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Framing the 2026 European Heatwave as a Climate Change Crisis: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract
The 2026 European heatwave emerged as one of the most severe climate-related events in recent years, intensifying public debate on climate change, environmental sustainability, and societal resilience. As news headlines constitute the first point of engagement with audiences, they play a significant role in shaping public understanding of environmental crises through selective framing and linguistic representation. This study examines how newspaper headlines construct the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs textual analysis as the research method, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the analytical approach, Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model as the analytical model, and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory as the theoretical framework. The dataset comprises purposively selected headlines from two international newspapers reporting the 2026 European heatwave. The analysis reveals four dominant media frames: Climate Change Attribution, Government Response and Preparedness, Public Health, and Environmental Crisis. Critical examination of the textual, discursive, and social dimensions demonstrates that the headlines extend beyond reporting meteorological events by constructing extreme heat as a multidimensional crisis with profound environmental, social, and institutional implications. The findings further indicate that newspapers employ strategic lexical choices, metaphorical expressions, evidential markers, and evaluative language to legitimize scientific knowledge, assign responsibility, and shape public perceptions of climate risks. By integrating discourse analysis with framing theory, this study contributes to scholarship on climate communication by demonstrating how media discourse influences public understanding of environmental change, governance,

and climate adaptation. The study also highlights the importance of responsible environmental journalism in promoting informed public engagement and policy responses to increasingly frequent climate-related disasters.

Keywords: Climate Change; Critical Discourse Analysis; Newspaper Headlines; Media Framing; European Heatwave; Environmental Communication; Textual Analysis

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1. Introduction

Climate change has become one of the most significant environmental challenges of the twenty-first century, increasing the frequency, intensity, and duration of extreme weather events worldwide. Among these events, heatwaves have emerged as one of the most visible manifestations of global warming, posing serious risks to ecosystems, public health, infrastructure, and economic stability (IPCC, 2023). Europe has experienced a marked rise in prolonged, intense heatwaves over the past decade, with the 2026 European heatwave among the most severe climate-related events in recent history. Record-breaking temperatures, widespread wildfires, glacier retreat, disruptions to energy and transport systems, and thousands of heat-related deaths highlighted the growing vulnerability of European societies to a warming climate (World Meteorological Organization [WMO], 2026; Copernicus Climate Change Service [C3S], 2026).

Beyond their environmental consequences, climate-related disasters are socially constructed through media discourse. News media do not merely report events; they actively shape public understanding by selecting, emphasizing, and interpreting particular aspects of reality (Entman, 1993). Through framing processes, newspapers define problems, assign responsibility, evaluate consequences, and suggest appropriate responses, thereby influencing how audiences perceive environmental crises and climate-related risks. Headlines are especially significant because they provide the first and often most influential interpretation of a news event. Their concise linguistic structure, lexical choices,

metaphors, and evaluative expressions guide readers' perceptions before they engage with the complete news report (Bell, 1991; Van Dijk, 1988; Richardson, 2007).

Recent scholarship demonstrates that climate journalism has increasingly shifted from treating heatwaves as isolated meteorological events to representing them as consequences of anthropogenic climate change (Painter et al., 2023; Wang & Downey, 2026). Nevertheless, media organizations differ in how they frame climate-related events, depending on their editorial priorities, institutional practices, and intended audiences (Schäfer & Painter, 2021). Some newspapers emphasize scientific attribution, while others foreground governance, public health, environmental degradation, or socio-economic consequences. These differences influence public understanding of climate change, institutional accountability, and support for climate adaptation policies.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an effective approach for examining how language constructs these representations. Rather than viewing discourse as a neutral reflection of reality, CDA investigates how linguistic choices reproduce ideologies, power relations, and institutional perspectives (Fairclough, 1992). When combined with Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), CDA enables a deeper understanding of how newspaper headlines construct climate change as a social, political, and environmental issue. This integrated perspective facilitates the examination of both the linguistic features of headlines and the broader meanings they generate within contemporary climate discourse.

Against this background, the present study investigates how newspaper headlines frame the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study examines selected headlines from The Guardian and Reuters, drawing on Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory. The study

explores how linguistic and framing strategies construct the heatwave as an environmental crisis while shaping public understanding of climate change, institutional responsibility, and the wider social transformations associated with increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

1.1. Problem Statement

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-induced heatwaves have transformed extreme heat from a seasonal weather phenomenon into a major environmental and social challenge. The 2026 European heatwave demonstrated the far-reaching consequences of climate change by affecting public health, ecosystems, infrastructure, labour conditions, and government preparedness. As public understanding of such crises is largely mediated through news coverage, newspaper headlines play a crucial role in shaping how climate-related events are interpreted, attributed, and evaluated.

Although previous studies have examined climate change reporting and media framing, relatively few have focused specifically on how newspaper headlines discursively construct extreme heat as a climate crisis. Moreover, existing research has largely examined framing and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) independently, with limited attempts to integrate Entman's (1993) Framing Theory and Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model within a single analytical framework. This gap restricts a comprehensive understanding of how linguistic choices, framing strategies, and ideological representations collectively influence public perceptions of climate change and its wider social and environmental implications.

To address this gap, the present study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine newspaper headlines published by The Guardian and Reuters during the 2026 European heatwave. Using Critical Discourse Analysis through Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory, the study

investigates how media discourse constructs the heatwave as a climate change crisis and how these representations shape public understanding of environmental change, institutional responsibility, and broader societal responses to climate-related disasters.

1.2. Research Objectives

The study aims to examine how newspaper headlines construct the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis through linguistic and framing strategies. Specifically, the objectives are:

- To examine how The Guardian and Reuters frame the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis through newspaper headlines.
- To analyze the linguistic and discursive strategies used in newspaper headlines to construct representations of climate change, environmental risk, and institutional responsibility.
- To explore how media framing shapes public understanding of the social and environmental impacts of the 2026 European heatwave.

1.3. Research Questions

1) How do The Guardian and Reuters frame the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis through newspaper headlines?
2) What linguistic and discursive strategies are employed in newspaper headlines to construct representations of climate change, environmental risk, and institutional responsibility?
3) How does media framing influence public understanding of the social and environmental impacts of the 2026 European heatwave?

2. Literature Review

Climate change communication has become a major area of inquiry within media and discourse studies because news organizations play a central role in shaping public understanding of environmental issues. Rather than functioning as neutral

channels of information, newspapers actively construct reality by selecting, emphasizing, and interpreting particular aspects of environmental events (Entman, 1993; Boykoff, 2011). Through these discursive processes, climate change is represented not only as a scientific phenomenon but also as a social, political, economic, and moral issue. Consequently, media representations influence how audiences perceive environmental risks, assign responsibility, and evaluate policy responses.

Framing Theory provides an important perspective for understanding these representational processes. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicative text to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and recommend solutions. Within climate journalism, framing determines whether extreme weather events are interpreted as isolated natural occurrences, consequences of anthropogenic climate change, governance failures, public health emergencies, or socio-economic crises (Nisbet, 2009). The selection of particular frames therefore influences both public understanding and policy debates surrounding climate change.

Among different news elements, headlines occupy a distinctive position because they provide readers with the first interpretation of an event. Van Dijk (1988) describes headlines as the macrostructure of news discourse, summarizing the most newsworthy information while directing readers toward a preferred interpretation. Their linguistic economy requires careful lexical selection, metaphorical expressions, grammatical structures, and evaluative language that foreground certain meanings while suppressing others (Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007). Consequently, headlines represent an important site for examining how environmental crises are discursively constructed.

Recent research demonstrates that media coverage increasingly attributes extreme weather events to anthropogenic climate change. Painter et al. (2023) found that contemporary climate journalism relies more heavily on scientific evidence than earlier reporting, reflecting growing acceptance of climate attribution science. Similarly, Wang and Downey (2026) reported that newspaper coverage of heatwaves has shifted from treating extreme heat as an isolated meteorological event to framing it as evidence of long-term climate change. These developments indicate an important transformation in environmental journalism, where scientific evidence increasingly informs public narratives about climate-related disasters.

Although scientific attribution has become more prominent, newspapers continue to differ in their framing strategies because of editorial priorities, institutional practices, and target audiences. Schäfer and Painter (2021) argue that climate narratives vary across media organizations according to national contexts, journalistic conventions, and ideological orientations. Some newspapers emphasize scientific certainty and environmental degradation, whereas others foreground governance, economic consequences, institutional accountability, or public health. These differences demonstrate that media discourse not only reports environmental events but also shapes public perceptions of responsibility, vulnerability, and adaptation.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a valuable analytical approach for examining these representational differences. Fairclough (1992) conceptualizes discourse as a social practice through which language both reflects and constructs social reality. His Three-Dimensional Model examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice, enabling researchers to investigate linguistic choices alongside the institutional and ideological contexts in which they are produced. Rather than focusing solely on textual features, CDA

explains how discourse legitimizes particular forms of knowledge, reproduces power relations, and shapes public understanding of social issues.

Despite substantial scholarship on climate communication, several research gaps remain. Much of the existing literature examines complete news reports or general media coverage rather than newspaper headlines, even though headlines often have the greatest influence on audience interpretation. Moreover, previous studies have frequently employed either Framing Theory or Critical Discourse Analysis independently, with limited attempts to integrate Entman's (1993) Framing Theory with Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, relatively little research has examined how headlines construct the 2026 European heatwave as both an environmental crisis and a catalyst for broader social and institutional change.

To address these gaps, the present study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine newspaper headlines published by The Guardian and Reuters during the 2026 European heatwave. By integrating Entman's Framing Theory with Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how linguistic choices, framing strategies, and ideological representations shape public understanding of climate change, environmental risk, institutional responsibility, and the wider social consequences of extreme heat.

3. Research Methodology

This section presents the research methodology.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how newspaper headlines construct the 2026 European heatwave as a climate change crisis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore meanings, representations, and ideological perspectives embedded within media discourse rather than measure variables quantitatively. By examining linguistic choices and

framing strategies, the study aims to understand how newspaper headlines shape public perceptions of climate change, environmental risk, institutional responsibility, and the broader social implications of extreme heat.

3.2. Research Method

The study employs qualitative textual analysis as its research method. Textual analysis enables researchers to examine how language, vocabulary, grammatical structures, metaphors, and rhetorical devices produce meaning within media texts. Since newspaper headlines are carefully constructed linguistic units designed to summarize events and influence audience interpretation, textual analysis provides an appropriate method for investigating how climate-related events are represented and communicated. The method facilitates a systematic examination of linguistic patterns that construct the European heatwave as an environmental and societal crisis.

3.3. Data Selection

The dataset comprises ten newspaper headlines, with five headlines purposively selected from each of The Guardian and Reuters. These newspapers were selected for their international readership, credibility in reporting on environmental issues, and contrasting editorial styles. The Guardian is widely recognized for its interpretative and climate-focused journalism, whereas Reuters emphasizes concise, evidence-based reporting. Purposive sampling was employed to select headlines that explicitly addressed the 2026 European heatwave and reflected diverse representations of climate change, environmental impacts, public health, and institutional responses.

3.4. Analytical Approach

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its analytical approach. CDA examines how discourse constructs social reality and how language reflects, reinforces, or challenges ideological assumptions and power relations (Fairclough,

1992). Rather than treating newspaper headlines as neutral descriptions of events, CDA investigates how linguistic choices influence public understanding of climate change, environmental responsibility, and institutional accountability. The approach enables the study to explore both explicit and implicit meanings embedded within media discourse.

3.5. Analytical Model

The analysis is guided by Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which examines discourse through three interconnected dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice.

3.5.1.Text

The textual dimension focuses on the linguistic characteristics of newspaper headlines, including vocabulary, grammatical structures, modality, metaphors, evaluation, and rhetorical devices. Examining these textual features reveals how specific lexical choices construct the heatwave as an environmental crisis and shape readers' initial interpretations.

3.5.2.Discursive Practice

Discursive practice examines the processes through which headlines are produced, distributed, and interpreted. This dimension considers editorial practices, journalistic conventions, and the integration of scientific, political, and environmental discourses that influence how climate-related events are framed for public audiences.

3.5.3.Social Practice

The social practice dimension explores the broader social, political, and ideological contexts within which newspaper discourse operates. It examines how media representations influence public understanding of climate change, environmental governance, institutional responsibility, and the societal transformations associated with increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

Particular attention is given to the relationship between media discourse, climate adaptation, public awareness, and environmental policy.

3.6. Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by Entman's (1993) Framing Theory, which explains how media organizations shape audience perceptions by selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of reality. According to Entman (1993), framing involves defining problems, identifying causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting possible solutions. Within the context of climate journalism, framing determines whether extreme heat is represented as a natural weather event, evidence of anthropogenic climate change, a public health emergency, or a governance challenge. Integrating Framing Theory with Critical Discourse Analysis provides a comprehensive analytical framework for examining both the linguistic construction of newspaper headlines and the broader meanings they communicate regarding climate change, environmental risk, and societal resilience.

4. Analysis

The analysis examines how The Guardian and Reuters discursively construct the 2026 European heatwave through newspaper headlines. Employing Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis alongside Entman's (1993) Framing Theory, the study explores how linguistic choices, editorial practices, and broader socio-environmental contexts shape public understanding of climate change. Four dominant frames emerged from the analysis: Climate Change Attribution, Government Response and Preparedness, Public Health, and Environmental Crisis. Each frame demonstrates how media discourse extends beyond reporting weather events to construct narratives of environmental risk, institutional accountability, and societal adaptation.

4.1. Climate Change Attribution Frame

The Climate Change Attribution Frame explicitly connects the 2026 European heatwave with anthropogenic climate change. Rather than portraying extreme temperatures as isolated meteorological events, the selected headlines emphasize scientific evidence, causal relationships, and environmental responsibility. Through lexical choices, evidential markers, and evaluative language, the newspapers encourage readers to interpret the heatwave as a consequence of long-term climatic change rather than natural weather variability. This framing corresponds with the findings of the IPCC (2023), which conclude that human-induced climate change has significantly increased the frequency and intensity of extreme heat events worldwide.

4.1.1. The Guardian

Headline

“European heatwave is worst ever and impossible without climate crisis, scientists say” (Carrington, 2026).

4.1.1.1 Text

The headline employs highly evaluative language to establish both severity and causality. The superlative phrase "worst ever" positions the heatwave as an unprecedented climatic event, immediately conveying urgency and exceptional magnitude. More significantly, the expression "impossible without climate crisis" constructs a direct causal relationship between the heatwave and anthropogenic climate change. The lexical choice "climate crisis", rather than the more neutral phrase "climate change", intensifies the perception of an environmental emergency and encourages readers to interpret the event through an urgent ecological lens.

The attribution "scientists say" serves as an evidential marker, legitimizing the headline's claims through expert authority. While this strengthens credibility

and aligns the report with scientific consensus, it also privileges scientific discourse over alternative political or economic interpretations. Consequently, the headline not only informs readers but also guides them toward a particular understanding of the event by presenting climate attribution as an established scientific fact rather than an issue open to debate.

4.1.1.2 Discursive Practice

The headline reflects The Guardian's editorial commitment to environmental journalism, where scientific findings are integrated into public communication to promote climate awareness. The newspaper combines scientific discourse with environmental advocacy by replacing neutral terminology with the more value-laden expression "climate crisis." This editorial choice demonstrates how journalistic practices actively shape environmental narratives instead of merely transmitting scientific information.

From a framing perspective, the headline defines the heatwave as a consequence of human-induced climate change while implicitly assigning responsibility for environmental degradation. However, its strong emphasis on scientific certainty may reduce attention to broader political, economic, and institutional factors that also influence climate adaptation and mitigation. Thus, the headline simultaneously informs public understanding and promotes a particular ideological interpretation of environmental responsibility.

4.1.1.3 Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the headline contributes to normalizing climate change as an immediate societal challenge rather than a distant environmental concern. By explicitly attributing the heatwave to the climate crisis, the discourse encourages greater public acceptance of scientific evidence and strengthens expectations for climate action. This representation reflects broader social changes

in which environmental sustainability, disaster preparedness, and governmental accountability have become central public concerns.

The framing also aligns with recent findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023), which conclude that human activities have unequivocally intensified the occurrence of extreme heat events. Consequently, the headline reinforces a broader societal transition in which climate-related disasters are increasingly understood as structural consequences of global warming requiring long-term adaptation, policy reform, and collective environmental responsibility.

4.1.2. Reuters

Headline

"Europe's heatwave 'virtually impossible' without climate change, scientists say" (Reuters, 2026).

4.1.2.1 Text

Reuters employs a more restrained lexical style while maintaining a clear causal relationship between climate change and the heatwave. The expression "virtually impossible" reflects the cautious language typically associated with scientific attribution studies, conveying a high level of probability without overstating certainty. Unlike The Guardian, Reuters avoids emotionally charged vocabulary such as "climate crisis," thereby maintaining a more neutral journalistic tone. Nevertheless, the attribution "scientists say" again foregrounds expert authority and positions scientific evidence as the primary basis for interpreting the event.

4.1.2.2 Discursive Practice

Reuters follows its institutional practice of evidence-based journalism by allowing scientific attribution rather than editorial evaluation to shape audience interpretation. This approach reflects professional norms emphasizing objectivity, accuracy, and factual reporting. However, the apparent neutrality of the headline

should not be interpreted as the absence of framing. By selecting scientific attribution as the dominant narrative, Reuters privileges scientific discourse while marginalizing competing political or ideological perspectives on climate change.

4.1.2.3 Social Practice

The headline reinforces the growing social legitimacy of climate science in public discourse. Presenting the heatwave as "virtually impossible" without climate change encourages readers to recognize extreme heat as part of a broader pattern of environmental transformation rather than natural climatic variability. Such representations contribute to changing public attitudes toward climate adaptation, environmental policy, and institutional preparedness. They also support the wider societal shift from reactive disaster management toward long-term climate resilience and sustainable environmental governance.

4.2. Government Response and Preparedness Frame

The Government Response and Preparedness Frame represents the 2026 European heatwave as a governance challenge requiring institutional preparedness, policy intervention, and long-term climate adaptation. Rather than focusing solely on rising temperatures, the selected headlines emphasize governmental capacity, policy failures, and institutional responsibility in protecting communities from increasingly frequent climate-related disasters. This framing reflects the growing recognition that effective climate governance is essential for reducing vulnerability and enhancing societal resilience (IPCC, 2023).

4.2.1. The Guardian

Headline

"‘A sad inevitability’: after decades of climate warnings, why is Europe so unprepared for rising heat?" (The Guardian, 2026).

4.2.1.1 Text

The headline combines evaluative language with an interrogative structure to question Europe's preparedness for extreme heat. The phrase "a sad inevitability" conveys resignation, suggesting that the consequences of the heatwave were foreseeable because of years of scientific warnings. The temporal expression "after decades of climate warnings" establishes a historical perspective, emphasizing that governments possessed sufficient knowledge to prepare for worsening climate conditions. The rhetorical question "why is Europe so unprepared?" shifts attention from the environmental event itself to institutional accountability.

While the headline effectively highlights governance failures, its rhetorical structure also implicitly assumes that inadequate preparedness is the principal explanation for the crisis. This emphasis may simplify the complexity of climate adaptation, which also depends on economic resources, political priorities, public behaviour, and international cooperation.

4.2.1.2 Discursive Practice

The headline reflects The Guardian's interpretative style by integrating environmental reporting with political accountability. Rather than merely informing readers about the heatwave, the newspaper encourages critical evaluation of governmental performance. The rhetorical question invites readers to assess whether European institutions have responded adequately to repeated scientific warnings.

From a framing perspective, responsibility is constructed primarily as institutional rather than individual. However, this framing simultaneously foregrounds governmental shortcomings while giving comparatively less attention to structural inequalities, regional disparities, and variations in national climate policies across Europe. Consequently, the discourse promotes accountability but simplifies the diversity of policy contexts within different European states.

4.2.1.3 Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the headline reflects changing public expectations regarding climate governance. Climate adaptation is no longer presented as an optional environmental policy but as a fundamental governmental responsibility linked to public safety, urban planning, labour protection, and healthcare preparedness. The discourse contributes to broader social change by reinforcing demands for proactive climate policies instead of reactive emergency responses.

This representation is consistent with the IPCC (2023), which emphasizes that effective governance, early warning systems, and long-term adaptation planning are essential to reducing climate-related risks. The headline therefore positions governmental preparedness as a defining measure of institutional legitimacy within an era of accelerating climate change.

4.2.2 Reuters

Headline

"Net-zero champion Europe snared by climate change on its doorstep" (Reuters, 2026).

4.2.2.1 Text

Reuters employs metaphorical language while maintaining its characteristic factual tone. The phrase "net-zero champion" presents Europe as a global leader in climate policy, highlighting its international reputation for environmental commitment. In contrast, the metaphor "snared" suggests that Europe has become trapped by the very climate crisis it has sought to address. The expression "on its doorstep" reinforces immediacy by indicating that climate impacts are no longer distant or hypothetical but directly affecting European societies.

Although the metaphor effectively illustrates vulnerability, it also introduces an implicit contradiction between climate leadership and climate resilience. The headline encourages readers to question whether policy commitments alone are

sufficient when adaptation measures fail to keep pace with accelerating environmental change.

4.2.2.2 Discursive Practice

Reuters frames the heatwave through the contrast between environmental ambition and practical vulnerability. Rather than criticizing governments explicitly, the headline relies on juxtaposition to expose the limitations of existing climate policies. This reflects Reuters' preference for evidence-based reporting in which interpretation emerges from carefully selected linguistic contrasts rather than overt editorial evaluation.

The discourse also privileges policy performance as a central theme. While this framing highlights institutional responsibility, it pays less attention to social inequalities, vulnerable populations, and local adaptation efforts that significantly influence climate resilience.

4.2.2.3 Social Practice

At the social level, the headline illustrates an important transformation in public understanding of climate governance. Societies increasingly evaluate governments not only by their environmental commitments but also by their capacity to protect citizens from climate-related hazards. The discourse reflects a broader shift from symbolic climate leadership toward measurable adaptation outcomes.

Recent assessments by the World Meteorological Organization (2026) and the European Environment Agency indicate that rising temperatures are placing unprecedented pressure on infrastructure, public health systems, and emergency services across Europe. Within this context, Reuters presents the heatwave as evidence that climate resilience requires more than policy declarations; it demands sustained investment in adaptation, disaster preparedness, and resilient public infrastructure. Consequently, the headline contributes to an emerging discourse in

which effective governance is measured by a society's ability to withstand increasingly frequent climate extremes.

4.3. Public Health Frame

The Public Health Frame constructs the 2026 European heatwave as a significant health emergency rather than merely an environmental phenomenon. The selected headlines emphasize mortality, vulnerable populations, and the responsibility of governments to protect public health during extreme weather events. By foregrounding human consequences, the newspapers encourage readers to perceive climate change as an immediate threat to human life and healthcare systems rather than a distant environmental issue. This framing aligns with the World Health Organization (WHO, 2026), which identifies extreme heat as one of the leading climate-related health risks in Europe.

4.3.1. The Guardian

Headline

"Extreme heat grips Europe as UK hits new June record, France shuts down nuclear reactors, and deaths rise across continent" (The Guardian, 2026).

4.3.1.1 Text

The headline employs a multi-layered structure to illustrate the extensive consequences of the heatwave. The verb "grips" personifies extreme heat as an overpowering force affecting the entire continent, conveying persistence rather than a temporary weather event. The clause "UK hits new June record" introduces measurable climatic evidence, while "France shuts down nuclear reactors" expands the discussion beyond weather by highlighting disruptions to critical infrastructure. The concluding phrase "deaths rise across continent" shifts the emphasis to the human cost, transforming the heatwave into a public health emergency.

Although the headline effectively demonstrates the interconnected impacts of extreme heat, the concentration of multiple crises within a single statement may reduce attention to the distinct structural causes behind each consequence. The discourse therefore prioritizes the magnitude of the crisis over a detailed explanation of the factors contributing to these outcomes.

4.3.1.2 Discursive Practice

The headline reflects The Guardian's tendency to integrate environmental, infrastructural, and humanitarian perspectives within a single narrative. Rather than reporting isolated events, the newspaper constructs the heatwave as a systemic crisis affecting multiple sectors simultaneously. This editorial approach encourages readers to recognize the interconnected nature of climate change and its societal consequences.

From a critical perspective, however, the headline foregrounds immediate impacts while providing limited attention to long-term adaptation strategies or policy measures capable of reducing future risks. Consequently, the discourse effectively communicates urgency but leaves broader governance responses largely implicit.

4.3.1.3 Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the headline reflects changing public perceptions of climate change as a direct public health challenge. Rising mortality, pressure on healthcare services, and disruption of essential infrastructure demonstrate that climate-related disasters increasingly threaten everyday social functioning. The discourse contributes to growing public expectations that governments should strengthen healthcare preparedness, improve early warning systems, and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure.

These representations are consistent with WHO Europe (2026), which emphasizes that prolonged heat exposure disproportionately affects older adults,

children, individuals with chronic illnesses, and economically vulnerable populations. By connecting environmental change with human health outcomes, the headline reinforces the understanding that climate adaptation has become an essential component of public health policy.

4.3.2 Reuters

Headline

"Europe swelters under deadly 'Omega' heatwave, more records broken" (Reuters, 2026).

4.3.2.1 Text

Reuters employs concise yet powerful language to emphasize both the severity and scale of the event. The verb "swelters" vividly portrays widespread physical discomfort while maintaining an objective reporting style. The adjective "deadly" immediately foregrounds the life-threatening nature of the heatwave, whereas the phrase "'Omega' heatwave" identifies the event as a distinct climatic phenomenon. The final clause, "more records broken," reinforces the exceptional character of the event through measurable climatic evidence rather than emotional evaluation. Although Reuters maintains journalistic restraint, the repeated emphasis on record-breaking temperatures implicitly constructs the heatwave as evidence of an escalating climate trend. However, the headline stops short of explicitly attributing these conditions to anthropogenic climate change, thereby allowing readers to infer causality rather than directly asserting it.

4.3.2.2 Discursive Practice

Reuters follows its evidence-based reporting tradition by prioritizing observable events and measurable climatic indicators. The headline avoids overt editorial commentary while strategically selecting linguistic elements that communicate urgency through factual evidence. This approach reflects institutional norms favouring objectivity and credibility in climate reporting.

Nevertheless, apparent neutrality does not eliminate framing. By emphasizing mortality and unprecedented temperatures, Reuters constructs extreme heat primarily as a public health emergency. At the same time, limited attention is given to the socio-economic inequalities that influence exposure to heat-related illness, such as housing conditions, occupational risks, and unequal access to healthcare.

4.3.2.3 Social Practice

The discourse reflects an important societal shift in which extreme heat is increasingly recognized as a recurring public health crisis requiring long-term institutional responses rather than temporary emergency measures. Public awareness of heat-related illness, occupational safety, healthcare preparedness, and urban resilience has expanded significantly as heatwaves become more frequent across Europe.

According to the World Meteorological Organization (2026) and the World Health Organization (2026), rising temperatures are increasing heat-related mortality while placing substantial pressure on healthcare systems and emergency services. Within this context, Reuters reinforces the growing expectation that governments must integrate climate adaptation into public health planning, disaster preparedness, and urban development to reduce future climate-related health risks.

4.4. Environmental Crisis Frame

The Environmental Crisis Frame represents the 2026 European heatwave as a broader ecological disturbance affecting natural systems, biodiversity, and environmental stability. Unlike the Public Health Frame, which emphasizes human consequences, this frame focuses on the physical transformation of ecosystems through rising temperatures, glacier retreat, marine warming, and increased risks of climate-related hazards. Through environmental metaphors,

scientific references, and geographical representations, the selected headlines construct extreme heat as a manifestation of ongoing ecological change. This framing corresponds with climate assessments demonstrating that global warming is intensifying heat extremes and accelerating environmental degradation (IPCC, 2023).

4.4.1The Guardian

Headline

"UK waters hit with extreme heatwave as global sea temperatures reach record levels" (The Guardian, 2026).

4.4.1.1 Text

The headline constructs the heatwave as an environmental crisis by extending attention beyond human experiences toward marine ecosystems. The passive construction "UK waters hit" positions the natural environment as the affected entity, emphasizing ecological vulnerability rather than human inconvenience. The adjective "extreme" intensifies the severity of the event, while the phrase "global sea temperatures reach record levels" expands the geographical scope from a national issue to a worldwide environmental concern.

The use of "record levels" functions as an evidential marker, suggesting scientific measurement and reinforcing the credibility of the environmental claim. However, the headline's emphasis on temperature records may simplify the complexity of marine ecosystem disruption by focusing primarily on measurable changes while leaving less visible consequences, such as biodiversity loss and long-term ecological instability, less explicitly addressed.

4.4.1.2 Discursive Practice

The headline reflects The Guardian's tendency to connect local environmental events with global climate narratives. By linking UK waters with worldwide sea temperature records, the newspaper constructs the heatwave as part of a larger

pattern of anthropogenic environmental change rather than an isolated regional occurrence.

From a critical perspective, this framing effectively increases awareness of ecological vulnerability but also relies heavily on scientific authority to establish significance. While scientific evidence strengthens environmental reporting, it may limit discussion of political and economic factors responsible for ecological degradation, including fossil fuel dependence, industrial practices, and delayed climate action.

4.4.1.3 Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the headline contributes to a changing social understanding of climate change by demonstrating that extreme heat affects not only human communities but also natural systems that support ecological balance. The representation of warming seas encourages recognition of climate change as an interconnected crisis involving oceans, biodiversity, food systems, and human livelihoods.

This interpretation aligns with the IPCC (2023), which identifies rising ocean temperatures and ecosystem disruption as significant consequences of global warming. The headline therefore participates in a broader environmental discourse that encourages societies to reconsider their relationship with natural systems and prioritize ecological protection, sustainable resource management, and climate adaptation.

4.4.2.Reuters

Headline

"Swiss glaciers rapidly lose protective snow in punishing European heatwave" (Reuters, 2026).

4.4.2.1Text

Reuters frames environmental damage through the visual representation of glacier vulnerability. The adverb "rapidly" emphasizes the accelerating pace of ecological change, while the phrase "protective snow" highlights the role of natural systems in maintaining glacier stability. The adjective "punishing" personifies the heatwave as a destructive force, creating a sense of environmental threat without directly employing emotionally charged climate terminology.

The headline effectively communicates ecological loss through a specific environmental indicator: glacier retreat. However, by focusing on visible physical changes, it provides limited attention to the broader social consequences of glacier decline, including impacts on water availability, agriculture, tourism, and communities dependent on alpine ecosystems.

4.4.2.2 Discursive Practice

The headline reflects Reuters' evidence-oriented approach by focusing on an observable environmental transformation rather than explicitly assigning responsibility for climate change. The use of glacier conditions as evidence aligns with scientific reporting practices, where visible ecological indicators are used to communicate the consequences of rising temperatures.

Nevertheless, the absence of explicit climate attribution demonstrates how journalistic conventions influence environmental narratives. By presenting glacier loss as an event associated with a heatwave rather than directly connecting it to human-induced climate change, the headline leaves causal interpretation partially open to readers.

4.4.2.3 Social Practice

The discourse contributes to broader societal awareness that climate change produces long-term ecological consequences beyond immediate weather disruptions. Glacier retreat represents a significant environmental transformation

with implications for freshwater resources, mountain ecosystems, and regional economies.

According to climate assessments by the IPCC (2023), glacier loss is one of the clearest indicators of sustained global warming. By highlighting the rapid disappearance of protective snow cover, the headline encourages recognition that extreme heat events are connected to wider ecological transformations requiring international cooperation, environmental conservation, and long-term climate mitigation strategies.

4.5. Socio-Economic Impact Frame

The Socio-Economic Impact Frame portrays the 2026 European heatwave as a disruption extending beyond environmental degradation to affect public services, infrastructure, economic productivity, and everyday social life. Rather than focusing primarily on the causes of extreme heat, this frame highlights its consequences for energy systems, public events, labour, and essential services. Through these representations, the newspapers construct climate change as a challenge to societal resilience and sustainable development. This framing is consistent with the IPCC (2023), which identifies extreme heat as a significant threat to economic stability, infrastructure, and human well-being.

4.4.2.Reuters

Headline

"Heatwave disrupts Fourth of July events, strains power grids" (Reuters, 2026).

4.5.1.1 Text

The headline employs two complementary clauses to demonstrate the broad societal consequences of the heatwave. The verb "disrupts" highlights the interruption of routine social activities, while the reference to "Fourth of July events" makes the consequences immediate and relatable by linking the environmental crisis to a major public celebration. The second clause, "strains

power grids," shifts attention toward critical infrastructure, illustrating that extreme heat affects not only individuals but also the systems that sustain modern society.

The lexical choice "strains" is particularly significant because it suggests substantial pressure without implying complete institutional failure. This restrained wording reflects Reuters' objective reporting style while simultaneously communicating that existing infrastructure is approaching its operational limits. However, the headline provides limited insight into the structural causes of infrastructure vulnerability, including ageing energy systems, increasing electricity demand, and insufficient climate adaptation planning.

4.5.1.2 Discursive Practice

Reuters constructs the heatwave primarily through its observable socio-economic consequences rather than through explicit climate attribution. This reflects the agency's commitment to evidence-based journalism, where tangible disruptions provide the basis for public interpretation. By juxtaposing public celebrations with infrastructure stress, the headline demonstrates how climate change simultaneously affects cultural life and essential public services.

From a critical perspective, the discourse emphasizes immediate disruption but pays comparatively less attention to unequal socio-economic impacts. Vulnerable communities, low-income households, outdoor workers, and individuals lacking access to cooling facilities are largely absent from the narrative. Consequently, the framing risks presenting climate disruption as a universal experience while overlooking significant differences in social vulnerability.

4.5.1.3 Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the headline reflects a growing societal recognition that climate change threatens economic productivity and the continuity of essential

public services. Increasing electricity demand during heatwaves places unprecedented pressure on national energy systems, while disruptions to transportation, tourism, labour productivity, and public events demonstrate the extensive societal consequences of extreme weather.

According to the IPCC (2023), climate change is expected to increase economic losses through damage to infrastructure, reduced labour productivity, and greater pressure on public resources. Similarly, the World Meteorological Organization (2026) emphasizes that heatwaves increasingly affect energy security and urban infrastructure across Europe. Within this context, Reuters presents climate resilience as both an environmental and economic necessity, reinforcing expectations that governments invest in sustainable infrastructure, resilient energy systems, and long-term climate adaptation strategies.

4.5. Summary of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that The Guardian and Reuters employ distinct yet complementary framing strategies in representing the 2026 European heatwave. Across all four frames—Climate Change Attribution, Government Response and Preparedness, Public Health, and Environmental Crisis—the newspapers consistently move beyond describing meteorological conditions to construct the heatwave as a multidimensional crisis with environmental, political, social, and economic consequences.

The Climate Change Attribution Frame explicitly connects extreme heat with anthropogenic climate change, strengthening the legitimacy of scientific evidence while encouraging public acceptance of climate attribution. The Government Response and Preparedness Frame shifts attention from environmental conditions to institutional accountability, highlighting the growing expectation that governments should develop effective adaptation and disaster preparedness policies. The Public Health Frame emphasizes the direct

consequences of extreme heat for mortality, healthcare systems, and vulnerable populations, thereby presenting climate change as an immediate human security issue rather than a distant environmental concern. Finally, the Socio-Economic Impact Frame demonstrates how climate-related disasters disrupt public infrastructure, energy systems, and everyday social life, reinforcing the need for resilient economies and sustainable development.

Although The Guardian frequently adopts a more interpretative and advocacy-oriented style by explicitly linking environmental events to climate change and governmental responsibility, Reuters generally maintains a more restrained and evidence-based approach, relying on measurable observations and scientific findings. Nevertheless, both newspapers contribute to constructing climate change as a pressing societal challenge requiring coordinated policy responses and long-term environmental adaptation.

Overall, the findings support Fairclough's (1992) argument that discourse not only reflects social reality but also participates in constructing it. Likewise, they reinforce Entman's (1993) proposition that media framing shapes public understanding by selecting particular dimensions of complex events while backgrounding others. The newspaper headlines therefore function not merely as summaries of news events but as influential discursive practices that shape public perceptions of climate change, environmental responsibility, institutional accountability, and the social transformations associated with an increasingly warming world.

5. Discussion

This study examined how The Guardian and Reuters framed the 2026 European heatwave through newspaper headlines by integrating Qualitative Textual Analysis, Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory. The findings demonstrate that

newspaper headlines function as more than concise summaries of news events; they actively construct public understanding of climate change by emphasizing particular interpretations, assigning responsibility, and legitimizing specific responses. Across the four dominant frames—Climate Change Attribution, Government Response and Preparedness, Public Health, and Environmental Crisis—the newspapers consistently represented the heatwave as a multidimensional crisis with profound environmental, social, political, and economic implications.

The Climate Change Attribution Frame revealed that both newspapers explicitly linked the heatwave to anthropogenic climate change, although they adopted different discursive strategies. The Guardian employed stronger evaluative language, such as "climate crisis," encouraging readers to interpret the event as evidence of an escalating environmental emergency. Reuters, in contrast, relied on cautious scientific attribution using expressions such as "virtually impossible without climate change," reflecting its commitment to evidence-based journalism. These findings support Entman's (1993) argument that media framing shapes audience interpretation by selectively emphasizing causality and responsibility. They also correspond with Painter et al. (2023), who found that contemporary climate journalism increasingly relies on attribution science to explain extreme weather events rather than presenting them as isolated natural phenomena.

The Government Response and Preparedness Frame demonstrates that climate reporting increasingly evaluates governments according to their capacity to anticipate and manage climate-related risks. Rather than portraying extreme heat solely as an environmental issue, the headlines questioned institutional preparedness, policy effectiveness, and long-term adaptation planning. This finding extends previous research by Schäfer and Painter (2021), who argue that

climate journalism has evolved from reporting environmental events toward evaluating governance and policy responses. The findings also support the IPCC (2023), which emphasizes that effective governance, resilient infrastructure, and early warning systems are essential for reducing vulnerability to climate-related hazards.

The Public Health Frame further illustrates an important transformation in climate communication by positioning extreme heat as a direct threat to human well-being. Headlines emphasizing mortality, healthcare pressures, and vulnerable populations encourage audiences to recognize climate change as an immediate public health challenge rather than a distant environmental concern. This representation aligns with the World Health Organization (2026), which identifies heatwaves as one of the leading climate-related causes of illness and mortality across Europe. However, the analysis also demonstrates that newspaper coverage frequently foregrounds immediate health impacts while giving comparatively less attention to structural inequalities that increase vulnerability, including poverty, housing conditions, occupational exposure, and unequal access to healthcare. Consequently, media discourse successfully communicates urgency but only partially represents the complex social dimensions of climate vulnerability.

The Environmental Crisis Frame highlights how newspaper discourse increasingly extends beyond human-centred narratives to emphasize ecological transformation. Rising sea temperatures, glacier retreat, and ecosystem degradation are presented as measurable indicators of accelerating climate change. These findings are consistent with Copernicus Climate Change Service (2026) and the IPCC (2023), both of which identify environmental indicators such as ocean warming and glacier loss as clear evidence of long-term climatic change. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates that media coverage often prioritizes highly visible environmental impacts while giving comparatively less attention to slower

ecological processes, including biodiversity decline, soil degradation, and long-term ecosystem resilience. This demonstrates how journalistic selection influences public understanding by making certain environmental consequences more visible than others.

Across all four frames, the findings demonstrate that newspaper headlines participate in constructing broader social changes associated with climate change. Extreme heat is no longer represented as an exceptional weather event but as a recurring societal challenge requiring institutional preparedness, behavioural adaptation, and environmental resilience. Public expectations increasingly extend beyond emergency response toward comprehensive climate adaptation involving urban planning, healthcare preparedness, labour protection, sustainable infrastructure, and environmental governance. This transformation reflects Fairclough's (1992) argument that discourse both shapes and is shaped by wider social practices. The newspaper headlines therefore contribute to changing societal understandings of environmental responsibility and governmental accountability within an era of accelerating climate change.

The comparative analysis also reveals differences in editorial orientation between the two newspapers. The Guardian adopts a more interpretative approach by explicitly connecting environmental events with climate politics, institutional responsibility, and environmental advocacy. Reuters, meanwhile, maintains a more restrained reporting style, emphasizing scientific evidence and observable facts while minimizing explicit editorial evaluation. Despite these stylistic differences, both newspapers reinforce the scientific consensus that climate change is intensifying extreme heat events and emphasize the necessity of climate adaptation. Their differing approaches illustrate that journalistic objectivity and interpretative reporting represent alternative discursive strategies rather than fundamentally opposing understandings of climate change.

The study contributes to the growing literature on climate communication by integrating Qualitative Textual Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Framing Theory within a single analytical framework. While previous studies have frequently applied these perspectives independently, the present study demonstrates that their integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic choices, media framing, and broader ideological contexts collectively shape public interpretations of climate-related disasters. Moreover, by focusing specifically on newspaper headlines covering the 2026 European heatwave, the study extends existing scholarship beyond general climate reporting and highlights the influential role of headlines in constructing environmental knowledge, shaping public debate, and promoting societal awareness of climate change.

Overall, the findings indicate that newspaper headlines function as powerful communicative tools through which environmental crises are interpreted, institutional responsibilities are negotiated, and public expectations regarding climate action are constructed. As extreme weather events become increasingly frequent under global warming, responsible climate journalism will remain essential for promoting scientifically informed public discourse, encouraging evidence-based policymaking, and strengthening societal resilience to future climate-related challenges.

5.1. Conclusion

This study examined how The Guardian and Reuters represented the 2026 European heatwave through newspaper headlines by integrating Qualitative Textual Analysis, Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis, and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory. The findings demonstrate that newspaper headlines function not merely as summaries of news events but as influential discursive tools that shape public understanding of climate

change, environmental responsibility, institutional accountability, and societal resilience.

The analysis identified four dominant frames: Climate Change Attribution, Government Response and Preparedness, Public Health, and Environmental Crisis. Across these frames, both newspapers consistently portrayed the heatwave as a multidimensional crisis extending beyond meteorological conditions to encompass environmental degradation, governance challenges, healthcare pressures, and socio-economic disruption. Although The Guardian adopted a more interpretative and advocacy-oriented style while Reuters emphasized scientific evidence and factual reporting, both newspapers contributed to strengthening public recognition of climate change as an immediate societal concern requiring long-term adaptation and policy intervention.

The study further demonstrates that linguistic choices—including lexical selection, metaphors, evidential markers, modality, and evaluative expressions—play a significant role in constructing media representations of environmental crises. Through these linguistic strategies, headlines influence how audiences interpret climate-related events, assign responsibility, and evaluate institutional responses. The integration of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis with Entman's Framing Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how media discourse simultaneously constructs textual meaning, institutional narratives, and broader social realities.

From a broader perspective, the findings indicate that climate journalism increasingly reflects changing societal expectations regarding environmental governance, public health preparedness, and climate resilience. Rather than portraying heatwaves as isolated natural events, contemporary newspaper discourse presents extreme heat as evidence of accelerating climate change and emphasizes the necessity of coordinated governmental action, sustainable

environmental policies, and long-term adaptation strategies. As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, responsible journalism will continue to play a crucial role in promoting scientific understanding, strengthening public awareness, and supporting evidence-based climate policymaking.

By focusing specifically on newspaper headlines during the 2026 European heatwave, this study contributes to the growing field of climate communication by demonstrating how media framing shapes public perceptions of environmental crises. It also extends existing scholarship by integrating Qualitative Textual Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Framing Theory within a single analytical framework, offering a comprehensive approach for examining the relationship between language, media, and climate change.

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Appendix A

Dataset of Newspaper Headlines Analyzed in the Study

The Guardian	1. European heatwave is worst ever and impossible without climate crisis, scientists say. 2. 'A sad inevitability': after decades of climate warnings, why is Europe so unprepared for rising heat? 3. Extreme heat grips Europe as UK hits new June record, France shuts down nuclear reactors and deaths rise across continent – as it happened 4. UK waters hit with extreme heatwave as global sea temperatures reach record levels 5. Unions in Europe press for new worker protections to counter heat stress
Reuters	6. Heatwave disrupts Fourth of July events, strains power grids. 7. Europe's heatwave 'virtually impossible' without climate change, scientists say 8. Europe swelters under deadly 'Omega' heatwave, more records broken 9. Net-zero champion Europe snared by climate change on its doorstep 10. Swiss glaciers rapidly lose protective snow in punishing European heatwave
Financial Times	11. Heatwave shows we are marinating in a crisis of our own making 12. Is Europe prepared for a world of extreme heat? 13. Red alerts across UK and Europe as heatwave takes a grip 14. UK hospitals cancel operations because of lack of air conditioning 15. Is Europe prepared for a world of extreme heat?
Al Jazeera	16. Heatwave scorches east Europe as Slovakia, Czechia see record temperatures

	17. Climate change the culprit for Europe's 'most severe' heatwave: Report 18. More than 1,300 deaths in Europe amid heatwave: What can countries do? 19. Germany records new all-time temperature high as Europe heatwave moves east 20. Deadly heatwave grips Italy and Balkans as wildfire fears grow