

# **Young climate activists in television news: an analysis of multimodal constructions of voice, political recognition, and co-optation**

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# **Young climate activists in television news: an analysis of multimodal constructions of voice, political recognition, and co-optation**

Young climate activists around the globe have been raising their voices against the inadequate response of world leaders to climate change. Mainstream media have an important role in bringing young people's concerns to the public, but research has shown that, in some countries, news outlets have failed to adequately represent their political voice. In view of a prevailing depoliticisation of climate change, this study focuses on Portugal's television news reporting and examines whether and how youth climate activists are constructed as recognized actors in the politics of climate change. To explore the mechanisms of voice, we conduct a multimodal analysis of material from three open access channels: RTP1, SIC, and TVI. By analysing 230 news pieces from 2018 to 2021 on youth climate activism, we investigate the different ways in which the youth are given voice and the specific settings in which they are presented. Findings reveal that while they are indeed given voice, the dynamics that grant them recognition in various settings, such as street protests and institutional venues, also contribute to the recasting of their claims within the existing depoliticised agenda. As a result, in-depth discussions about their proposals for transformative change are hindered.

Keywords: young climate activism, climate change, multimodal constructions, voice, television

## **Introduction**

The year of 2019 witnessed a qualitative change in climate change communication, mostly due to the establishment of Fridays for Future (FFF), also known in some countries as School Strike for Climate. Greta Thunberg's lone demonstration in front of the Swedish Parliament and her compelling argument that there is no point in attending school when a liveable planet is not being guaranteed, resonated with young people

worldwide. She is credited as the central figure in the transnational movement that scheduled global strikes (Molder et al., 2022), mobilizing hundreds of thousands of young people to attend climate protests, instead of school, in 3000 different cities in the world (Fridays for Future, n.d.). Shortly after Greta Thunberg's first school strike, the group Extinction Rebellion (XR) was founded, endorsing more radical tactics, such as non-violent direct action. Together, these groups made young people's growing concern with and involvement in climate action evident in multiple public spaces (Sloam et al., 2022). In Portugal, national and local chapters of these transnational groups were created in late 2018 and 2019: FFF as *Greve Climática Estudantil* (Student Climate Strike) and XR keeping its original name. In addition, local or Portugal-based climate action initiatives, some of which had been established for some time (e.g. *Climáximo*, founded in 2015), as well as more recent ones (LIDERA, founded in 2020), have supported the transnational movement.<sup>1</sup>

The increasing engagement of young people in global issues is indicative of important social and cultural transformations and it is therefore critical to understand how powerful institutions and symbolic systems, such as the media, make sense of and represent them. As key agents in the cultural politics of our societies, television stations produce multimodal discourses that often circulate widely, reaching well beyond their live audiences via recontextualizations in social media and other platforms. The power of televised discourse is partly derived from its multimodality, i.e., the interplay between different semiotic modes (linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, audio). Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> While not exclusively led by young people, these initiatives have played a crucial role in mobilizing the youth and fostering their engagement in the climate movement in Portugal.

televised discourse has a capacity of setting agendas and driving the attention of other mediating actors, especially in the case of the mainstream channels.

Studies of media representation of the School Strikes for Climate have shown that in many countries the strikes were construed – albeit to varying degrees – in relation to school truancy (e.g. Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021). Furthermore, young people’s attempt to politicise issues have been met with expectations of inaction and passivity on their part, the adult eye still seeing them as *en route* to “becoming citizens” instead of fully enjoying that status (Gordon, 2009). Although there was some fair media coverage of their actions, because of the “unexpected” involvement of young people in political causes (Kettrey, 2018), their claims were frequently downplayed, with activists often infantilized, and their actions depoliticised, as is often characteristic of youth activism in general (Gordon, 2009).

As one of the European countries that is most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, Portugal can also be singled out for having witnessed a strong mobilization of young people in the last few years and offers an interesting case study. Focusing on the Portuguese television news media portrayals of youth climate activism between 2018, when Greta Thunberg first sat in protest in front of the Swedish parliament, until the end of 2021, this study is situated within the literature that investigates mainstream media discourses on civic action. It aims to account for how youth climate activism is represented in broadcast news. The article starts by offering an overview of media portrayals of youth climate activism in various geographies and contexts. Then, it focusses on the literature on the process of offering voice in contemporary democracies and on television specifically. After presenting our analytical framework, research questions and analysis, we discuss the processes of

giving voice to and constructing recognition of youth climate activism, as well as their consequences for the pluralization of the debate on climate change.

### **Media coverage of youth climate activism**

Studies examining media portrayals of youth protests associated with the School Strike for Climate have identified common patterns in various countries. One notable trend is the ageist portrayal of the “pupils”, who have often been stripped of their political message and agency, or even of the stature of “climate activist”. Bergmann and Ossewaarde (2020) found that both left-wing and right-wing newspapers in Germany exhibited this trend. Similarly, in Finland, the news media prominently adopted a “school attendance” frame, which, to a significant extent, diverted public attention away from the voices and perspectives of young people (Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021).

A particular rendition of this trend is the emotional framing of activists in the media, which has been shown to be salient in both Belgian (Poot & Bouwens, 2022) and Australian (Mayes & Hartup, 2021) newspapers. The portrayal of youth climate activists as being stirred by emotions such as anxiety and hysteria has been carried out in ways that downplay their messages, but also through more constructive frames, such as genuine interest and incorruptibility, and hope for the future (Poot & Bouwens, 2022). In both cases, an image of young people as unqualified political agents seems to underpin the emotional framing of their protests.

To be noted is the almost total absence of the “protest frame” (Cottle, 2008) in the analyses mentioned above, mainly because the youth actions were understood as peaceful and constructive, without any reference to policing. Instead, news outlets have employed strategies of delegitimization that involve a negative representation of the youth based on moral values, emphasizing their disobedience of mandatory school attendance. There were rare instances in which youth climate activism was portrayed

positively, i.e., in which they were given voice and other social actors showed support to their cause (Jacobsson, 2021; von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021; Gordon, 2009). However, in none of those cases was their voice allowed participation in the climate debate in ways that politicised it further (Chen et al., 2022). Even though the youth's disruptive claim "that there is no point in attending school when faced with climate change" (Kenis, 2021, p.136) had the political potential to destabilize technocratic and market-driven discourses (Machin, 2022), mainstream media outlets did not offer the opportunity and space to explore that potential and for politicising the debate. Whether acknowledging a disruptive potential (von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021) or rendering the youth claims too vague to question the status quo (Marquart, 2020), journalistic choices were made to steer away from the activists' critique of structural inequalities (Jacobsson, 2021; Chen et al., 2022).

The attention from the media on Greta Thunberg proved to be both advantageous and disadvantageous. In social media, in particular, her image accentuated a strong generational identity and contributed to expand the existing climate justice frame within the global movement (Diaz-Perez, 2021; Molder et al., 2022). In mainstream media, however, her heroic acts were often reworked to direct the focus away from the collective claims of the movement and onto her celebrity status (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021).

In Portugal, it is unclear what representations were prominent. In the only study conducted so far, focusing on the progressive *Público* newspaper, Almeida (2022) showed that young people were given opportunities for self-representation within a frame of political activism, providing emphasis to their collective action. The study found that young activists were quoted directly in most articles, including in titles, showing how reporters chose to set the tone to the entire piece. Criticism towards the

movement was almost absent, i.e., the newspaper did not present their actions as a nuisance. However, it remains uncertain how young people's claims, and their relationship with the polity and the political (Mouffe, 2005), have been constructed more generally in the Portuguese media.

### **Mediated voice and recognition**

An important backdrop to globalized climate activism is the hegemonic post-political framing of climate change, through which a techno-managerial discourse has come to dominate both policy and public arenas, suppressing conflicting views and alternative proposals towards sustainable futures (Swyngedouw, 2007). Activism can open spaces for counter-hegemonic discourses (Melucci, 1996), especially against a “voice-denying” rationality that restrains “human being’s ability to give an account of themselves” (Couldry, 2010, p.13) and re-imagining the dominant political ethos (Machin, 2022).

The recognition of counter-hegemonic perspectives requires valuing diverse voices in public debates and in decision-making processes (Couldry, 2008, 2010), and the media can be critical in this regard (Carvalho, 2010; Cottle & Rai, 2006).

Television, for example, has the potential to provide a platform for individuals to articulate their life experiences and contribute to pluralistic democratic debates (Maesele & Raejmaekers, 2020). Ultimately, this process should strive for agonism as a democratic ideal (Mouffe, 2005), acknowledging that (political) conflicts are inevitable (Kenis, 2019) while avoiding a moral hierarchization within such conflicts. Achieving this ideal not only requires the accommodation of a multitude of perspectives but also the demonstration of how different actors can share a common discursive repertoire, enabling the recognition, discussion, and critical examination of each other's voices (Phelan, 2022).

Instead, the reporting of activism usually resorts to the so-called “protest paradigm” or frame (Cottle, 2008), which delegitimizes activists’ attempt of offering critique. This standardized way of reporting protests focuses on “spectacle and drama” (Cottle, 2008, p., 854) and directs the spectators’ attention to the clash between protesters and the police. Voice is directly or indirectly that of “official” sources, dimming the light on the issues that protesters seek to address. That said, of course, depending on the identity and alliances of news organizations and journalists, as well as on journalistic cultures and routine practices, the (multiple) ways a protest is reported can vary significantly (Cottle, 2008). This variability can also reflect how media systems and societies prioritize different social struggles (Harlow & Brown, 2023).

Yet, activists do not passively accept the structural barriers imposed by the media; instead, they actively seek empowerment through increased visibility in multiple media platforms. The process of mediation is inherently dialectical but reveals asymmetrical and uneven opportunities for voice within existing power structures (Cammaerts, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Harlow & Brown, 2023). It is important to note that a protest/spectacle frame should not be automatically associated with negative coverage, as activists can express the kind of emotional engagement, or passion, that has the potential to inspire audience mobilization (Harlow & Brown, 2023). Moreover, activists draw on other influential allies, such as alternative media, for more balanced reporting (Fernandes, 2019; Reul et al., 2018), and leverage social media platforms to create opportunities for their counter-discourses (Chen et al., 2022; Cammaerts, 2012). However, television, a mainstream form of media, is still understudied in relation to such issues of voice and in the context of climate change (Schaefer & Schlichting, 2014). In the next section, we will delve into the multimodality of televised discourse in its potential to offer voice to climate change activism.



### **Television: offering voice to activists in a multimodal fashion?**

Television is regarded as a key medium that can contribute both to reproduce hegemonic discourses or to host alternative ones, as it offers a wide range of topical and contextual venues for dissent and debate (Cottle & Rai, 2006). Audiovisual grammars can work to maximize or minimize activists' recognition as political actors (Fernandes, 2019). For example, televised images can create power differentials via aspects that are inherent to the construction of the moving image, such as the relative position of different social actors among each other, how they look at the camera, etc. (Hayes & O'Neill, 2021). The multimodal characteristics of television add another layer of complexity to discursive moments offering voice to activists. For instance, there can be a lack of coordination between what is said, the text, and what is seen, the image, as they can be independently generated but become connected in editing stages (Corrigan-Brown & Wilkes, 2012).

As a powerful means of semiosis, televised images contribute to the dynamics of recognition when they present the settings of activism, for instance, showing different spaces of presence and movement. In a recent analysis of the Getty images database of climate protests across the years, Hayes and O'Neill (2021) have shown that the youth climate movement is endowed with a shift in the visual representation of climate activism. Instead of a protest frame, recent images of climate demonstrations tend to show an empowered youth at centre stage, holding banners and looking directly at the camera. Furthermore, activists can also be televised in other spaces of claims-making, for instance, within institutional/policy settings or in the newsroom, offering distinctive opportunities for debate (Cottle & Lester, 2009). These different places can confer recognition to their claims in ways that street action may not. Exploring this complexity of voices and settings on television is an opportunity for probing how dissent, consensus, and agonism as a democratic ideal can be fabricated (Maesele &

Raeijmaekers, 2020; Mouffe, 2005). This highlights the importance of looking at *how* activists are offered voice, in which settings, and in relation to whom/what. A debate frame, or the juxtaposition of voices, is no guarantee of legitimacy (Kenis, 2019). Of great relevance is the examination of power structures implicit in televised discourse to understand modes of offering voice (Harlow & Brown, 2023). This instigates the study of how the youth's distance to the political realm is constructed in the media, and whether their voices are heard in a meaningful way vis-a-vis the dominant climate change discourses.

In this context, it is also worth examining the mentioned processes of recognition with regard to the (scalar) geographies of the global climate change debate. For instance, when the communicative architecture of the news piece features segments from events or protests elsewhere, these may work to steer the audience's attention away from local struggles, diffusing responsibilities (Horta et al., 2017; Üzelgün & Castro, 2015). A study investigating the possible cross-national discursive effects of COPs in the media debates on climate change showed that they tend to perpetuate the patterns of inequality of media coverage around these issues (Wozniak et al., 2021). Instead, an emphasis on the "here", that can be aided by the multimodality of television, can help to recognize how climate change will impact place, helping to understand the locus of responsibility in mitigating and adapting to those consequences (Lester, 2019). This is something that transnational movements have had more difficulty in putting forward, i.e., a consensus of *how* these problems should be addressed *in place* (Smith, 2002). Nevertheless, transnational movements can work towards global solidarity and a shared understanding of the problem, which is often seen as the precondition for environmental citizenship and agency, eventually leading to action (Cottle & Lester, 2009; Smith, 2002). The current youth climate activism, instigated by the School Strike

for Climate, is one such example that juxtaposes the global and the local in ways fomenting local collective action (Boulianne et al., 2020; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022).

We then explore representations of young climate activists on television, not only because it is the most consumed form of media in Portugal (Delicado et al., 2020) and the least studied internationally (Schaefer & Schlichting, 2014), but also because it relies on multiple semiotic resources (text, image, sound), allowing for, perhaps, a more sophisticated understanding of the journalistic processes associated with the recognition or the depoliticisation of young climate activists. The main research question that guided the analysis is the following: to what extent do Portuguese television channels offer voice to young climate activists? Particularly, we analyse (1) how and in what settings do Portuguese television news offer direct voice to young climate activists and (2) whether and how the relation to official political discourse grants young climate activists the recognition as civic actors of climate politics, e.g., whether the relation is agonistic or co-opted.

### **Method and material**

This study aims to understand how youth climate activism was reported in Portuguese television between 2018 and 2021, when the School Strike for Climate movement emerged and grew. We focus on prime-time evening television news in three open access channels: RTP1, SIC and TVI. RTP is a public service television channel, funded by the state and the oldest of the three. SIC and TVI were founded in the 1990s as commercial channels. Together with the smaller RTP2, these are freely aired television channels in Portugal and gather the largest shares of audiences.

The news pieces were collected through the media monitoring platform e-Telenews<sup>2</sup>. The platform's interface only allowed for single keyword searches, so the search terms included *clima*, *climática*, *climático*, *estudantil*, *ativistas*, *ativistas*, *Fridays*, OR *Thunberg*<sup>3</sup>. We extracted a list of the relevant results, obtaining a total of 594 news pieces. The output from e-Telenews included some structural characteristics (e.g. length of video in minutes, broadcast date and time) of each piece, and also a short text description. We then refined our selection process to ensure that news pieces featured young activists and were not about the topic climate change alone. This led to 230 news pieces. In the process, we also distinguished pieces where youth climate activism was the primary focus and those where it was a peripheral element.

The volume of televised news on the youth climate movement had a large variation in the 2018-2021 period. Table 1 shows that before Greta Thunberg's school strike received international attention, in 2018, youth climate activism had almost no space in Portuguese primetime television. The year 2019 stands out among the four years with a remarkable upswing of news pieces from 6 to 149 (64.8%). This was a year of more intense protests by young activists, also coinciding with Greta Thunberg's passage to Portugal that received extensive coverage. In 2020, the media's focus on the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected on the relatively scant coverage of youth climate action (16 pieces, 7%), which was shifted to online platforms (Sorice & Dumitrica, 2023). With the stabilization of the pandemic, and with COP26 taking place in

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<sup>2</sup> We are thankful to the e-TELENEWS MediaMonitor/Marktest, and MediaLab-Iscte's Barómetro de Notícias for the help in collection of the corpora.

<sup>3</sup> *climate* (as a noun), *climatic* (as a feminine and masculine adjective), *student* (as an adjective), *activists* (in two different orthographies), *Fridays*, or *Thunberg*.

Glasgow, which had been postponed one year, there was more media attention in 2021 that nevertheless did not approximate the levels of 2019 (59 pieces, 25.7%).

(Insert Table 1 here)

After an initial screening by the first two authors of this article, we determined that our method for analysing television news would involve the development of a comprehensive coding grid, drawing inspiration from the analytic strategy adopted in Field's (1988) qualitative content analysis of television news. The grid had the following structural categories: (1) news captions (this is the lead text appearing at the start of a news piece on television) and (2) type of news piece (live piece, reportage, opinion, short piece). And the following analytical categories that were inductively produced: (3) main theme of the piece; (4) whether it focused on a national or international event; (5) settings (different 'spatial blocks' throughout a given news report and their order); (6) social actors, by order of appearance; (7) presence/absence of the police; (8) presence of young activists (direct voice, indirect voice by social actors, voice-over by journalist); (9) settings of activism (streets, institutional venues, or the newsroom) and (10) presence/absence of young activists' interactions with politicians.

At a second analytic step, the coding grid developed was examined to identify not just the main trends (reported as percentages in the analysis), but also the meaningful relations within the salient patterns in the news discourse. The latter centrally involved the presence of social actors and voices, as well as the settings in which the youth climate movement was presented across the visual, textual, and audio modes. We also paid special attention to scene composition (Field, 1988). Examining

the processes of giving voice (Couldry, 2010) through these categories and their interactions, we identified various configurations that featured activists and their views. Firstly, we analysed instances where the youth are given a voice, such as in street demonstrations, and the use of a protest frame during these events. Secondly, we explored the multimodal strategies in the reconstruction of the distance of young activists to the institutional debate, and their recognition therein. This involved analysing how images and voices of young activists were utilized during the coverage of international meetings like COPs and the functions these fulfil. Finally, we investigated the reported interactions between activists and political figures. In doing so, we also assessed whether these interactions offered opportunities for local activists to express claims that are specific to the Portuguese context.

### ***Young activists' direct voices on the streets***

Almost 70% (157 pieces) of the news pieces gave young activists the opportunity to directly express their claims. This was done mainly through street interviews during demonstrations (in 173 pieces activists are seen on the streets, 75.2%). In general, the movement was represented as peaceful, directing the viewer's attention to the youth's demands. The most prominent claims concerned the "urgency to act", or the insufficiency or lack of meaningful action, which mostly played as an "intergenerational tension" (Kenis, 2021) both in national and international news. Example 1 is from a news piece by TVI on November 7, 2021, featuring a mass demonstration in Lisbon during COP26.

Example 1.

News caption: *Courage needed for curbing climate change.*

Voice over: *There's a worldwide urgency and Portugal won't miss the call. This Sunday, ecology went to the streets and hundreds of environmentalists claimed deep changes in the approach towards the climate crisis, namely, more political courage.*

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Young Woman: *"It is necessary to start worrying about a transition and let us stop thinking in four-year cycles like politicians do. Enough! We need to think about prosperity and longevity. The climate will not only affect us, it is already affecting, but will affect whoever follows us: our children, our grandchildren."*

This is an example where the (re)construction of the activist voice was carried out by the anchor. The voice over was accompanied by a news caption ("Courage needed for curbing climate change") that was crafted to highlight courage in a double-entendre: courage was needed for curbing climate change, both by the world leaders that activists appealed to, and by the youth to become activists. The voice over unsurprisingly highlighted the first sense, the appeal to world leaders, as both the street demonstration and the televised voices were oriented to the ongoing COP26. The voice of young activists followed an initial spatial block of activists on the streets. The young woman used the inclusive term "we" to evoke a collective that needed to "start worrying" about the transition. Implying that the COP26 leaders were not (yet) worried, she clarified what needed to be left behind: thinking in four-year cycles as the politicians. A distance, if not a contrast, was created between parliamentary politics, as well as the COP26, and a broader "we" that should start planning for prosperous futures. The intergenerational tension was also brought to the fore and extended to

generations to come. The activist is seen to engage with the audience by looking directly at the camera, as if the reporter was not there. Typically, this way of presenting an interviewee is an editorial choice to offer more direct interaction between the speaker and the audience, with minimal mediation from the reporter (Fernandes, 2019). In this case, it appears as a choice by the activist, who saw a media opportunity (Caemmart, 2012) to engage with a wider audience directly. This spatial block was followed by a focus on developments in COP26 that marked a contrast with the foregoing – the youth discontent with the lack of commitment of world leaders to tackle the climate crisis as a serious problem. The coordination between the textual, audio, and visual elements facilitated the showcasing of the youth’s claims and their legitimacy to act. Sometimes, this was achieved through a voice over narration accompanying the images of activists (without the audio layer) on the streets, and worked to animate the youth’s claims with spaces, people, and action.

When analysing the coverage across the three television channels, a clear distinction can be observed between non-violent actions, which were generally portrayed positively, and direct actions carried out by certain activist groups. These clashes during street protests were primarily organized by the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement, both internationally and within Portugal. In the news coverage, these were depicted as sporadic events involving the occasional “troublemaker”.

The decline of the protest frame in Portuguese news signifies the rise and validation of the intergenerational climate justice claim, which grants some power and agency to the youth (Hayes & O’Neill, 2021). This shift is evident in the inclusion of announcements about upcoming demonstrations, informing viewers about protest events. Notably, TVI channel aired a news report on May 23, 2019, documenting the preparations for a demonstration, showcasing activists painting banners and mobilizing



others ahead of the Global Strike the following day. These scenes of activism on the streets were juxtaposed with images of children and young people from various countries worldwide. This helped to create a repertoire of images and symbols of youth climate activism, showcasing their potential for global solidarity (Lester & Cottle, 2009) and their role in fostering a shared understanding of the issue (Smith, 2002). Greta Thunberg, in particular, emerged as a prominent figure of voice, inspiring activism worldwide and becoming a symbol of youth agency in the fight against climate change (Ryalls & Mazzearella, 2021).

### ***Young activists' voices in institutional settings***

Some of the news pieces featured the mobilization of young activists in institutional settings. At times this was done via the juxtaposition of activists' images with official meetings (26.1%, 60 pieces). In many instances, political actors were shown conveying and reinforcing the activists' actions in those institutional settings (24.3%, 56 pieces), thereby problematizing the path towards a carbon-neutral future as drawn in the international agenda. This suggests a certain level of political recognition, specifically in relation to their presence in institutional venues of the debate. However, it was mainly Greta Thunberg who featured in news pieces giving speeches in such settings. The disproportionate media focus on Greta Thunberg in these contexts implies that her coverage obfuscated the diversity of voices in the movement (Ryalls & Mazzearella, 2021). Within this celebrity frame, there was a clear emphasis on her heroic actions, reflecting the ethos of neoliberal individualism (Taft, 2020), rather than highlighting collective action with specific demands and proposals.

Yet, the presence of young activists in such high-level international meetings reinforced the notion of the need for criticism regarding the progress in negotiations, especially during COPs. In Example 2, broadcasted on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, SIC

news juxtaposed videos from two settings in a live reporting from COP25. The news piece featured an interesting sequence of spatial blocks involving activists, some of them being restrained by the police. It began with the interior, featuring indigenous activists peacefully protesting and members of Extinction Rebellion, revealing some tension. The piece then transitioned to the outside, where the activists were shown placing banners on the building's façade, indicating a sense of solidarity among the activists.

Example 2.

News caption: *The outcome in Madrid is threatening to be one of the biggest failures in the history of these meetings.*

Reporter: *"...the countries that have been accused of blocking these activities are precisely the United States, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia. These are the countries (...) from their current domestic politics, it is clear that they are not committed to this fight against the threat that the UN Secretary-general and scientists say is looming over humanity and will be one of the greatest threats of this century."*

(Insert Figure 2 here)

The editorial transition from the inside to outside COP25 reinforces the reporter's critical statement that world leaders must be held accountable for the climate crisis. The concerned citizens, especially the young activists, were depicted as deeply invested in this process of ensuring accountability. The news caption, "the outcome in Madrid is threatening to be one of the biggest failures in the history of these meetings," aligned with the reporter's narrative, calls out the countries accused of impeding the

success of the conference. The reporter, however, did not directly mention the activists or their specific claims, as they were being simultaneously televised. Instead, she referred to the UN Secretary-general and scientists in establishing “the greatest threat of this century”, in other words, to the usual voices in defining the issue (Peeples & Depoe, 2014). According to these authoritative figures, the countries failing to prioritize climate change are the main culprits for the lack of a positive resolution. The reporter did not vocalize any specific claims on behalf of the young activists. Nevertheless, one cannot underestimate the impact of the multimodal juxtaposition of visuals in such reporting: the depiction of a blindfolded and topless activist, with the words “Act now” in Spanish written on her body and the Extinction Rebellion symbol on her palms, symbolically and literally embodied the youth’s voice in support of the cause.

In 25% of the news pieces (56 pieces), young activists were also brought into the debate through the accounts of others, such as politicians and UN officials. Such adult voices often commended and supported the young activists’ efforts. A report from RTP1, aired on 20 November 2019, was set at the COP25 venue and showed the swift process of preparation due to the venue change from Chile to Madrid. The piece featured Teresa Ribera, the Spanish Minister of Ecological Transition, announcing in a press conference:

*“There are big economies that seem to be looking the other way. There are big economies that work within the rules of the planet’s limits and with solidarity to face the physical impacts of climate change without leaving anyone behind. (...) The young people who claim with determination and that have suddenly transformed themselves into first rank political actors, they will be a very demanding barometer in knowing whether we’ve overcome this test.” (RTP1, 20-11-2019)*

In this excerpt there is a clear recognition of young people's actions as part of the political space, indeed they are labelled “first rank political actors”. This is said to be something that has happened *suddenly*, clearly delimiting a past in which young people were perceived as disengaged and passive (Gordon, 2009). However, now, their actions are viewed as an important measure of discontentment, and they are regarded as citizens in full, i.e., social actors that world leaders need to respond to. However, not all these leaders are being blamed for their inaction. According to this minister, the problem lies with the "big economies that appear to ignore the issue," implying that only certain countries are responsible for the lack of consensus and hindering necessary changes. While young people are recognized as competent watchdogs, the responsibility is mitigated and attributed to certain countries, whereas others are portrayed as already working “within the rules” and demonstrating “solidarity”.

Certainly, the televised images of young people in institutional settings, where their voices could be heard, served as significant moments that bridged the gap between the youth on the streets and positions of power. These televised moments played a vital role in bringing these two groups closer together. Moreover, there were also instances of direct interactions between young people and those in positions of power, which will be the central focus of the upcoming section.

### ***Young activists' interaction with (national) politics***

In 16.5% (38 pieces) of the examined news, young activists were portrayed as engaging in direct interaction with political actors *in loco*. Instead of an editorial choice of juxtaposing their images with formal politics as a means to involve them in a news story (e.g. the “debate frame”, Harlow & Brown, 2023), these interactions served as illustrations of how the youth actions were supported by actors in positions of power.

The image of Greta Thunberg being received by world leaders was often the primary focus in these news pieces. These portrayals often downplayed the conflict between the youth and politicians, making it difficult for the youth to engage in political discourse by overshadowing the fact that politicians and politics themselves are the source and target of disagreement. Such pieces seemed to undermine any tension between the activists and the politicians/politics in a post-political display of support to young activists.

On June 22, 2019, SIC reported on the UN youth conference held in Lisbon (see example 3 below). Portuguese climate activists protested in front of the meeting's venue. The finishing segment of the news piece came after the spatial block depicting the meeting venue where the President of Portugal delivered a speech along UN youth representatives discussing the need to include the youth in politics.

Example 3.

Voice over: *The president heard a group of young activists of the student climate strike*"

Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa: *I've already supported the idea of the declaration of the state of climate emergency... I hope it will be approved soon, thank you."*

(Insert Figure 3 here)

In this particular segment, SIC portrayed the president in agreement with the activists. The active verb conveying this agreement was "hear", as established by the accompanying voiceover. Having informed viewers that young activists were "heard", the video proceeded to show the president responding to them in English, even though

they shared Portuguese as a common language. On his way of an international meeting, the President of Portugal assumes an international audience. Revealingly, with all the cameras and microphones pointed at the president, one of the two activists in the frame is shown with tape covering her mouth, arguably protesting that their voices were, in fact, being silenced. This gesture is incongruent with both the voiceover's message and the image of a smiling president saying the activists were heard. Notably, the youth's claim was expressed only through the president's mention of a "declaration of the state of climate emergency". The incongruence of what was verbally described and what was visually available suggests a deliberate framing by the news piece displaying an alliance between the president and the young activists. Such framing strategies may be interpreted as a way of supporting the youth claims, although it still foregrounds the perspective of high-ranking officials.

Another instance where these dynamics were more noticeable occurred during the media coverage of Greta Thunberg's journey to Portugal on her way to COP25 in Madrid. The television channels in Portugal adopted a celebrity-like approach in reporting on Greta Thunberg, closely following her every move while she was in the country. This emphasis overshadowed the local struggles brought by the voice of the local youth. At the time of her arrival many activists were present to welcome her and to shed light on the Portuguese challenges. However, the focus on Greta Thunberg's arrival and stay kept a descriptive tone, of where she was, or when she would get a train to Madrid. While local activists pushed their own agendas and concerns, television channels opted for brief and superficial reporting. Portuguese politicians received more attention during this period with the media exploring the political position of the country in relation to her arrival. The media event became an opportunity for politicians to project an image of Portugal's (purported) flawless state of affairs.

Referring to a letter that the Minister of the Environment wrote to Greta Thunberg, an RTP1 news piece aired on December 1, 2019 emphasized the opening sentence: “Dear Greta, Welcome to Portugal, the first country in the world to take the commitment to be carbon neutral by 2050”. The Minister claimed that Greta Thunberg was arriving in a country that stood at the forefront of her struggle. This approach sought to gain the support of the youth by positioning Portugal as an ally rather than a foe. Given the context of Greta Thunberg's memorable statement “how dare you?” during the UN summit, this welcoming speech may be seen as an effort towards dissociating Portugal from the objects of anger or disillusionment often expressed by climate activists.

While the youth movement in Portugal succeeded in garnering greater media attention and had opportunities to express their concerns in various settings, their endeavours to promote a concrete agenda that reflected the specific debates and struggles within the Portuguese context did not echo in the news media. Although moments of dialogue, interaction, and television’s emphasis on alternative settings for climate activism played a crucial role in providing recognition, the effective inclusion of their voices in the climate debate remained limited. During global strikes and local initiatives organized by groups like *Climáximo* or XR-Portugal, activists voiced specific demands concerning regional and local policies, such as protesting oil and gas exploration in the Algarve or opposing the construction of a second airport in Lisbon. They also advocated for increased investment in the railroad system, which has suffered from significant disinvestment in Portugal over the past three decades. However, those context-specific claims were not prevalent throughout the media corpus, but rather served as storylines designed to capture public attention in the immediacy of television news. This was particularly evident during street demonstrations. Despite being

televised, these alternative spaces and interactions did not offer meaningful opportunities for discussion or debate that could have positioned young climate activists as equal participants in the climate debate.

## **Conclusion**

This article examines the representation of young climate activists on prime-time television news in Portugal between 2018 and 2021. By analysing multimodal constructions, we delve into the diverse semiotic resources employed in television news to investigate how these activists were offered voice and recognition as civic agents in the climate change debate. This is likely to have important consequences for political engagement (or disengagement) and standing in climate politics (Carvalho, 2010). Our analysis suggests that Portuguese television news stood out compared to other countries in terms of providing voice to youth climate activism, a finding aligned with Almeida's (2022) analysis of a Portuguese newspaper. Additionally, our study reveals the absence of ageist portrayals and the truancy frame (e.g. Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021) with young activists often presented as social actors with direct voices expressing their demands and concerns. The alliances formed between young activists and other political figures exemplify how they are regarded as essential stakeholders demanding immediate action. The news pieces often mobilized them, alongside regular political actors, to criticize the disregard for climate urgency.

The analysed news pieces demonstrate an endorsement of the legitimacy of the intergenerational struggle, refraining from infantilizing the activists. The majority of television coverage provided opportunities for young activists to articulate their claims in their own words during street demonstrations. The representational choices can be said to negotiate the identity of climate activism by constructing a middle ground



between a domesticated form of activism and an insurgent form that pursued direct action. This more subdued portrayal depicted young climate activists participating in street demonstrations in an orderly manner, presenting it as a proper space for contestation. Actions that deviated from this domesticated image, such as civil disobedience, although less prevalent in our analysis, carried a frame of dissent that challenged the established order and the issues at hand. However, these moments of dissent can strategically serve activists by attracting media attention, intensifying the passion of the youth, and fostering increased mobilization for their cause (Cammearts, 2012).

Nevertheless, there were instances where political figures in positions of power mobilized the voices of young climate activists to criticize countries that were perceived as uncooperative in joint climate change action. The strategic use of powerful imagery of youth demanding justice served the same purpose. Consequently, televised news perpetuated the portrayal of climate change as solely obstructed by villains who deny the magnitude of the problem. This is arguably an overly simplified depiction of climate change politics, which Portuguese television seemed inclined to integrate the claims of young activists into.

In doing so, television news erases the crucial dialogue that young climate activists seek to engage in with the realm of politics and its most relevant actors. As exemplified above, televised moments of interaction predominantly featured Greta Thunberg engaging with various influential figures. In cases where it was not the norm, as shown in Example 3, a contrived television approach failed to convey an *authentic* moment of interaction. Furthermore, Portuguese television news did not provide a comprehensive representation of national issues through the perspectives of young activists. Their voices were limited to brief moments during demonstrations, lacking

subsequent follow-up or meaningful opportunities for elaboration, as they would have had in a newsroom setting. Conversely, as revealed in our analysis, national politicians were granted a platform to argue that the problem was not localized but instead lay beyond the country's borders (Lester, 2019; Üzelgün & Castro, 2015). Consequently, Portuguese television fostered a prevailing sense of disillusionment regarding inadequate climate action, utilizing a range of youth images and discourses that connected to a transnational movement (Lester & Cottle, 2009). However, it provided limited space for addressing and resolving local problems and conflicts (Smith, 2002).

Critically, despite the activists' pursuit of "system change, not climate change" (Jacobsson, 2021), the news pieces failed to explore how their voice could contribute to dismantling a voice-suppressing rationality that has dictated the climate change debate so far (Machin, 2022; Peeples & Depoe, 2014). Instead, this study demonstrates how climate activists were given a voice in a manner that reinforced or preserved the post-political consensus. This in turn limits the paths towards alternative imaginaries of climate action, and smoothly operates as co-optation. Likewise, when activists were portrayed inside official settings or in moments of interaction, the distance to power and politicians suddenly vanished in what looked like a dialogue or recognition of sorts. Rather than constituting agonistic moments – where the youth *are* recognized as political actors and the intergenerational conflict line *is* exposed and debated – these television-mediated interactions resulted in the consensualization of the youth claims by integrating them into the generic narrative that "climate change is a serious problem" without fully addressing the multiple political imaginaries involved in tackling it. This consensus, however, is an obstacle to the politicisation of climate change (Pepermans & Maesele, 2014), as it fails to highlight social tensions, which is a prerequisite for democratic debate (Mouffe, 2006).

Television then managed to both (1) position the youth at the forefront of the climate debate, offering them a political representation in a predominantly positive light, albeit with occasional dissent, and (2) perpetuate a consensual and hegemonic global climate discourse (Cottle & Rai, 2006) by portraying politicians and officials as “aligned” with the youth. Some scholars have argued that youth climate movements may have been susceptible to a process of re-signification of their claims and demands due to the vagueness of their goals (Machin, 2022; Marquardt, 2022). Nonetheless, journalistic choices effectively played young activists into the spotlight while simultaneously diverting attention from the movement's critique of structural inequalities (Jacobsson, 2021). This study then shows how the positive portrayal of youth climate activists does not grant them an agonistic standing: it indicates that Portuguese television's endeavour to offer voice to the young climate activists fell short in acknowledging their perspective in climate politics as a counter-hegemonic discourse.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

In Portugal, groups such as *Greve Climática Estudantil*, *Climáximo*, and LIDERA have distinct political visions that manifest in different actions and platforms for discourse. This study of televised discourse fell short in adequately differentiating how various youth activist groups, with their varied tactics and perspectives, were given voice. Future studies should further investigate these differences and explore how they are rendered invisible to audiences of mainstream media, leading to the legitimization of certain actions while marginalizing others.

Our analysis focused on a specific timeframe, which does not cover more recent actions of youth climate activists. As the initial global school strike yielded limited political echo, in 2022, there was a notable shift in their strategies. Inspired by the

international movement “End Fossil - Occupy!”, students in Portugal embraced a more radical approach, occupying their schools to “disrupt, blockade, interrupt, and/or sabotage”<sup>4</sup>. This shift in tactics has most probably brought about significant changes in the coverage of youth climate activism (Treré & Mattoni, 2014). Further research is needed to account for such changes as and the emerging trends in the media coverage of young climate activists.

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<sup>4</sup> From website <https://endfossil.com>

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Table 1. Distribution of news pieces in time

	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
News pieces	6 (2.6%)	149 (64.8%)	16 (7%)	59 (25.7%)	230 (100.0%)

Figure 1. Young activist in the street, TVI, November 7, 2021



Figure 2. Reporter at COP25, SIC, December 14, 2019



Figure 3. Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, President of Portugal, talking to young climate activists, SIC, June 22, 2019

