

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

**Global climate change will “not be decided in Duisburg”:
An exemplary investigation into local journalists’ frames and
potential contextual factors**

Der globale Klimawandel wird „nicht in Duisburg entschieden“:
Eine exemplarische Untersuchung von Frames von
Lokaljournalist*innen und möglichen Kontextfaktoren

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1. Introduction

Climate change is a systemic problem of our era. Although seen as a global problem, not all parts of the world are equally affected, including the different regions/ecosystems in Germany. Especially the connections between the global and the local make reporting on climate change challenging for journalists (Kunelius, 2019, p. 220), who remain one of the primary sources of information on climate change for public audiences (Guenther et al., 2022, p. 195).

Journalists act as “key mediators” (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2014, p. 400), bringing climate change into the audience’s lifeworld, potentially influencing their awareness, knowledge, and behaviors (Nisbet, 2009, p. 22). At the same time, climate change journalism is in a flux: Trends highlight an increased focus on constructive/transformational journalism (Brüggemann et al., 2023, p. 221; Guenther et al., 2022, p. 143), emphasizing solutions to the climate crisis and the goal of sustainable societal transformation. However, climate change journalism is also affected by the crisis in traditional business models (Schäfer & Painter, 2021, p. 3), with the proliferation of voices, particularly on social media, challenging its practices and functions. These challenges contrast with the significant importance of journalism, and especially local journalism, for climate change communication.

The aim of this article is therefore to describe climate change journalism at the level of local journalism. The framing approach will be applied here, given its effectiveness in numerous studies on climate change communication (Guenther et al., 2023; Schäfer & O’Neill, 2017, p. 2). Frames are seen as consistent patterns that guide the understanding, evaluation, and processing of topics, shaping realities. Such cognitive frames, or journalists’ frames (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106), are influenced by journalists’ perspectives and are related to contextual journalistic factors, such as editorial guidelines or resources available (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 65; Esser, 1998, p. 470). Since cognitive frames receive little attention from research, particularly in the field of climate change communication, this study reconstructs them and explores their interaction with contextual journalistic factors.

2. Method

Since cognitive frames cannot be captured through content analysis (Brüggemann, 2014), this study relies on qualitative interviews with journalists. A systematically selected sample of ten local journalists from various newspapers/regions in Germany was chosen, aiming for in-depth insights into a diverse sample of individual cases. The selection of journalists was based on the conscious choice of local newspapers from different areas/regions, primarily distinguished by how regions are affected differently by climate change. The journalists were identified through internet searches using climate change-related keywords for the respective newspa-

pers. The selected journalists had reported on regional climate change topics at least four times over the last two years before data collection, ensuring their familiarity with the topic. Semi-structured interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes on average, were conducted digitally in June/July 2021, covering various aspects of climate change reporting. The interviews were transcribed with software and checked manually after being recorded.

The analysis, conducted using MaxQDA, employed a qualitative content analysis approach combined with frame identification. Frames were derived both deductively from theoretical considerations and inductively from the data. Three cognitive frames emerged regarding climate change; in a second step, these frames were analyzed in relation to contextual journalistic factors such as editorial resources, journalistic roles, and personal backgrounds. The study found little variance in the frame elements problem definitions and causal attributions among the journalists, with differences primarily emerging in treatment recommendations. Additionally, variations were observed in editorial resources, with some journalists facing significant time and personnel constraints.

3. Results

Among the local journalists interviewed, the three distinct frames regarding climate change were:

Frame 1: *Status Quo*. Journalists with this frame acknowledge regional climate change impacts but are cautious about countermeasures, fearing potential burdens on citizens. The journalists rather advocate for moderate actions due to perceived financial burdens on citizens.

Frame 2: *Cautious Climate Action*. There is a strong focus on regional climate change issues within this frame, with journalists urging prompt actions from policymakers. The journalists emphasize the importance of reporting on alternative ways to react on climate change and to garner support for countermeasures.

Frame 3: *Transformation*. Journalists with this frame stress the urgent need for global action on climate change. They highlight the interconnectedness of climate change issues and advocate for interdisciplinary collaboration. While they reject outright bans of actions that prevent climate change mitigation, they call for swift policy implementation and emphasize the role of science in guiding solutions.

These cognitive frames reflect journalists' perceptions of citizens' readiness for countermeasures, and the resources available for climate change journalism. Connections between cognitive frames and contextual journalistic factors were mainly evident regarding an individuals' progressiveness and the resources available: Journalists with the *Status Quo* frame showed low progressiveness, and they had limited individual and editorial resources available. Those with the *Cautious Climate Action* frame exhibited higher progressiveness, demanding regional climate protection and adaptation, particularly from politicians. However, despite awareness of solutions, their style of describing climate change remained problem-focused, and they had limited resources. Journalists embodying the *Transformation* frame were alarmed, informed, and engaged, working in resource-rich newsrooms. Both mitigation and adaptation measures were considered useful and should be enabled

by scientific progress. The journalists were aware of their role in climate change communication and strived to give climate change more coverage in reporting, taking self-determined time for research.

In conclusion, local journalists contribute to the societal construction of climate change through their cognitive frames. In this study, three cognitive frames among the journalists surveyed were identified; they represent different perspectives on climate change and professional practices that are influenced at least in part also by their cognitive frames. Despite all frames assuming negative consequences for the local environment, the frames differed in their views on actions and solutions. This study aligns with previous research on identifying thematic frames but focuses specifically on local journalism. While there are overlaps with previous findings, the emphasis here is on local consequences and the journalists' roles in addressing them. The local journalists interviewed exhibited different attitudes towards climate change, ranging from problem-focused to solution-oriented approaches. Their framing practices are influenced by contextual factors such as resource constraints and individual interests.

The findings thus suggest implications for journalistic practice: Journalists should reflect on their cognitive frames and role perceptions regarding climate change. Structuring journalism around reader-oriented thematic coverage could enable more in-depth climate change reporting. The little time that journalists have would thus be used more effectively for climate change journalism and the specific information needs and concerns of local audiences could be addressed. Networking and training opportunities could enhance journalists' knowledge and facilitate collaboration with experts in climate change communication.

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