

# From Protest to Criminal Disruption

## A Diachronic Investigation into the Framing of Climate Activism in the UK

**Gloria Cappelli**

University of Pisa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2047-2596>

Email: [gloria.cappelli@unipi.it](mailto:gloria.cappelli@unipi.it)

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### Abstract

This study investigates how climate activism has been represented in two major British newspapers, *The Guardian* (2015-2023) and *The Telegraph* (2020-2023). Drawing on a purpose-built corpus of over 1.4 million words and employing a corpus-based discourse analytic approach, the research explores diachronic shifts and cross-newspaper differences in the portrayal of activist groups *Extinction Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil*. The analysis focuses on the linguistic framing of activists in building the narratives surrounding climate action. Results reveal that *The Guardian*'s discourse has evolved from event-based reporting towards a more activist-centred and solidarity-driven narrative, increasingly linking climate activism to social justice issues and broadening its evaluative framing to include both supportive and more critical views. *The Telegraph*, instead, primarily frames activism in terms of disruption, legality, and public order concerns, without much emphasis on the activists' social or ideological motivations. Word Sketch analyses of the terms *activist(s)* and *protester(s)* further confirm the different evaluative patterns and orientations of the two publications. The trends observed point to the need for further critical investigation of the framing of activists in the media and of its role in polarising public opinion, influencing the debate on policies and defining the role of protest in democratic societies.

## 1. Introduction

The protests of activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil have received growing attention over the past few years, sparking debate over the complex balance between the need for climate action and worries about public disruption (Scheuch et al. 2024; de Moor et al. 2020; Feinberg, Willer and Kovacheff 2020; Painter and Gavin 2016). Extinction Rebellion was founded in the UK in 2018 and is best known for its large-scale, non-violent acts of civil disobedience designed to push governments to acknowledge and act on the climate emergency. Just Stop Oil, established in 2022, emerged from the same activist context. However, it originally had a more specific focus: the immediate halt to new fossil fuel projects. Both groups have become emblematic of climate activism in the UK as well as of the current debate over the

legitimacy and limits of protest, combining high visibility with increasingly controversial tactics. For this reason, they offer a valuable lens through which to explore how media discuss activism over time, thus shaping how these movements and their initiatives are perceived, whether as legitimate forms of socio-political engagement or as a challenge to public order (Chinn, Hart and Soroka 2020).

Media framing can also influence policy-making responses (Fisher, Berglund and Davis 2023). As Entman explains, framing is the linguistic selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality that guide readers' interpretations of social actors and events (1993, 52). This is particularly visible in newspaper discourse, where editorial choices can impact how narratives develop. Journalists select which events to highlight, what language to use in portraying them, and which perspectives to prioritise (Mutz and Soss 1997). Depending on their editorial orientation, they may present activists as brave advocates for environmental justice or disruptors of everyone's daily life (Chinn, Hart and Soroka 2020). Investigating these portrayals and their evolution can provide valuable insights into the relationship between media narratives and public perception of current affairs. This study explores how climate activism has been represented in two major British newspapers between January 2015 and April 2023: *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. These outlets were selected for their contrasting political orientation: *The Guardian* tends to support progressive social movements, while *The Telegraph* generally aligns with more conservative views (Filmer and Vignozzi 2025).

In recent years, research has focused on the nature of protests, discussing their rationale and effectiveness (Fisher and Nasrin 2020, 2021; Vu et al. 2021; de Moor et al. 2020). This study examines the linguistic characterisation of activists, protesters and their actions to identify trends and changes in their portrayal, and verify whether they have been framed as a force for change or agents of disruption. Using a corpus-based discourse analytic approach, it draws from a dataset compiled specifically for this analysis, containing over 1.4 million words from articles published online between 2015 and 2023.

By analysing linguistic patterns and changes in lexical choices over time, this study aims to answer three research questions:

- How has the discourse around activism evolved in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*?
- How have the two newspapers differed in their portrayal of activism?
- How have the terms *activist(s)* and *protester(s)* been framed linguistically?

Section 2 presents an overview of previous studies on the representation of activism in the news. Section 3 discusses the methodology used, and Section 4 addresses the research questions by discussing corpus data. Section 5 offers some concluding remarks on the limitations of the analysis and perspectives for further research.

## 2. Literature review

Climate activism has been explored from multiple angles, with studies examining the ways it is framed across traditional and social media (Vu et al. 2021), who activists are and how they are represented (Fisher and Nasrin 2020, 2021; de Moor et al. 2020), and the communication strategies employed by social movements (de Moor et al. 2020). More recently, scholars have noted a shift in climate discourse, with increasing emphasis on the political and economic dimensions of climate change rather than just environmental concerns (Molder et al. 2022; Stecula and Merkley 2019).

Digital platforms have become crucial for climate activists to mobilise support, shape narratives, and challenge dominant discourses (de Moor et al. 2020). Studies have explored how activists and organisations design messages to engage the public and influence policy (Molder et al. 2022), and by examining climate activism representation, they have identified “moral” and “motivational framing” as key strategies used by activists to shape their public image (Vu et al. 2021). For instance, research on Greta Thunberg’s Instagram activity (Molder et al. 2022) shows how “moral” and “hopeful” framing fosters public engagement. NGOs’ messaging on Facebook (Vu et al. 2021) uses “diagnostic framing”, highlighting the problems associated with climate change, and “prognostic framing”, focusing on possible solutions. However, “motivational framing”, essential for encouraging public action, appears to be underutilised. This gap has led Vu et al. (2021) to conclude that, while climate activism is more visible, its representation still leans towards problem identification rather than action.

Differences have also been observed in framing in different parts of the world. Vu et al. (2021) found that NGOs from developed countries were more likely to promote individual political participation as a strategy. In contrast, those from developing countries tended to focus on climate impacts. This suggests that communication strategies and framing adapt to local political and economic contexts and that local framing could affect public engagement and policy-making differently.

Molder et al. (2022) found that discussions about climate activism on social media have become highly political, focusing on policymakers. By emphasising collective responsibility and examples of successful action, activists can prompt actual change. This is in line with broader trends in media coverage, where climate activism is increasingly tied to discussions about national economic policies, energy markets, and global negotiations rather than being framed as a purely “grassroots” movement (Chinn, Hart and Soroka 2020; Stecula and Merkley 2019). Focusing on US news coverage of climate change over 25 years, Stecula and Merkley (2019) have identified such a shift towards economic and political narratives, which they claim is gradually transforming the discussion into a policy debate rather than an environmental crisis.

The framing of climate activism is adapting accordingly, making it a more contested topic (Stecula and Merkley 2019).

Social media have shifted power dynamics between activists and traditional outlets. The outlets no longer have near-total control over information dissemination and public discourse shaping (Scheuch et al. 2024). Nevertheless, news coverage still plays a central role in constructing movements' narratives (Scheuch et al. 2024; Amenta et al. 2019; 2017), even though research suggests that only a small portion of activism receives media attention. Large-scale analyses of news coverage across multiple countries have revealed that, while activism draws media attention to climate issues, protests alone are unlikely to dominate the broader climate discussion (Hase et al. 2021). Even when covered, activists' initiatives are subject to selective reporting (Smith et al. 2001; McCarthy, McPhail and Smith 1996).

It is widely recognised that news coverage of climate protests can directly influence public opinion (Kenward and Brick 2024): positive coverage will likely result in greater pro-environmental action, whereas negative framing will discourage public support. Scheuch et al. (2024) report on some experimental studies highlighting the complex interaction between visibility and public perception, known as the "activist's dilemma" (Feinberg, Willer and Kovacheff 2020). This dilemma concerns radical protest tactics and their tendency to attract media attention while simultaneously alienating the public, which might eventually reduce support for the movement (Caren, Andrews and Lu 2020). Entities like Extinction Rebellion (henceforth XR) and Just Stop Oil (henceforth JSO) will likely experience this dilemma because of their large-scale, disruptive actions.

Scheuch et al. (2024) have hypothesised that some of XR's recent, more moderated initiatives (e.g., the "We Quit" statement) might have been implemented to exploit the so-called "radical flank effect", a concept describing how the presence of more radical elements within a movement can shape the public perception of its more moderate factions (Simpson, Willer and Feinberg 2022). In other words, activists might have tried to benefit from a new perceived moderate stance to obtain a more relevant position in the policymaking panorama (Hutter and Vliegthart 2018; Wouters and Walgrave 2017). In conclusion, since different outlets emphasise different aspects of climate activism, often shaping narratives to match their political and ideological positions (Scheuch et al. 2024; Amenta et al. 2019; 2017; Corrigall-Brown 2016), understanding how specific initiatives and the actors involved are presented in the media can help understand how public opinion is shaped and contribute to the academic debate on the complex relationship between activism, media representation, and socio-political impact.

### 3. Methodology

The analysis is based on a purpose-built corpus, CLIMOVAC, with 1,454,832 words from articles published between January 2015 and April 2023. Opinion and news articles from the digital editions of the newspapers were collected through NexisUni and manually revised to avoid duplicates and remove metadata. The selection criteria for inclusion were strictly based on the presence of references to the two emblematic climate activist groups Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. This allowed for a focused investigation of how the media have represented actors and actions associated with organised climate activism.

More specifically, the comparisons were carried out through keyword analyses. Analysing keywords provides a way to operationalise framing in corpus-assisted discourse studies. In line with Entman's (1993) view of framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of reality, recurring keywords are taken to indicate which social actors, processes, and evaluative stances are made prominent in news discourse.

The corpus was queried using SketchEngine<sup>1</sup> (Kilgariff et al. 2014). It was first subdivided by year into subcorpora (e.g., Guardian 2015; Telegraph 2020) to allow for diachronic mapping. More specifically, to address the first research question, which focuses on diachronic variation within each newspaper, the top one hundred multi-word keywords were extracted from each annual subcorpus by contrasting it with the overall corpus of the same newspaper. For instance, Guardian 2019 was used as a focus corpus and compared against the entire Guardian subcorpus (2015-2023) as the reference corpus. This intra-source comparison was crucial for capturing year-specific lexical and framing strategies without relying on an external general corpus, which could have reduced the specificity of discursive patterns. A parallel procedure was followed for *The Telegraph*, although limited to the 2020-2023 time span due to data availability. This step allowed the identification of diachronic lexical trends.

To address the second research question, which aims to compare the framing of eco-activism in the two newspapers, the fifty top keywords for each publication were extracted by setting each newspaper subcorpus as the focus corpus and using the other as the reference corpus. This cross-source keyword comparison focused only on articles published in the period 2020-2023. It provided insight into how the same activist events or actors were differently presented, presumably because of the outlet's editorial positioning and ideological alignment.

The selected keywords were checked to include only the occurrences that were part of the article's narrative voice, excluding instances in quotes to control attribution bias. This reduced the risk that the keywords reflected the voice and stance of quoted sources rather than those of the newspaper itself. The keywords selected through these procedures were manually refined

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sketchengine.eu](http://www.sketchengine.eu). Last visited 27/04/2025.

and grouped into eight semantic categories. This facilitated the identification of dominant frames, and their comparison offered insights into the evolving representational strategies over time and across newspapers.

The categories identified were “Arts and crafts” (e.g., *art gallery*), “General and abstract concepts” (e.g., *crisis*), “Government, politics and the law” (e.g., *police*), “Language and communication” (e.g., *newspapers*), “Money, commerce and industry” (e.g., *oil giant*), “Science and technology” (e.g., *paramotor*), “Social actors, actions, activism” (e.g., *protest*) and “World and the environment” (e.g., *carbon dioxide*). The keywords included in each category were further classified into semantic subsets, except those relative to “Arts and crafts”. “General and abstract concepts” were subdivided into negative, positive and neutral phrases and phrases denoting ideologies (e.g., *critical race theory*). “Government, politics and the law” keywords were classified into “Agreement” (e.g., *treaty*), “Attitude” (e.g., *extreme political stance*), “Crime” (e.g., *abuse of power*), “Events” (e.g., *Ukraine war*), “Financial” (e.g., *fuel excise*), “Forces” (e.g., *Metropolitan police*), “Judicial” (e.g., *conditional discharge*), “Intervention” (e.g., *evacuation warning*), “Legislation” (e.g., *new law*), “Policy” (e.g., *Saudi carbon capture plan*), “Projects” (e.g., *third runway*), “Public servants” (e.g., *Energy resources board*), “Rights” (e.g., *human rights*), “Rituals” (e.g., *gun salute*), and “Voting” (e.g., *election day*). The category “Language and communication” was found to include keywords denoting “Communication” (e.g., *reporting period*), “Rights” (e.g., *press freedom*), types of “Media”, “Entities” (e.g., *news organisations*) and “Participants” (e.g., *reporter*). “Money, commerce and industry” keywords were subdivided into “Business” (e.g., *oil company*), “Economics and financial” (e.g., *oil price*), and “Investments” (e.g., *major push for gas*). “Science and technology” included “Scientific research” and “Technological products” keywords, and “Social actors, actions, activism” keywords included “Activists” (e.g., *climate protester*), “Effects” (e.g., *serious disruption*), “Empathy” (e.g., *free school meals*), “Generic” (e.g., *peaceful protest*), “Ideology” (e.g., *radical feminism*), “Initiatives” (e.g., *obstruction of the highway*), “Initiatives – official” (e.g., *climate conference*), and “Participants” (e.g., *young people*). Finally, “Places”, “Pollution” (e.g., *gas emission*), “Processes” (e.g., *climate change*), “Living beings”, “Negative impact/damage” (e.g., *carbon footprint*) and “Substances” keywords built the set of terms and expressions referring to “World and the environment”.

The distribution of keywords across yearly subcorpora was calculated. This made it possible to identify prominent topics and framing strategies. Even when absolute frequencies were low, the patterns observed could offer valuable information on the development of the debate around climate activism and on changes in argumentative strategies and newspaper stance. Thus, for example, news discourse that was found to construct activism mainly in terms of policing and public order, foregrounding sanctions and disruption rather than motives or goals, was taken to represent criminalisation framing.

Four macro-categories were found to be especially relevant to the discussion: “General and abstract concepts”, “Government, politics and the law”, “Money, commerce and industry” and “Social actors, actions, activism”. Changes in these domains are discussed in detail in Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

Finally, the third research question targets the discursive framing of the keywords *activist(s)* and *protester(s)*. These agentive terms were analysed through the Word Sketch function to investigate their most frequent word association patterns and trace how each media outlet portrayed activists. This qualitative analysis is discussed in Section 4.3.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 RQ1: Diachronic change in the representation of activism

#### 4.1.1 The Guardian

The distribution of keywords between 2015 and 2023 reveals patterns that reflect changes in terminology and shifts in thematic and argumentative focus, evaluative stance, and broader ideological positioning. These shifts are significant even when absolute frequencies remain relatively low, as they highlight recurring discursive frames and emerging trends in public debate within the specialised corpus that support the interpretation of diachronic change in framing. Table 1 summarises the diachronic changes in the distribution of the keyword categories.

Semantic sets	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Arts and crafts	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%
General and abstract concepts	0%	0%	12%	19%	8%	12%	5%	2%	11%
Government and politics	0%	33%	24%	4%	29%	18%	26%	28%	30%
Language and communication	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	5%	8%	2%	0%
Money, commerce, industry	50%	33%	28%	4%	6%	18%	5%	48%	20%
Science and technology	0%	0%	4%	4%	0%	1%	1%	0%	4%
Social actors, actions, activism	0%	0%	8%	54%	45%	34%	45%	11%	28%
World and environment	50%	33%	20%	15%	10%	12%	5%	9%	7%

**Tab. 1:** Diachronic distribution of keyword semantic sets in *The Guardian*

The data show that in 2015 and 2016, *The Guardian*’s coverage focused primarily on political and economic aspects of the climate crisis. From 2018 onwards, however, there is a noticeable shift towards the actions and identities of activists themselves. This trend continues through to 2022, when economic considerations increase, probably because that was a year marked by rising inflation and growing socioeconomic instability. Factors such as the global youth-led

climate movement *Fridays for Future* (2018), extreme climate events, and the *25th Anniversary Statement on the State of the Global Climate*, which highlighted record sea level rise and high temperatures, may explain these changes.

In the earlier subcorpora (2015-2018), focus was predominantly on events, and keywords highlighted initiatives and actions (e.g., references to London bridges, climate talks, and Fashion Week). These positioned climate activism within a broader sociopolitical landscape, foregrounding the events rather than those who enacted them. From 2018 onwards, however, there is a lexical and thematic shift towards activists as agents. Terms such as *activist*, *protester*, *climate striker*, and *Extinction Rebellion member* begin to surface more prominently. This transition is mirrored in the rise of the “Social actors, actions, activism” category, which peaks in 2018 (54%) and remains highly salient through 2019-2021, featuring less prominently in 2022 (11%). This might be explained by the emergence of “competing” news narratives (e.g., the economic crisis) or shifting editorial priorities. In 2023, the category received more attention (28%), reflecting renewed public interest in disruptive tactics and activists’ visibility. Overall, this shows a change in reporting focus from protest events to the individuals and groups behind them, their roles, identities, and affiliations, which suggests a growing interest in the human dimension of activism and a recognition of climate activists as key social actors.

A closer look at the internal distribution of keywords within the “Social actors, actions, activism” category between 2017 and 2023 confirms this change (cf. Table 2). Earlier years in the dataset were excluded from this analysis due to the absence of relevant keywords in this category.

Sub-categories	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Activists	50%	14%	42%	62%	43%	27%	31%
Effects	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Empathy	0%	21%	8%	9%	0%	36%	8%
Generic	0%	14%	22%	3%	17%	19%	15%
Ideology	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	15%
Initiatives	0%	44%	22%	14%	23%	9%	23%
Initiatives – official	50%	7%	0%	0%	3%	9%	0%
Participants	0%	0%	4%	9%	14%	0%	8%

**Tab. 2:** Semantic distribution of the “Social actors, action, activism” keywords

The distribution across subcategories reveals a greater emphasis on the activists themselves. Over time, *The Guardian* appears less concerned with describing what activists do and more invested in discussing who they are, their affiliations, roles, and identities (cf. examples 1 and 2):



- (1) “[...] thousands of activists blocked five London bridges, glued themselves to public buildings and disrupted traffic with ‘swarming’ protests that led to dozens of arrests.” (2018)
- (2) “Speaking to the Guardian, one of the authors of the letter, which Extinction Rebellion members wrote with decades of experience of the advertising industry, said the group was [...]” (2019)

This development coincides with a growing presence of keywords associated with the “Empathy” domain (e.g., *future generations*, *young people* [2018], *people of colour* [2019], *minority groups* [2020], *transgender woman* [2021], *jobseekers*, *care workers*, *Aboriginal tent embassy* [2022], *improved community* [2023]), reflecting the tendency to link activism to broader social issues and marginalised communities, as illustrated in (3):

- (3) “[...] just transition that prioritises the most vulnerable and indigenous sovereignty [and] establishes reparations and remediation led by and for black people, indigenous people, people of colour and poor communities for years of environmental injustice” (2019)

At the same time, the use of abstract and normative language increased, as reflected in the “Generic” concepts subcategory (e.g., *campaign of civil disobedience* [2018], *radical action*, *mass civil disobedience*, *autumn uprising*, *non-violent direct action* [2019], *action plan* [2020], *peaceful protest*, *disruptive action* [2021], *scare campaign* [2022], *public disruption*, *culture war* [2023]), which often denotes normative or ethical frameworks. This points to a parallel discursive shift towards values, principles, and systemic critiques accompanying the portrayal of climate protest. In other words, activism starts being represented not merely as a reaction to environmental concerns, but as part of a broader, justice-oriented movement that intersects with issues of race, class, gender, and global inequality. This suggests that climate activism in *The Guardian*’s discourse becomes increasingly associated with solidarity-based frameworks, representing activists as advocates for the environment, systemic change, and the rights of vulnerable populations.

The analysis of the keywords directly referring to “Activists”, “Initiatives”, and “Generic” also highlights the emergence of more intense evaluative language from 2019 onwards. Thus, keywords such as *oil protester* (2017), *campaign group* (2018), *climate striker*, *environmental protester* (2019), as well as positive terms like *rights activist* (2021) and *non-violent defendant* (2023), appear alongside *extremist group*, *crime group*, *leftwing terrorism* (2020), *radical climate*

*activist* (2023) in the “Activists” category. *Climate talks* (2017), *open letter* (2018), and *climate strike* (2019) are replaced in the list of the most salient keywords referring to “Initiatives” by multi-word units such as *blocking private jet*, *damaging painting* (2021), and *disrupted proceedings* (2023). “Generic” concepts such as *campaign of civil disobedience* (2018), *non-violent direct action* (2019), and *peaceful protest* (2021) give way to *radical action*, *mass civil disobedience*, *autumn uprising* (2019), *disruptive action* (2021), *scare campaign* (2022), *public disruption*, and even *culture war* (2023).

This diversification of lexical framing corresponds to increased entries under the “Government and politics” category, which remains steadily high from 2016 onwards and reaches 30% in 2023. More specifically, from 2019 onwards, there is a noticeable increase in keywords associated with law enforcement (e.g., *police officer*, *public order* [2019], *counter terrorism police*, *national security* [2020], *defence forces* [2022], *investigation team* [2023]), crime (e.g., *criminal damage*, *violent crime* [2019], *illegal activity* [2020], *alleged attack* [2023]), and judicial processes (e.g., *jail term*, *conditional discharge* [2019], *legal action* [2020], *freed on bail* [2021], *rule of the law* [2022]), which co-occur with references to activist groups, suggesting a discursive move towards criminalisation and securitisation of protest activity.

The trend might reflect some changes in policy or growing concern about disruption. In *The Guardian*, these keywords often appear in nuanced or critical contexts, possibly revealing an effort to balance supporting activists and reporting on the institutional reactions to civil disobedience. The consistent presence of “Government and politics” keywords throughout the period and their overlap with security and legal issues further support the interpretation of a shift in discourse depicting activism as increasingly intertwined with questions of state authority, legal accountability, and public order.

Nevertheless, at the same time, in line with solidarity-based frameworks, keywords such as *civil rights*, *proportional response* (2022), and *human rights* (2023) also emerged in the most recent years represented in the corpus. This indicates a growing discursive polarisation in how activism is framed, reflecting the broader societal debates over the legitimacy, morality, and consequences of disruptive protest actions found in the literature (cf. Section 2). This lexical diversification does not suggest a uniformly negative shift but rather signals a broadening of evaluative space, within which activism is discussed as both admirable and controversial, legitimate and radical.

Another significant development seems to occur in 2022, when the “Money, commerce, industry” category grows dramatically (48%), following a previous low in the 2018-2021 period. Keywords such as *poverty line*, *cost of living*, *disadvantaged urban areas*, and *energy crisis* (2022) suggest that climate activism became increasingly embedded within the discourse of economic hardship and social inequality, and was being reframed accordingly. This semantic

shift reflects a new portrayal of the climate protest as part of a broader economic justice movement, in which the environmental crisis is inseparable from struggles and systemic disparities.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether the changes observed were statistically significant. The results confirmed significant differences across years for the categories “Social actors, actions, activism”, “Government and politics”, and “Money, commerce, industry” ( $p < .05$ ). *The Guardian*’s evolving discourse should, therefore, not be seen as the result of random fluctuation; taken together, the keyword analyses provide evidence that the newspaper’s coverage of climate activism has undergone a process of discursive reconfiguration over time. It began as event-focused reporting and has evolved into a narrative that blends activism with reflections on political legitimacy, economic vulnerability, and intersectional justice. This reflects the evolving role of activist groups in shaping public and institutional responses to the climate emergency.

#### 4.1.2 The Telegraph

The analysis of keyword distributions across semantic categories in *The Telegraph* subcorpora from 2020 to 2023 reveals both consistencies and subtle discursive shifts in the newspaper’s framing of climate activism. While the overall time span is more limited than that of *The Guardian* due to data availability in the NexisUni database, this four-year period still captures changes in the media response to Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion activities. It includes the aftermath of XR’s early visibility, the intensification of JSO’s actions, and their intersection with broader national debates about law, public order, and energy security. Table 3 shows the distribution of the eight semantic sets over time.

Semantic sets	2020	2021	2022	2023
Arts and crafts	0%	1%	5%	5%
General and abstract concepts	5%	3%	3%	3%
Government and politics	18%	35%	28%	18%
Language and communication	11%	5%	2%	12%
Money, commerce, industry	13%	9%	16%	3%
Science and technology	6%	10%	5%	0%
Social actors, actions, activism	42%	30%	37%	53%
World and environment	5%	7%	4%	6%

**Tab. 3:** Diachronic distribution of keyword semantic sets in *The Telegraph*

As in *The Guardian*, the various semantic categories represented fluctuated. *The Telegraph* shows less variability (probably because of the more limited time span). “Social actors, actions, activism” and “Government and politics” are the most consistently represented categories. The “Money, commerce, industry” category features less prominently than in the other newspaper.

Throughout the period, “Government and politics” is the most prominent category (cf. examples 4 and 5), peaking at 35% in 2021 and remaining relatively high (28% in 2022; 18% in 2020 and 2023). This category includes references to policing (e.g., *senior police officer* [2020], *metropolitan police* [2021], *security guard* [2022]), judicial actions (e.g., *spared jail* [2020], *court ruling* [2021], *contempt of court* [2022]), interventions (e.g., *dynamic risk assessment* [2021], *protest removal* [2022]), and crime (e.g., *aggravated trespass*, *violent crime* [2020], *new offence* [2021], *put life in danger*, *hate crime* [2022], *criminal damage* [2023]).

- (4) “[...] Supreme Court ruling encourages climate change group to ‘invite anyone’ to join civil disobedience” (2021)
- (5) “The hallmark of a free society is the right to legitimate protest, but how can a protest be deemed to be legitimate if it puts lives at risk?”

The salience of this category points to a framing of climate activism that emphasises state response, legality, and public order, representing activists not as “civic agents” but as individuals undergoing criminal investigation or needing to be regulated and controlled.

A closer look at the internal distribution of keywords within this category over time supports this observation. The most prominent subcategory across all four years, “Forces”, accounted for 28% of government-related keywords in 2020, 37% in 2021, and 43% in 2023 (cf. example 6). This steady growth shows a sustained focus on policing as the primary perspective to narrate activism.

- (6) “A senior police officer has called for fuel companies to hire more private security as they struggle to cope with protesters.” (2022)

“Judicial” keywords are also consistently present, making up between 17% and 22% each year, while the “Crime” subcategory was highly represented in 2020 (22%) and, although in a lower percentage, remained present in 2023 (14%). In contrast, subcategories potentially indicating a more engaged or participatory framing, such as “Policy”, “Legislation”, “Agreements”, or “Rights”, were either absent or minimally represented. These trends align with moments of heightened protest visibility and political backlash, reinforcing a “law-and-order” presentation

of climate activism that frames it in terms of disruption, control, and legal sanction rather than negotiation or legitimacy. Mentions of “Public Servants” increased over time (11% in 2020 to 29% in 2023) but did not correspond to a growth in policy-related framing. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that they were likely used to reinforce the description of the role of officials in enforcement or institutional representation rather than a form of participatory governance. These findings suggest that *The Telegraph* has not presented activism as part of the democratic dialogue, but rather as a public order problem requiring management by the State.

A complementary trend is observable in the distribution of keywords within the “Social actors, actions, activism” category. Between 2020 and 2023, there is a clear shift in focus from protest initiatives to the activists themselves. In 2020, “Activist” and “Initiative” keywords were nearly balanced (32% and 27%, respectively), but by 2023, keywords referring to activists rose to 47%, while those denoting initiatives decreased to 26%. In addition, keywords denoting official initiatives (e.g., *petitions*, *formal campaigns*) appeared only in 2021 (7%) and were absent in other years, which indicates scarce interest in institutionalised forms of protest. To some extent, this shift reflects the pattern observed in *The Guardian*. In *The Telegraph*, however, this change does not match a more sympathetic portrayal of the groups. The growing attention to activists may reflect the newspaper’s interest in profiling and criticising protesters as “social types” by emphasising their disruptive behaviour or the lack of legitimacy of their initiatives. Moreover, the “Empathy” category disappeared after 2022 (from 19% in 2020 to 0% in 2023), which might confirm the newspaper’s choice to avoid connections between climate activism and vulnerable communities or broader social issues.

Keywords referring to “Money, commerce, and industry” featured in 2020 (13%; e.g., *oil price*, *green bond*) and 2022 (16%; e.g., *cost of living crisis*, *economic growth*), both years marked by public concern over economic and energy supply issues. However, a qualitative assessment of the collocational profile of these terms shows that they occurred in texts discussing specific events (cf. example 7), alongside some “Crime” keywords (e.g., *printing blockades* and *blocking roads*), and “Language and communication” keywords (e.g., *newspaper print plant*, *freedom of speech*, *free speech*).

- (7) “The action was timed to coincide with the energy price cap rise, which will mean bills increase by 54 per cent amid a cost of living crisis exacerbated by the war in Ukraine [...]”

This suggests that such representations are episodic and often reactive to specific protest actions (e.g., the September 2020 road blockade outside the Newsprinters printing works in

Broxbourne), and that *The Telegraph* framed climate activism primarily in terms of its consequences, particularly its impact on infrastructures, media distribution and mobility.

It is also possible that the “Language and communication” keywords reflect increased attention to the debate about activists’ media representation, free speech, and messaging, particularly in response to public criticism of protest visibility and its media portrayal. Keywords belonging to the “General and abstract concepts” category (e.g., *existential threat* [2020], *culture war* [2021], *daily life* [2022], *climate crisis* [2023]) remain few (3-5%) across all years, indicating a limited use of “value-laden” or ideological discourse. In any case, these categories remain secondary, and their presence might show that *The Telegraph* engaged with the broader discourse surrounding activism only occasionally, when it intersected with questions of legitimacy and press freedom.

#### 4.2 RQ2: Differences in the portrayal of climate activism in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* between 2020 and 2023

The diachronic analysis in the previous sections has already highlighted that *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* offer different discursive representations of climate activism. That these two newspapers might propose at least partially contrasting portrayals is not, in itself, unexpected, given their divergent political and editorial orientations. What is interesting, however, is to understand how and to what extent the two newspapers differ, having observed a shift towards a positive uptake of activism in *The Guardian*. The top fifty multi-word keywords extracted from the CLIMOVAC corpus using the two subcorpora alternately as focus and reference corpus were categorised and compared in their global distribution to answer this question. Given the difference in the time frames represented in the dataset, the comparison was limited to keywords obtained from articles published in 2020-2023. This section discusses the most salient domains, represented in Figure 1. Overall, *The Guardian* seems to frame activism by referring to the public sphere, including economic and social aspects, whereas *The Telegraph* focuses more narrowly on the events themselves.

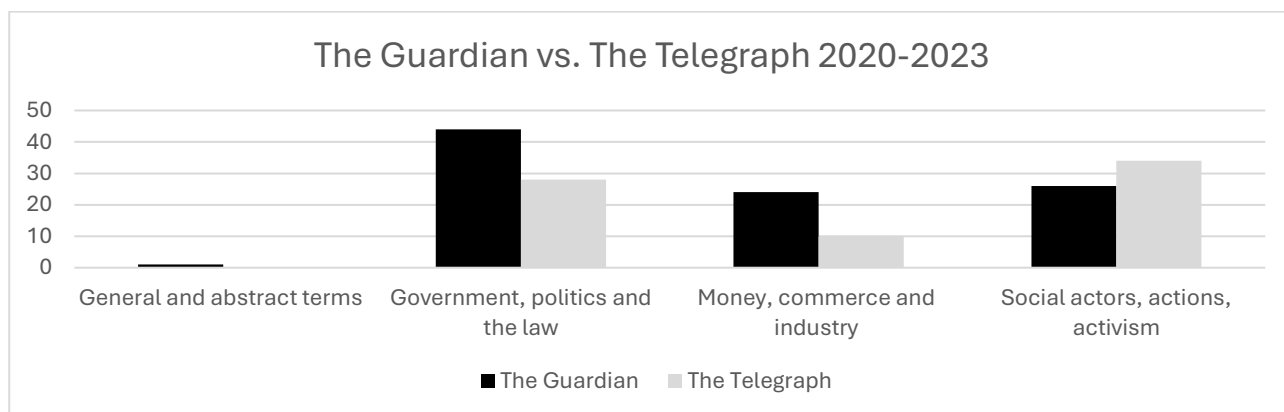
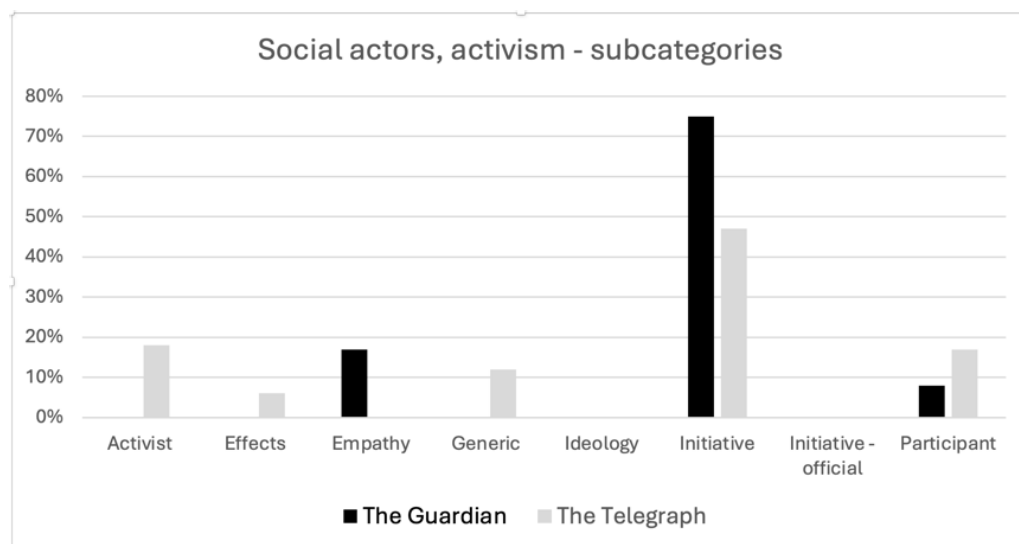


Fig. 1: Domains represented in the two newspapers

The distribution of distinctive keywords within the “Social actors, actions, activism” category shows that the two newspapers differ in how they refer to activists and their initiatives (cf. Figure 2).



**Fig. 2:** Distribution of keywords within the “Social actors, actions, activism” category

Comparing the two subcorpora Guardian 2020-2023 and Telegraph 2020-2023, keywords such as *First Nations people*, *Indigenous Australian*, *gallery protest*, *Parliament House*, and *Fashion Week* were found to feature in the former, whereas the latter included keywords such as *left-wing activist*, *blockade of newspaper printing*, *blocking busy motorway*, *London marathon*, *orange powder*, and *support for road users*. This indicates that the two newspapers focused on different events and aspects of the protests.

A parallel analysis of the keywords in the “Government, politics and the law” category shows striking differences. No crime-related keywords feature in the list obtained from the Guardian 2020-2023 subcorpus (cf. Figure 3), whereas most keywords refer to public servants (e.g., *King Charles III*, *Liberal Party*, *opposition leader*), general concepts such as civil society, and judicial issues (e.g., *federal court*, *evacuation order*). In contrast, keywords related to crime (e.g., *unlawful protest*), policing (e.g., *police*, *full force*), and judicial aspects (e.g., *court judgment*, *legal loophole*) are more frequent in *The Telegraph*, alongside keywords related to interventions (e.g., *protest removal*).

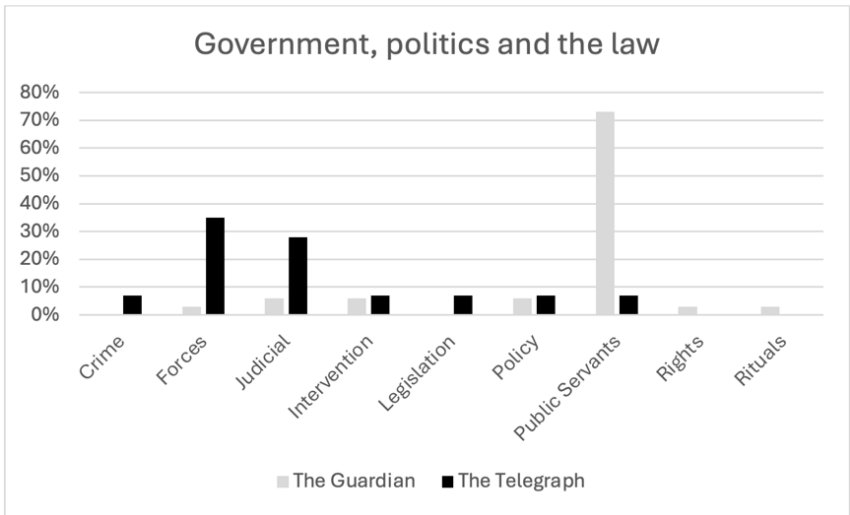


Fig. 3: Distribution of keywords within the “Government, politics and the law” category

The analysis was expanded to explore the most frequent keywords in the two macro-categories for each year. This step confirmed the hypothesis that the two newspapers seem to focus on different facets of climate activism, both in the events they highlight and how they frame them (see Table 4).

The Guardian	The Telegraph
<i>climate strike, non-violent group, green recovery, climate policy, ecological emergency, climate breakdown (2020), climate action, disruptive action, journalist killed by police, pre-emptive arrest, climate justice (2021), leftwing terrorism, climate movement, high court, evacuation order, civil resistance, deprived urban areas, living pressure (2022), direct action, radical climate protest, climate justice, public order bill, culture war, serious harm, mental health (2023)</i>	<i>green movement, veteran activist, blockade, wartime, violent crime, spared jail, police power (2020), climate change protester, serious disruption, wilful obstruction, road users, new offence, police force, risk assessment, jail sentence, culture war, ton of rubbish (2021), climate activist, climate protester, serious disruption, blocking roads, oil protest, criminal damage, public order, police officer, human right (2022), civil resistance, protest group, rights activists, young people, show of solidarity, criminal damage (2023)</i>

Tab. 4: Examples of keywords in the two newspapers (2020–2023)

*The Guardian*’s keywords continue to present climate activism predominantly as embedded in broader social justice movements and frame it with empathy, legitimacy, and purpose. It should, however, be noted that the signs of a more critical rhetoric in later years also emerge in these data, with terms such as *leftwing terrorism*, *radical protest*, and *public order bill* (cf. example 8). This might mirror events featuring increasingly disruptive tactics, which were harder to fully support and resulted in the Public Order Act (2023), granting the police more powers to prevent and respond to protests. Some of these sparked public outrage (e.g., Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* protest, sporting event disruption, protest in the UK Parliament), possibly reducing the general support previously offered to activism.



- (8) “[...] But does disruptive protest remain the only way forward?” (2022)

This change might have surfaced in the newspaper’s otherwise generally sympathetic editorial stance. More recent data and further qualitative investigation would be necessary to validate these hypotheses.

The picture returned by *The Telegraph*’s keywords, on the other hand, consistently depicts activists as predominantly disruptive individuals rather than socially engaged agents. There is little evidence of an empathetic framing: empathy-related keywords disappear entirely in 2023. Disruption, crime, and enforcement constitute the vast majority of the keyword set, especially in the earlier years. However, in 2023, the list also includes terms like *civil resistance*, *rights activists*, *young people*, and *show of solidarity*, which might point to a slight shift in tone to acknowledge activist identities and motivations.

A qualitative analysis of the keywords’ occurrences was conducted to verify the observed trends. This revealed that, whereas all the keywords in *The Guardian* occurred in the narrative body of the text and matched the hypothesised function, the supposedly “supportive” items in *The Telegraph* occurred, in fact, either in indirect quotations of activists’ press releases (and should therefore be excluded) or referred to individuals other than activists, as in (9), where solidarity is directed towards the police and against climate protests:

- (9) [...] Prof Leslie Thomas KC, who specialises in claims against the police. Prof Thomas said that while he intends to sign in a show of solidarity [toward the police], this does not mean he will refuse cases he is assigned.

To conclude, the analysis presented in this section confirms the hypothesis that, up to 2023, the core framing strategies in the two newspapers differed, and that, although both newspapers discussed the same protest movements, they selected, interpreted and represented events and actors through different lenses. *The Guardian* tended to include activism within broader debates on rights, equity, and social responsibility. *The Telegraph* tackled the issue mainly from the point of view of public order as opposed to disruption and the need for institutional control. These patterns emerge as differences in editorial stance and can be interpreted as pointers to a different view of activism. The relevance of the findings does not lie solely in the acknowledgement of a contrast in tone or emphasis between two news sources of different ideological orientations but in the fact that these newspapers give voice to two opposing views of social action. *The Guardian* seems to accept activism as a form of engagement to be debated (sometimes critically) and understood, whereas *The Telegraph* seems to express the concerns of those who see it as a form of behaviour that is legitimate only as long as it remains within the

limits of legality and needs to be regulated and possibly reconducted to consolidated norms of conduct. However, signs of evolution can also be observed in *The Guardian*, where the portrayal of protests might reflect the broader context of political polarisation.

### 4.3 RQ3: Differences in the word association profile of protester(s) and activist(s)

To confirm the hypotheses discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, the word association profiles of two crucial keywords, *protester(s)* and *activist(s)*, were analysed (i.e., addressing the third research question). The analysis includes both collocational and dependency-based relations, obtained through the WordSketch tool in SketchEngine. This function extracts significant collocations and syntactic relations (e.g., subject-verb, verb-object, modifier-noun) based on statistical measures such as logDice, allowing the examination of how activists and protesters are represented as agents or patients in the discourse. This helps identify the list of words most systematically linked to the focus terms and substantiate evaluative claims through verb patterns and grammatical roles, thus uncovering deeper framing patterns beyond isolated examples.

WordSketch results were manually verified to ensure valid usage patterns. Cases of associations resulting from inaccurate parsing or other issues with data processing were excluded. To further understand *activist(s)* and *protester(s)* profiling, co-occurrences were also analysed with phrases that, although not statistically significant, contributed to their representation.

#### 4.3.1 Activist(s)

In *The Guardian* subcorpus, the keyword *activist(s)* is typically modified by “affiliation labels” (e.g., *Extinction Rebellion*, *Greenpeace*) and “cause-related adjectives” (e.g., *climate change*, *environmental*, *animal right*, *human right* activist). Other modifiers or complements show positive evaluation (e.g., *dedicated*, *full-time*, *an example*, *on the right side of history*, *viewed as angelic saviours*, *not organised criminals*) or age (e.g., *youth*, *young*, *teenage*). In *The Telegraph*, although the categories are similar, there are fewer modifiers, and they seem to offer a different perspective. Affiliation and cause associations are less diverse than in *The Guardian* and feature items such as *left-wing* and *militant*. Moreover, the term *activist(s)* is associated with age-related modifiers such as *grown-up* and *veteran* rather than with youth, and with mostly critical expressions such as *fabulously posh*, *scared stiff*, *daft*, *extreme*, *in search of a cause*, *entitled brats with no idea about normal life*, *white*, *middle class*, *privileged*, *high on their own self-righteousness*, and *confident*. Interesting associations in the pattern “activist(s) and x” were found in *The Guardian* (e.g., *scientists*, *faith* / *racial justice* / *anti-poverty* / *Indigenous groups*) but not in *The Telegraph*.

In both newspapers, activists are subjects of verbs that denote commitment to a cause, engagement, or the impact of their actions. In *The Guardian*, activists *vow*, *stand up for something* (commitment), *stage a protest*, *throw + object*, *pour paint*, *glue themselves*, *take the streets*, *occupy*, *blockade* (engagement), *target*, *disrupt*, *cause chaos / a stir / harm*, *affect people's business* (impact), and *claim something* (report). In *The Telegraph*, they *stage a (violent) protest*, *demand*, *urge* (engagement), *block*, *bring to a standstill*, *bring misery* (impact), and *lose touch with reality* (other). Moreover, they are mostly the object of verbs referring to legal actions (e.g., *accuse*, *prosecute*, *remove*, *jail*, *detain*, *take away*). In *The Guardian*, they are also presented as victims of extreme reactions (e.g., *being targeted / killed*, *facing repression*).

These associations frame activism in *The Guardian* as a brave but risky activity, and activists are portrayed not only as engaged agents but also as potential victims of disproportionate institutional response. Associations with other socially active groups further reinforce the observation proposed in 4.1 and 4.2, namely that activism is presented within broader social and environmental justice movements. In contrast, in *The Telegraph*, activists are more often associated with critical elements. There is emphasis on privileged conditions and irrational or excessive behaviour; hence, within this framing, activism is presented almost as a disruptive and illegitimate threat to public order rather than civic engagement. Overall, this more qualitative exploration appears to confirm the differences in framing strategies identified in the diachronic and comparative analyses.

#### 4.3.2 Protester(s)

The association profile of *protester(s)* shows similar patterns, with some distinct nuances. In *The Guardian* subcorpus, *protester(s)* is commonly modified by affiliation or cause-related adjectives such as *climate*, *eco*, and *anti-HS2*. References to age are also found, with terms like *young* or age-specific mentions, and occasionally to disability (e.g., *disabled*). Adjectives or *to be + complement* constructions tend to provide positive or neutral evaluation: protesters are described as *peaceful*, *non-violent*, *locals from all walks of life*, or even *brave*. Some derogatory expressions occasionally appear, but a closer inspection shows that they are embedded in attributed speech that the article criticises, as in (10) below, and the overall narrative remains empathetic:

- (10) “[...] protesters have been described variously as “ferals”, “ratbags”, “idiots”, “twerps”, “selfish”, “conceited”, “misguided”, “ideological zealots”, “unemployed thugs” and more, “annoying people to get on TV”, to be “used as speed bumps” [...]”.

In *The Telegraph*, the term *protester(s)* is modified by a more negative set of adjectives, similarly to *activist(s)*. Modifiers and complements include *selfish*, *extremist*, *disruptive nuisance*, *frightfully posh*, and *ill-informed*.

Verb patterns are again similar to those observed for *activist(s)*. In *The Guardian*, *protester(s)* are subjects of verbs that denote commitment (e.g., *vow*), engagement (e.g., *block*, *smash*), and impact (e.g., *target*, *cause disruption* or *minor damage*, *interrupt*). They are also presented as facing consequences (e.g., *arrest*, *charge*, *acquit*). In *The Telegraph*, *protester(s)* are associated with more obviously negative or criminal actions (e.g., *willing to break the law*, *criminals*). Verbs include *deface*, *vandalise*, *attack*, *endanger lives*, *cause gridlock*, and *bring chaos*. Protesters are described as leaving problems behind (e.g., *left 120 tons of rubbish*, *blockheads causing more pollution*), failing to understand the consequences of their actions (e.g., *peculiarly parochial in their view of carbon emissions*), and imposing suffering on the broader public (e.g., *ruining people's lives and the economy*). They are objects of verbs linked to law enforcement (e.g., *accuse*, *arrest*, *charge*, *remove*). However, the most recent articles also include more positive terms (e.g., *doing nothing wrong*, *not dangerous*).

#### 4.3.3 Summing up

The word association profiles for *activist(s)* and *protester(s)* further confirm the differences observed in the diachronic and comparative analyses. More specifically, looking at the collocations with both terms, *The Guardian* frames climate activism primarily as a form of civic engagement associated with a broader and more general struggle for social justice. Even when disruptive actions are described, they tend to be connected to collective objectives and described with positive or neutral evaluative vocabulary. In contrast, *The Telegraph* portrays activists and protesters mainly through frames of disruption, illegality, irrationality, and social irresponsibility. These differences in the semantic environments surrounding *activist(s)* and *protester(s)* thus reinforce the observation that the two newspapers offer two very different pictures of climate activism, likely the consequence of profoundly diverging ideological stances which emerge even at the micro-linguistic level.

### 5. Concluding remarks

This study has investigated how climate activism was represented in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* up to 2023. It documents differences that consistently emerge across lexical and syntactic patterns, reflecting deeper ideological divisions in the newspapers' editorial lines and their reactions to climate activism-related events. Over time, *The Guardian* moved away from reporting protests as isolated events and began to focus more on the people behind them, their

motivations, identities, and social concerns. Activism was increasingly linked to wider issues of justice and equality. *The Telegraph* maintained its focus on disruption, legality, and public order, often framing protests as challenges to everyday life rather than expressions of civic engagement. When the two newspapers were compared, data showed that *The Guardian* generally treated activism as a legitimate and sometimes admirable form of participation. At the same time, *The Telegraph* portrayed it as something that needed control or regulation. This contrast also emerged in the collocational profile of the key terms *activist(s)* and *protester(s)*. In *The Guardian*, they tended to occur with positive or empathetic words, whereas in *The Telegraph*, they were often linked to negative or disciplinary expressions.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The two subcorpora are different in size and time span, and although efforts were made to control for attribution bias (e.g., excluding quotations), some overlap may still affect the analysis. Moreover, this study adopted a primarily quantitative and corpus-based approach, but further research could undoubtedly benefit from a more detailed qualitative analysis of collocational patterns. It could also include the investigation of direct and indirect quotations (e.g., adopting frameworks such as van Leeuwen's [1995] theory of *Social Actor Representation*).

Future research could moreover study a broader range of news outlets, including social media, to verify whether similar patterns are confirmed across different sources. Finally, investigating the reception and effects of media framing on readers' attitudes towards climate activism would further complement this study and advance our understanding of the complex relationship between media discourse, public perception, and social change and their interdependence.

## Bionote

Gloria Cappelli is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Pisa. Her research focuses on semantics, pragmatics, and corpus-based discourse studies. She has investigated how discursive choices shape meaning and perspectives across genres, including the representation of dyslexia in news discourse and of disabilities in adventure tourism promotion. Her broader interests include multimodal communication, English for Specific Purposes, and the development of reading comprehension skills in foreign language learning.

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