



The topic of climate change in Polish media coverage on the example of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is one of the most critical global issues, engaging not just researchers and activists but also members of the power elite responsible for political decisions. A key annual event for discussing the challenges of climate change is the UN Climate Conference. Its 26th edition, held in Glasgow in 2021, received widespread coverage in both traditional and online media, earning the moniker “last chance summit.” **This article presents** a study on the media image of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26). **Concept:** The research focused on news published during the Conference in three primary TV news broadcasts (“News”, “Events”, “Facts”) and on the main pages of three internet news portals (Interia, Onet, WP). **Results:** The study found that COP26, while competing for media attention with other significant events (such as protests against anti-abortion laws and the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border), was featured by all surveyed media organizations. Additionally, each TV news outlet, through actions like sending reporters to Glasgow, and each online portal, through initiatives like participating in Greenpeace-organized events, emphasized the conference’s importance.

KEYWORDS

COP26, UN Climate Change Conference, media, climate change



We are all residents of Pripyat¹. We lead comfortable lives in the shadow of the catastrophe to which we contribute.” This is how David Attenborough (2020, p. 13) depicted the ongoing sixth great extinction of species on Earth, a direct consequence of climate change. This global crisis manifests through various phenomena impacting both animate and inanimate nature, including humans. Prominent among these are environmental disasters, which can be directly attributed to human actions, such as the 2021 gas leak in the Gulf of Mexico, or have delayed effects, like the Australian fires of 2019 and 2020, further intensifying the issue of rising Earth temperature. Due to their significance and media appeal (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neil, 2016), these disasters receive extensive media coverage. This coverage can heighten public interest in these issues and potentially lead to concrete actions, ranging from protest activities to financial donations for those affected. Notably, the impact of climate change extends beyond environmental concerns to other areas of life, including political, energy, economic, and social spheres. This multifaceted impact is why the authors of successive reports by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stress the urgency of taking concrete and effective measures to avert the climate catastrophe.

The dangers of climate change were underscored by the organizers of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference, who labeled the phenomenon as “the most important issue of our time, and the stakes could not be higher” (COP26, 2021). Held in Glasgow, UK, from 31 October to 12 November 2021, the conference convened representatives from countries worldwide. Its goal was to discuss climate change problems and challenges and to forge concrete decisions and agreements for its prevention. However, many decisions made by leaders were criticized by activists for being inadequate or neglectful, particularly regarding the delayed transition from fossil fuels, especially coal. Alongside the official proceedings, protests by global climate advocates, including Greta Thunberg, took place in Glasgow’s streets, branding the conference a “last chance summit” (Lasota, 2021).

Owing to the multifaceted nature of climate change and its media significance, previous UN climate conferences have drawn attention from both traditional and online media, including social media. This interest is evidenced by research from social communication and media studies, which have explored various aspects of these conferences, such as media representation, environmental themes in print press (Sajna, 2012), the Twitter activity of participating academics (Walter, De Silva-Schmidt, & Brüggemann, 2017), and communication strategies of public figures (e.g., Donald Trump, Justin Trudeau) and celebrities (e.g., Jane Fonda) in their Facebook posts during the conferences (De-Lara, Erviti, & León, 2022).

This article aims to present a study on the media depiction of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference in Polish media (both traditional and online). A quantitative analysis of media content was conducted, focusing on news published by six media outlets – TVP1, TVN, Polsat², Interia, Onet, and Wirtualna Polska – during the event. The methodology will be detailed later. Three research questions were posed: 1) the extent of COP26 coverage in traditional and online media; 2) the characteristics of COP26 media coverage; 3) the framing of COP26 in traditional and online media. Due to the exploratory nature of the questions, a research hypothesis was not formulated.

¹ Pripyat, a town in Ukraine, was devastated by the 1986 explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant reactor. This catastrophe is considered as one of the most significant environmental disasters in history (Attenborough, 2020, pp. 9-12).

² The materials featured in television news broadcast (TVP1, TVN, Polsat) were compiled using the CAST system (Content Analysis System for Television) at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Theoretical background

Traditional and online media are key sources of information about local and international events, serving various functions, including educational, mobilizing, and opinion-forming roles (MacBride, 1980; McQuail, 2007, pp. 111-112; Nowak, 2016). The content presented to audiences is thus of significant importance. Given the vast amount of information available daily, media outlets and their journalists decide which events and issues to bring to their audience's attention. This selection is influenced by the media value of these issues, determined by the presence of specific characteristics. According to the news values theory (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neil, 2016), these characteristics include exclusivity, conflict, surprise, drama, magnitude, relevance, bad news, good news, entertainment, the power elite, celebrity, news organization's agenda, shareability, audio-visuals, and follow-up. Consequently, topics on the effects of climate change, especially environmental disasters, due to their dramatic nature or scale, have the potential for significant media coverage. A notable instance occurred in late 2019 and early 2020, when the Australian wildfires caused extensive destruction and numerous casualties.

Building on Bernard Cohen's notion that perhaps the news media cannot tell people what to think, but they can persuade them what to think about (cited in McCombs, 2008, p. 2), it's crucial to recognize that the influence of media lies not only in what is presented, but also in how it is presented. First, media outlets, by focusing on certain issues while neglecting others, can signal to their audiences which events and issues are significant, potentially influencing their opinions of authority figures such as the government, the president, or public office candidates (priming). This influence is articulated by Iyengar & Kinder (1987, p. 63; McCombs, 2008, p. 144) and can manifest through frequent media exposure of an issue (repetition) or its positioning (e.g., placement as the lead story in a news broadcast or on the front page of printed media). Brewer, Grad, and Willnat (2003) emphasize the impact of priming: "Exposure to media coverage of an issue tends to make that issue more accessible in people's minds; this heightened accessibility, in turn, increases the likelihood that people will base subsequent evaluations on their thoughts about the issue" (p. 494).

Secondly, the concept of framing plays a pivotal role. 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 for the item described" (p. 52). Basic framing types, as identified by Semetko & Valkenburg (2000), include conflict, human interest, economic consequences, responsibility, and morality. Iyengar (1991, pp. 2-3) distinguishes between episodic frames, which focus on specific events or issues, and thematic frames, which place them in a broader context. His study of television in the 1980s revealed that episodic frames were far more common than thematic ones, indicating a rarity in discussions of issues not easily encapsulated by specific events, with global warming cited as an example (pp. 2-3).

COP as a response to Climate Change Challenges

Climate change is a pressing contemporary challenge facing humanity. It is defined as "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods" (United Nations, 1992, p. 7). While changes in the Earth's climate system are a natural occurrence, having taken place numerous times throughout the planet's geological history, the current shift is distinct from previous ones. According to the scientific consensus, as reported by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "human activity

is the dominant cause of observed warming since the mid-20th century” (Stocker et al., 2013, p. V). Climate change is characterized by a range of phenomena, including rising global temperatures, melting glaciers, increased sea and ocean levels, droughts, and extreme weather events like hurricanes, floods, fires, and snowstorms. Despite the severity of these threats, many can be mitigated or slowed, allowing for adaptation to new environmental conditions.

The connection between escalating climate change issues and human activity was emphasized by Anthony Giddens (2010):

“as long as the dangers caused by global warming are not tangible, direct or visible in everyday life, then no matter how serious they may seem, people will sit back and do nothing concrete. Meanwhile, waiting until they become visible and acute, only then to take serious action, will by definition make it too late” (p. 10).

It is important to note, however, that there are people advocating for action to halt this trend, including researchers, activists, and ordinary citizens. An example of such activism is the Youth Climate Strike, which mobilizes young people to participate in protests and advocate for their future.

The recurring UN Climate Change Conference (COP – Conference of Parties), whose 26th edition was held in 2021, also represents a response to climate change. This event was particularly anticipated by various social groups worldwide, partly due to its one-year postponement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly evident impact of climate change on daily life. One notable issue was the rise in sea levels, highlighted by island nations. Simon Kofe, Tuvalu’s foreign minister, delivered a speech while standing in his country’s coastal waters, visually demonstrating the threats facing the Tuvalu people (“Tuvalu minister stands in sea...”, 2021, para. 1). Surangel Whipps Jr, President of Palau, addressing the plight of his country’s citizens, told other delegates: “You might as well bomb our islands instead of forcing us to witness our own deaths” (“Prezydent Palau na COP26...”, 2021, acc. 4). Concurrently, public debate continued to focus on the dependency on fossil fuels and the timeline for transitioning away from them, especially coal (Lasota, 2021).

COP26 took place between 31 October and 12 November 2021 at the Scottish Event Campus in Glasgow, UK, with delegations from over 120 countries in attendance. Notably, the leaders of the Russian Federation (Vladimir Putin), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), and China (Xi Jinping) did not attend (“Ruszył COP26...”, 2021, acc. 4). The conference was structured into two segments. The first, concluding on 2 November, featured representatives of the power elite, while the second part, from 3 to 12 November, involved experts from governing bodies engaging in discussions and finalizing agreements. Key topics discussed included the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, aiming to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and protecting communities and ecosystems vulnerable to climate change (COP26, n.d., “Goals”). Two significant agreements were reached: one to halt deforestation by 2030 (“Zatrzymać wylesienie...”, 2021, acc. 1) and another to reduce methane emissions (“Koalicja na rzecz redukcji emisji metanu coraz większa...”, 2021, acc. 1). Simultaneously, protests by global activists took place on the streets of Glasgow, involving individuals like young people and concerned parents. These activists, unable to participate in the discussions at the Scottish Event Campus, expressed their frustration with the actions (or lack thereof) of the authorities and demanded stronger climate policy measures. They particularly criticized the politicians for their inconsistency, as evidenced by the heavy air traffic caused by their arrival (“W Glasgow korek odrzutowców, którymi na COP26 przybyli światowi przywódcy...”, 2021, acc. 1) and the inclusion of fuel lobby representatives in the discussions (“BBC: Najwięcej delegatów na COP26...”, 2021, acc. 1).

Survey methodology

The study involved a quantitative analysis of media content, focusing on news broadcast or published between 31 October and 12 November 2021, the duration of the COP26 conference. The analysis encompassed the main TV broadcasts – TVP1’s “News”, TVN’s “Facts”, and Polsat’s “Events” – as well as the homepages of three online news portals – Interia, Onet, and Wirtualna Polska³. Additionally, each of these sites has a dedicated section for climate change and ecology (environmental protection) content – Zielona Interia (Green Interia), Niech żyje planeta (Long live the planet), Naturalnie WP (WP natural) – which were also included in the analysis. The selection of news items for review was based on specific keywords: *cop26*, *klimat** (climate), *konferencja** (conference), *szczyt** (summit), *Glasgow**, *ONZ** (UN)⁴. Excluded from the study were TV program announcements in news services, partner material, recipes, games, links to VOD, advertisements, and audience spaces (e.g. discussion forums).

The research was structured using a codebook created specifically for the study, encompassing categories such as date, title of the news item, media outlet, journalistic genre, function of the material, topics covered, conformity with scientific consensus, validity of the material, and characteristics of the material. The latter category ties directly to the news values theory (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neil, 2016), using characteristics proposed by the theory’s authors. “Importance of the news” pertained to its positioning (priming) and was operationalized such that news was deemed “important” if it was among the first three aired on a television news broadcast or highlighted at the top of a web portal with a larger picture or a graphic indication, like a box or board marked “urgent” or “important”.

For the study, two distinct frames for presenting news were developed: a “worst-case scenario” frame and a solutions frame. The “worst-case scenario” frame is applied to news item where the journalist unambiguously portrays climate change issues and events in a negative way. This includes a focus on environmental disasters and the use of emotionally charged, negative adjectives in the language. In contrast, the solutions frame aligns with the five basic frames previously cited: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, responsibility, and morality. This frame fits into Shanto Iyengar’s category of thematic frame. Therefore, the solutions frame involves presenting information about climate change and its consequences, while simultaneously proposing solutions to these issues or highlighting actions humanity can take to avoid or mitigate them.

Findings

During the period from 31 October to 12 November 2021, a total of 19,412 news items – comprising 395 television and 19,017 online news – were published by the six media outlets selected for analysis. It’s important to highlight that, alongside the 26th UN Climate Conference, other significant events occurred, capturing national media attention. These included protests against anti-abortion laws in Poland following a pregnant woman’s death in a Pszczyna hospital, the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, All Saints’ Day, an increase of COVID-19 cases, and controversies surrounding the Independence March.

³ The collection of news items from online news portals involved accessing their homepages, including links to individual articles, using a web plugin available in the Google Chrome browser. This task was performed twice daily, once between 11:00 and 11:30 and again between 23:00 and 23:30. However, it’s important to note that due to the nature of online media and their algorithmic tailoring to user preferences, the same page accessed at the same time by different internet users might have displayed slightly varied content.

⁴ Due to the peculiarities of the Polish language, different variations of the highlighted (*) keywords (e.g. *klimat* (“climate”), *klimatyczny* (“climatic”)) were taken into account.

Exposure scale of COP 26

Out of the 19,412 news items published, 167 were about COP26, accounting for 4% (16 news items) of all material from the three television stations and 1% (151 news items) of all content on the three news portals. Notably, 42% of all publications about the conference from the six media outlets occurred during its first part, from 31 October to 2 November. This trend was particularly pronounced in television coverage, with 75% of all television news related to COP26 during this period. On 1 November, each of the three TV news outlets aired two news items on COP26 – the highest daily count. Simultaneously, Interia, Onet, and Wirtualna Polska published 38% of their total conference-related news during this initial phase. This period was significant as it saw the presence of authority figures (including heads of state and government officials) in Glasgow and the announcement of key decisions like methane emission restrictions and commitments to end deforestation.

In analyzing the work of the various editorial teams, it was observed that Interia published the most COP26-related news – 81 items or 48.5% of the total, both television and online. Notably, over half of these (46) were featured on the special Green Interia subpage. This section distinguishes itself from other subpages in the study, functioning almost like an independent portal dedicated to a specific topic, with regular publications of news, interviews, columns, and audio-visual materials. Some of these were also featured on Interia’s homepage.

The codebook for the study included a category for the “importance” of materials. During the analysis period, 15 items were classified as “important”. The majority of these appeared on Interia, which featured six “important” news. In contrast, TVP1 was the only one among the analyzed media outlets that did not mark any publication concerning COP26 as “important”. Table 1 in the study compares several key data points: the total number of news published on the analyzed days, the number of news specifically concerning COP26, and those news designated as “important”.

Table 1. News on COP26 published between 31 October and 11 November 2021 in six media outlets (TVP1, TVN, Polsat, Interia, Onet, WP).

Media outlet	All news	COP26 news	“Important” COP26 news
TVP1	136	4	0
TVN	123	6	2
Polsat	136	6	3
Interia	4 803	81	6
Onet	9 124	39	2
WP	5 090	31	2
TOTAL	19 412	167	15

Source: own study.

Each of the six media organizations surveyed emphasised the significance of COP26. All television stations had at least one journalist on-site, both at the Scottish Event Campus, where the official conference proceedings took place, and on the streets of Glasgow, where activists were protesting. Reporters not only created news but also frequently appeared on-screen,

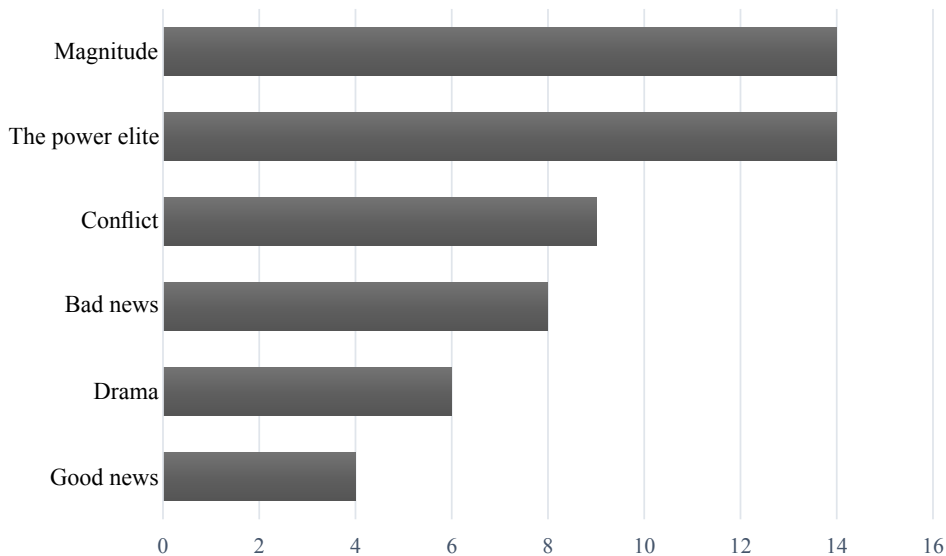
such as in stand-ups or live entries, which was the case for 50% of the TV coverage. Online news portals also highlighted the event and the broader themes of climate change and ecology (interpreted as environmental protection). As previously mentioned, each media organization has a dedicated section for these topics. On Green Interia, both on the homepage and within individual articles, two counters were displayed: “CO2 emissions from entering the site” and “Temperature tipping point behind...”. Additionally, Onet and Wirtualna Polska, as part of a campaign organized by Greenpeace in collaboration with Polish media editors, featured an appeal and a counter titled “This is how much time we have to move away from coal” on their homepages. Moreover, WP and Interia showcased frames like “Time escapes, time to act” (2 November, WP) and “Green Thursdays” (11 November, Interia), accompanying news on environmental issues.

The presentation of COP26 in media coverage

In the study, two frames – the “worst-case scenario” and the solutions frame – were utilized to analyze how journalists presented information. The “worst-case scenario” frame was used in 44% of TV news and 14% of online news. In these, authors depicted climate change-related events and problems negatively, such as environmental disasters, and focused on pessimistic future scenarios, often attributing these phenomena to excessive greenhouse gas emissions, like carbon dioxide. In contrast, the solutions frame appeared in 6% of both TV and online news. This frame was most common in publications referencing the conference’s agreements on reducing methane emissions or halting deforestation, highlighting the potential positive effects of these decisions.

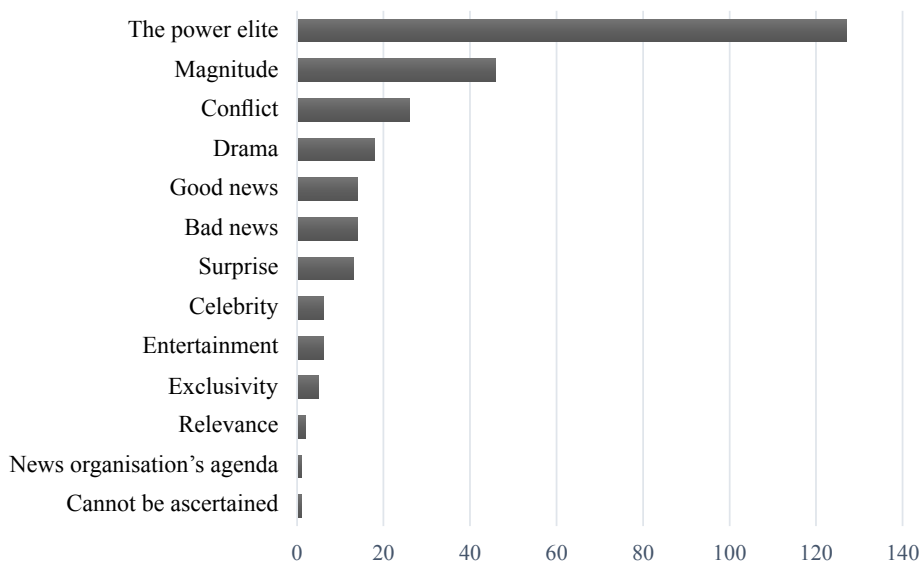
The codebook also considered the characteristics of the news to assess their media value (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neil, 2016). However, three characteristics from the news values theory were not included in this study: shareability, audio-visuals, and follow-up. The first, related to online media’s shareability, was widely available on Interia, Onet, and Wirtualna Polska, with almost all analyzed news items (except two) featuring this option. The presence of audio-visuals, the second characteristic, is inherent to both television and internet portals due to their nature. The last characteristic, the continuation of previous events, was omitted as the study focused on a single event.

In both television and online media, the most frequently observed features were the power elite, magnitude, and conflict. This emphasis is closely linked to the political nature of the climate conference, which was attended by delegations from around the world, often led by prominent figures such as heads of state, prime ministers, and ministers. Notable attendees included Elizabeth II, who participated remotely, Prince Charles, Joe Biden, and Boris Johnson. Poland was represented by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. The feature highlighting the involvement of the power elite was evident in 87% of television coverage and 84% of online news.



Graph 1. Features appearing in TV coverage of COP26 broadcast from 31 October to 12 November 2021 on TVP1, TVN, and Polsat.

Source: own study.



Graph 2. Features appearing in COP26 news published between 31 October and 12 November 2021 on Interia, Onet, and Wirtualna Polska (WP).

Source: own study.

Second in significance was the feature of scale. This aspect can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it pertains to the sheer number of attendees at the conference, encompassing both members of state delegations and activists protesting in the streets of Glasgow. Secondly, journalists, in their coverage of COP26, contextualized the event and its underlying cause – climate change. Their reports not only defined the phenomenon but also cited examples of its impacts, including environmental disasters. These examples spanned both past incidents and potential future events linked to rising global temperatures and their effects on various elements of the global ecosystem. Consequently, journalists conveyed the extent of populations affected historically and the potential risks to even more people should the situation deteriorate. The magnitude feature was identified in 87% of the TV news and 30% of the online news.

The presence of the latter feature, conflict, was connected to the previously mentioned protests in the streets of Glasgow. Conflicts also emerged during the official segment of the conference, stemming from disagreements among delegations regarding the decisions to be made. These included setting a specific date by which countries, categorized by their economic status, would transition away from coal. Additionally, the absence of certain leaders, like Vladimir Putin, at the conference in Glasgow, contributed to these conflicts. The feature of “conflict” was identified in 56% of TV coverage and 17% of online news.

Conclusions

The 26th UN Climate Conference stood out as a particularly significant event, not only due to its multifaceted nature (encompassing political and social dimensions) but also because of the increasingly evident and severe impacts of climate change, which the conference aimed to address. Both traditional and online media extensively covered the event’s proceedings and the outcomes of the participants’ deliberations. The research presented in this article, examining the portrayal of COP26 by six Polish media outlets, provided insights into the three research questions set out in the introduction.

The first question concerned the scale of COP26’s media coverage. During the event, the selected media outlets published 167 news related to COP26, accounting for 4% of all television news and 1% of online news. This might suggest that the media and journalists did not prioritize the conference highly. However, it’s noteworthy that the climate summit had to vie for media attention with other nationally relevant events, such as protests against anti-abortion laws and the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Significantly, five of the six media outlets analyzed classified their COP26 news as “important,” and all of them highlighted the event’s significance, either through the presence of television journalists in Glasgow (TVP1, TVN, Polsat) or through coverage of a Greenpeace-organized action (WP, Onet).

The second point addresses the media value of the conference. The most frequently depicted features in media coverage were the power elite, the magnitude, and the conflict. These features were prominent in both television and online news. These features were prominent in both television and online news. It is important to note that a substantial 42% of the analyzed content was published in the first three days of the conference (between 31 October and 2 November), coinciding with the attendance of high-profile authority figures.

The third research question explored how COP26 was framed in media coverage. For this analysis, two frames were constructed: the “worst-case scenario” and the solutions frame. The ‘most-case scenario’ frame was more dominant, with the news primarily focusing on the negative aspects of climate change. This coverage notably emphasized the increasing occurrence of environmental disasters and the associated risks, such as loss of human and animal life and

ecosystem destruction. In contrast, the solutions frame was associated with the positive outcomes expected from the conference's decisions, for example, agreements on reducing methane emissions.

Considering the percentage of COP26-related news alone, one might conclude that the conference did not attract significant media interest. However, the media outlets under study did emphasize its importance, evident through actions like deploying TV journalists from each of the three news programs and the involvement of online portals in the Greenpeace campaign. The media coverage provided audiences with information not only about the decisions made in Glasgow but also about the broader issue of climate change, including its consequences like the rising frequency of environmental disasters.

COP26 was labeled the "last chance" summit, yet it did not result in decisive actions to halt climate change, as indicated by the conflicts among delegates and between the public and the power elite (evidenced by activist protests). Consequently, future editions of the conference have been scheduled, including COP27 in Egypt in November 2022.

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