, 2025, attributes the severity of the wildfires primarily to policy failures and governmental mismanagement rather than to climate change. The article argues that restrictive environmental regulations and a decline in active forest management practices have led to overgrown forests, increasing wildfire risks. It highlights issues such as inadequate maintenance of power lines and insufficient clearing of brush around properties, suggesting these factors have exacerbated wildfire outbreaks.

*“Do Sanders and the myriad other politicians decrying ‘climate change’ have a valid point? Simply, no.”*

This line exemplifies the article's scepticism toward climate change as a primary cause of wildfires, instead reinforcing the argument that mismanagement is to blame.

### **Impact on Communities:**

The New York Times’s reports generally covered community-level impacts from a marginalized community perspective. Fox News emphasised individual stories, the emotional toll, and evacuation statistics.

In the article *“Airborne Lead and Chlorine Levels Soared as L.A. Wildfires Raged”* (Jan 20, 2025), *The New York Times* reports:

*“They are urban wildfires, fueled by the very materials that make up our homes and cities.”*

The article emphasizes health impacts in densely populated, low-income neighbourhoods’, particularly in areas like Pico Rivera, California. This coverage aligns with *NYT*’s progressive editorial stance, highlighting systemic vulnerability and environmental justice, where poorer and marginalized communities bear the brunt of disasters.

### **Framing:**

The New York Times clearly employing **thematic framing**: it connects individual weather events to the broader, systemic issue of climate change. The headline of article "'We're in a New Era': How Climate Change Is Supercharging Disasters" with subheadline "Extreme weather events — deadly heat waves, floods, fires and hurricanes — are the consequences of a warming planet, scientists say" clearly reflects the thematic framing of the newspaper. It suggests that these aren't isolated events but symptoms of a changing global climate—mirroring the NYT's tendency to focus on long-term causes and implications.

On the other hand, conservative media like Fox frequently employ **episodic framing**, concentrating on specific events or individual stories without delving into underlying systemic issues. This approach can lead to coverage that emphasizes personal responsibility and immediate reactions over broader policy discussions. For example,

*“Residents say they’re fed up with red tape and government inaction as flames consume their homes.”*  
 — Fox News, January 9, 2025

- This quote emphasizes **frustration from individuals**, focusing on **bureaucratic failure** and **personal experience** — a hallmark of episodic framing.

**Media Bias:**

Media bias is the bias or favouritism shown by news outlets in the way they report stories, often influencing public perception through selective coverage or framing. In The New York Times, most of the news reports had minimal to moderate bias. For example, lines like *“The dead in the Palisades fire included a hang-glider, a surfer, a space engineer and a former child star from Australia”* adds a personal, emotional touch by focusing on who the victims were. This information, while accurate, leans a little toward narrative storytelling in an otherwise straightforward report. In Fox News, news reports had moderate to high bias. For example, lines like *"A lawsuit filed Monday claims Southern California Edison equipment sparked the Eaton Fire"* show bias because they focus only on the lawsuit against the company and don't mention any defence or response from the company. By only showing one side, it makes it seem like the company is definitely at fault.

The reports from the New York Times were more analytical and cause-driven, while Fox News fluctuated in cause framing. New York Times gave more importance to solutions, while Fox News underrepresented solutions. The New York Times directly engaged with systemic responsibility, while Fox News tiptoed around blame. The New York Times highlighted the structural community impact, while Fox News used an emotional human-interest angle. The New York Times was more critical and investigative, while Fox News was pro-government. The New York Times leaned towards a liberal progressive style, while Fox News leaned towards mainstream conservative tendencies.

**VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NEW YORK TIMES AND FOX NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2025 CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES**

Dimension	The New York Times	Fox News
<b>Tone</b>	Serious, urgent, and policy-focused; empathetic; avoids sensationalism	Mixed: dramatic, emotional, and sometimes critical; often more sensational
<b>Emotional Language</b>	Restrained and analytical; concern	Vivid, fear-inducing; emphasizes

	grounded in scientific or expert voices	chaos, individual suffering, and disruption
<b>Cause Attribution</b>	Emphasizes climate change, global warming, human activity, and ecosystem mismanagement	Attributes fires to natural factors, corporate faults, and state mismanagement
<b>Responsibility/Blame</b>	Shared/systemic: urbanization, poor planning, hazardous materials, climate inaction	Political/governmental: poor forest management, red tape, utility failure
<b>Framing Style</b>	Thematic framing: connects wildfires to long-term systemic and climate issues	Episodic framing: focuses on immediate events, individuals, and emotional impact
<b>Community Impact</b>	Focus on marginalized and low-income communities; environmental justice lens	Focus on general communities; uses emotional stories and statistics
<b>Policy/Solution Focus</b>	Highlights climate policy, prevention, and recovery strategies	Solutions underrepresented; focuses on critique of current governance
<b>Media Bias Level</b>	Minimal to moderate; analytical tone with some narrative elements	Moderate to high; selective focus, often one-sided
<b>Political Leaning</b>	Liberal, progressive, pro-environmental regulation	Conservative, skeptical of climate framing, anti-regulatory

## VII. CONCLUSION

The 2025 California wildfires were not only a stark reminder of the growing threat of climate-related disasters but also a revealing case of how media coverage can shape public understanding of such events. This study found clear differences in how ideologically distinct news outlets framed the crisis. Left-leaning media, such as The New York Times, tended to contextualize the wildfires within broader environmental and systemic issues, often emphasizing long-term solutions and collective accountability. In contrast, right-leaning outlets like Fox News frequently employed more emotional or episodic framing, focusing on immediate impacts, natural causes, and often avoiding deeper structural critiques.

These variations underscore the powerful role of media framing, how the selection of language, tone, and emphasis can shape not just what people think, but how they think about environmental issues. Furthermore, media bias continues to influence how information is presented, reflecting political leanings that can polarize public discourse. When news coverage becomes fragmented along ideological lines, it limits opportunities for shared understanding and collective action, especially on complex issues like climate change. As climate disasters become more frequent and severe, the need for balanced, evidence-based, and inclusive journalism becomes even more urgent. Only through responsible media practices can we foster the informed and unified public engagement necessary to address the climate crisis effectively.

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