

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2026-06-24

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Santos, T. R., Üzelgün, M. A. & Carvalho, A. (2026). Reporting on young climate activism: How journalistic multimodal choices on television can delegitimise disruptive dissent. *Journalism Practice*. 20 (6), 1898-1918

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1080/17512786.2024.2433649

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Reporting on young climate activism: how journalistic multimodal choices on television can delegitimise disruptive dissent

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published in *Journalism Practice* on November 27, 2024
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/17512786.2024.2433649?needAccess=true>

Reporting on young climate activism: how journalistic multimodal choices on television can delegitimise disruptive dissent

Abstract: The effects of climate change and the significant transformations it demands will disproportionately impact young people. Recognising young climate activists as pivotal contributors to the climate debate is essential for fostering inclusive political dialogue. This study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis to examine a 17-minute reportage on young climate activism in Portugal. Our objective is to examine journalists' role in promoting political agonism by: 1) ensuring the visibility of alternative political visions advocated by young activists, and 2) validating diverse voices and proposals for change, thereby granting them political legitimacy. Through analysing the editorial choices that foster interactions among actors, discourses and modes, such as text, image, and talk, we find that television coverage adopted a critical perspective that worked to differentiate the dutiful activist and the disruptive one. By favouring certain means of social action and by privileging the epistemic authority of certain actors, the examined reportage challenged the political legitimacy of young activists that call for deeper social changes. In doing so, it constrained discussion on alternative pathways for change and transformation, and failed to create – or indeed endorse – a comprehensive and inclusive climate debate.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, television, climate change, youth activism, disruptive dissent

1. Introduction

The societal changes required to combat climate change pose significant challenges for journalistic practices. "Balance as bias" (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004) provided an early critique of the traditional approach to balanced reporting, which aimed to present equitable viewpoints but ultimately gave undue credence to denialism, thereby stifling in-depth discussions on the topic. Today, a major challenge lies in ensuring that climate reporting offers informative and balanced exploration of the possible solutions to the climate dilemma. Too often, however, these accounts are skewed, favouring dominant narratives that limit the scope for alternative perspectives (Carvalho, 2020). We argue that truly informative and balanced journalism must amplify a range of viewpoints, especially those that are typically marginalized, such as perspectives of young people.

In this study, we analyse how the mediated climate debate on mainstream television addresses (or sidesteps) the profound social transformations advanced by various young climate activist groups, as well as a discussion on different political imaginaries and their potential pathways to different futures (Machin A., 2023). To explore how this plurality of perspectives should be represented, we draw on the literature on political agonism (Kenis, 2019; Machin A., 2023; Maesele and Raeijmaekers, 2020) and integrate it with multimodal critical discourse analysis, focusing on intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992a, 1992b; Machin D., 2013, 2016). Our aim is to better understand how diverse voices, such as those of young climate activists, can be meaningfully included in the climate debate happening in news media, fostering the "respectful contestation" (Maesele and Raeijmaekers, 2020) necessary for productive discourse. Political agonism acknowledges difference and praises disagreement as constituting the foundation for more suitable and democratic debate and legitimacy (Machin A., 2023). It promotes the visibility of underrepresented voices and demands the critique of the power dynamics that render certain perspectives as indisputable (Kenis, 2019). On television, the plurality of voices/social actors and how they interact and *encounter* each other, along with the interplay of visual and audio elements, are central aspects in the (de-)legitimation of certain positions. By underscoring the differences between social actors while also emphasizing a shared discursive space where democratic debate and conflict are valued (Phelan, 2022), journalistic practices can help marginalized voices achieve some visibility in the public sphere.

The voices of young people, which brought climate change back to the media agenda in 2019, represent a marginalized perspective that demands political legitimacy grounded on

the principle of intergenerational justice (Bowman, 2020; Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023). Through their positions and direct actions, young climate activists have envisioned and given prominence to different possible paths to the future (Marquardt, 2021). Speaking for future generations, they have pushed the climate debate beyond existing societal structures and into considering alternatives (Jacobsson, 2021). Their “disruptive dissent”, expressed through protests and collective organisation, exemplifies efforts to “modify or change existing political and economic structures, which include norms, rules, regulations, and institutions” (O’Brien et al., 2018). In short, they call for systemic changes that address the root causes of climate change. Through their varied actions, they have highlighted alternative political imaginaries capable of dethroning neoliberalism as the primary cultural reference for interpreting priorities, values, and actions related to climate change (McAfee, 2017; Pepermans and Maesele, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2007).

Since the end of 2022, activist collectives in Europe, including Portugal, the context of our study, have started occupying schools and other public spaces, demanding the rapid end of fossil fuels for electricity generation from national governments. In doing so, they aim to more assertively expose the conflict in visions that national media obscured during the Student Climate Strikes in 2019, when news outlets simultaneously offered them voice and withdrew it (e.g. Santos et al., 2023). Compared to other forms of campaigning, such as petitioning, direct action is often viewed as less legitimate by the public (Castro et al., 2016; Peebles and Depoe, 2014). A negative public perception of those forms of activism may arguably stem from the disturbance they generate; however, public opinion on such issues is largely shaped by their media portrayals, which can be complex and multifaceted. There are ample signs that this shift in strategy towards more disruptive action may cost the movement its previously mediated image as a legitimate political actor, a status that was already partially diminished.

We explore how a detailed journalistic piece portrays the perspectives of young climate activists and their disruptive dissent in relation to other proposals and sources of knowledge. Our analysis investigates how these portrayals establish, reinforce, or challenge boundaries between activists and other relevant social groups (Van Dijk, 2006; Gillespie, 2008, 2020). Journalists may either emphasize conflicting viewpoints or obscure certain perspectives in the public arena, thereby limiting discussions on alternative approaches to addressing climate change challenges, such as various pathways for energy transition. Our analysis highlights the editorial choices made by journalists and content creators (Fairclough,

1992a) in a prime-time report, focusing on the juxtaposition of different actors, perspectives, and modes of discourse.

We specifically analyse a long television report on young climate activists broadcast in 2023 by the Portuguese channel SIC. Longer segments provide depth to the portrayals and claims of young activists moving beyond heuristic and stereotypical (“thin”) representations (Matthews and Cottle, 2012). They also create space for claims and counter-claims to be presented, helping the public understand the conflicts at stake (Kaderka, 2023). The selected reportage explores various ways young people can contribute to “protecting the planet,” (Reportagem Especial, 2023), as illustrated through the accounts of three individuals. One activist is a member of the End Fossil-Occupy! Movement in Portugal, which advocates for disruptive dissent, while the others pursue change within institutional venues for climate communication and education, representing “dutiful dissent” (O’Brien et al., 2018). The journalists juxtaposed different views among climate activists and other sources of cultural meaning, which can either facilitate or hinder their legitimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Dijk, 2006; MacKay, 2015) and promote “respectful contestation” within this pluralism (Maesele and Ræijmaekers, 2020; Mouffe, 2005). Our focus is on how these young people’s societal critique (Jacobsson, 2021) is represented, and the potential for creating discursive spaces for alternative political imaginaries.

2. Intertextuality: (de)legitimising the voices of young climate activists

The study of intertextuality examines how the combination of texts can facilitate the (re)construction of new relations between texts, discourses, and their creators (Carvalho 2020; Fairclough, 1992a, 1992b; Farrelly, 2020). Intertextuality encompasses both direct references to texts and the incorporation of other actors’ “texts” (from formal documents to oral statements) within the construction of a new text, including the use of direct or indirect speech. However, the productive potential of intertextuality is socially constrained by orders of discourse, which dictate what is more likely to be heard or accepted, thereby erecting barriers to the renegotiation and hybridisation of meaning (Fairclough, 1992b). For instance, literature on climate change communication shows the prevalence of eco-modernist discourses that sustain technological fixes as the (only legitimate) way for transformation (Machin A., 2023; Swyngedouw, 2007). Mainstream media often promote networks of intertexts that prioritise certain sources, constraining the public’s role in the co-construction of significant socio-political transformations (Carvalho, 2010).

A media representation of young climate activists fostering legitimacy is an important step in this process, although their representation is rarely truly pluralistic. Recent images of young climate activists during global marches challenge the typical protest frame (Hayes and O'Neill, 2021; Harlow and Brown, 2023; Homoláč and Mrázková, 2021) and contradict representations that show exclusively police in confrontation (Cottle, 2008) by offering some space for interventions by the protesters. Studies have documented a spectrum of legitimising or delegitimising effects in their representation (e.g. Almeida, 2022; Hayes and O'Neill, 2021; Santos et al., 2023; Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023), which not only depend on the extent to which activists challenge the status quo but also on how society and journalists, serving as gatekeepers of cultural meanings, perceive the most relevant struggles of contemporary times (Harlow and Brown, 2023; Okoliko and de Wit, 2023). This means that in certain geographic contexts, young activists' claims were mainly downplayed by a truancy frame with underlying ageist stereotypes (e.g. Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021), while in others, where their struggle was valued, their school strike disobedience provided them with a voice and overall media support (Jacobsson, 2021; Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023). However, their interventions were juxtaposed with adults' positions, in strategies of co-optation that impeded their proposals and identities from entering political debates (Homoláč and Mrázková, 2021). In some cases, the intergenerational conflict was amplified to such an extent that it may have hindered public acceptance of their actions (Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023). Moreover, media representations of young people's activism indicated that a legitimate engagement framework prevailed, i.e., the media mostly praised young people for participating in climate strikes but overlooked the important debates on the causes and solutions that they aimed to highlight (Bowman, 2020; Jacobsson, 2021; Santos et al., 2023). This shows that the juxtaposition of voices/texts in televised reporting, such as showcasing street interviews during the coverage of climate summits (COPs), and any attempts to praise their actions do not guarantee a representation of activists as relevant political actors (Harlow and Brown, 2023).

While many studies have embraced a critical viewpoint, none have yet explored the intertextuality in media pieces about young climate activists. This exploration would illustrate how journalists craft their narratives in response to existing discourses and in anticipation of future discussions. The role of journalists is pivotal in enabling different voices to "co-exist, orchestrate, or conflict" (Feng, 2016:4242), thus facilitating the reproduction and recontextualization of citizens' political concerns. This practice not only lends political legitimacy but also underscores the political and contentious nature of these interactions.

Given that young people are particularly susceptible to portrayals of political disengagement and are often sidelined in decision-making processes (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus, 2023), highlighting their perspectives and actions is crucial. These actions and perspectives represent a youth-driven collaborative effort in climate education and politics (Bowman, 2020) and serve as vital interventions in civic life, challenging the cultural and social narratives that could otherwise limit young people's actions and imaginations (Bowman and Germaine, 2022). Therefore, it is essential for mediators to underscore the transformative potential of these intertextual encounters with young people's voices, which can help emancipate and reshape societal ideas. It is particularly important to avoid enforcing a consensus with current societal agendas that falsely aligns activists and other actors when they are actually striving to disrupt the status quo and "business as usual" (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Discourse analysis can help discern communicative styles that illustrate different degrees of (de)legitimation dynamics in intertextuality. We understand that multimodal editing practices by journalists can promote semantic contact, as in "the meeting of meanings" (Gillespie, 2020:22), and reveal the extent to which different discourses and positions are open or closed to the perspective of the other (Fairclough, 1992b). For example, in a reportage, different interviews are combined to present different ideas and perspectives in interaction, while the narrator creates a story of how these differing views are positioned next to one other. As a result from this contact, openness to other perspectives can be strategic, as the prominence of semantic barriers may also be intentional, reifying discourses through rigid oppositions that contribute to stigmatisation and prejudice (MacKay, 2015). These barriers are by-products of the threatening potential of contact, which is visible in discourse (Gillespie, 2020). When opposing ideas interact, such as when actors that mainly contribute to hegemonic discourses of climate change promoted by the international governance regime encounter transformation attempts by the voice of activism, a "frame contraction" comes in response (Üzelgün et al., 2022). For instance, in discussing the utility of carbon offsetting in tackling climate change, clean-tech entrepreneurs persistently overlook the clearly expressed political aspects of the debate, responding to activist arguments only partially by resorting to a contracted frame of consumers and markets.

According to Gillespie (2020), semantic barriers include avoiding, delegitimising, and limiting. Strategies vary in their distance from creating opportunities for negotiation and debate, with *avoiding* being the most distant. This strategy involves not acknowledging the other party, rendering them invisible, and discrediting any disruptive ideas they may offer. In contrast, *delegitimising*, a strategy closer in proximity, acknowledges the existence of other

viewpoints but seeks to dismiss them by doubting their motives or status (Gillespie, 2020). Within this approach, the other party may be portrayed as ignorant or inconsistent through *ad hominem* criticisms directed toward the person/messenger rather than the content of the message itself. The most open strategy, *limiting*, focuses on the content of the message, accepting or recognising some aspects of other viewpoints while omitting or criticising others. This often manifests in “yes, but” concessive format, where the speaker acknowledges elements of the opposing viewpoint but ultimately undermines its significance (Castro and Santos, 2021). For instance, the speaker may limit disruptive ideas by isolating them in the past or rationalising them as one-time events - strategies that tend to justify the status quo (Gillespie, 2020).

We analyse whether intertextuality in television reportage encourages moments of connection or perpetuates these barriers. This occurs when political legitimacy is not granted to young people, restricting their ability to fully engage in discussions about political imaginaries that propose alternative and structural changes, as also advocated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Media professionals, working on in-depth explorations, such as television reportage, play a crucial role in legitimising diverse viewpoints and outlining various potential pathways for transformation. By examining intertextuality in terms of editorial and discursive choices, we enhance our understanding of how "respectful contestation" and the celebration of conflicting views towards alternatives can be envisioned and promoted in journalism without the fear that it may reinforce further conflict (e.g. Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023)

3. Journalism practices, the television reportage and material under analysis

The news report, often associated with intertextuality (Fairclough 1992b), serves the purpose of delivering information to an audience through various presentational elements, such as voice over, on-camera addresses, and interview segments (see Feng 2016). Journalists use these elements to present themselves as unbiased by balancing perspectives from different social actors (Feng 2016). However, the recontextualization of interviewees' statements to fulfil different discursive tasks can reproduce power relations without challenging established boundaries and meanings (Ekström, 2001). In particular, journalistic questioning reveals a tension between two major professional norms: objectivity and confrontation (Kaderka, 2023; Patrona, 2012; Okoliko and de Wit, 2023). This tension involves balancing distance from societal structures in the name of objectivity – potentially perpetuating the status quo –

against the need to challenge these structures. For instance, journalists often leverage the epistemic authority of certain social actors and types of knowledge to interpret how citizens may participate in the climate change debate (Carvalho, 2010), rather than questioning the structural nature of those relationships. Reflecting on the socio-cultural processes that deem certain social actors more legitimate than others is a crucial step toward encouraging citizen-led actions and interventions in the media space—indeed, a “bottom-up” perspective is the recommendation of many journalistic briefs for climate communication (e.g. in Brazil, Amaral et al., 2020). This approach promotes a more inclusive climate change discourse, expanding the space for mediated deliberation to incorporate a broader range of voices and perspectives. It especially seeks to avoid marginalizing those who are often exclusively viewed as victims of climate impacts or passive consumers of climate information (Okoliko and de Wit, 2023). Moreover, encouraging a political discussion may involve redirecting the conversation from an emphasis on scientists' evaluations of the physical causes and effects of climate change to addressing the societal origins, various strategies for transformation, and the contrasting visions and alternatives at play (Pepermans and Maesele, 2017).

For this study, to explore how different societal proposals for transformation are reconstructed in connection with young climate activism. We analyse a 17-minute reportage that was aired on January 4, 2023, during prime-time evening news. This extensive piece followed the school occupations in November 2022, during which student climate activists occupied two secondary schools and two universities in Lisbon, demanding a rapid end to fossil fuel projects. The escalation of protests, influenced by the international End Fossil-Occupy! movement, came after years of symbolic actions from the School Strike for Climate, which had led to limited progress and growing frustration among young climate activists due to continuous inaction and the alarming rise in CO₂ emissions. Thus, faced by the failure of governments and institutions, they are “taking back power” (End Fossil-Occupy, 2023).

In Portugal, media portrayals of symbolic actions and street demonstrations were mostly positive, although bordering on co-optation (Santos et al., 2023). This lengthy reportage was an opportunity to make sense of their change of tactics and to confront activists regarding the effectiveness of the action. Produced by SIC, one of the top commercial channels in Portugal, the reportage is entitled “The Disciples of Greta” (“Os Discípulos de Greta”). It showcases the stories of three young environmentalists, including one activist who participated in the occupations. Additionally, the reportage features other social actors, including one expert in climate change science, a teacher, and a leader of the student movement that played a role in overthrowing the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974.

4. Analytical method

The 17-minute TV reportage exhibits various forms of intertextuality, integrating different voices throughout (Xing and Feng, 2023). Modes (Kress, 2010), which some authors argue are better discerned as affordances (Machin D., 2016), consist of layers of semiotic resources that communicate complex meanings and ideas. These affordances can combine text, sound, and image, both allowing for and constraining different kinds of interactions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). In this study, we pay attention to the interplay of various semiotic resources and their sequence in either affording or hindering the exposure of conflicting perspectives that emerge in moments of intertextuality. We employ multimodal critical discourse analysis as our analytical framework to examine how identities, actions, and circumstances are re-interpreted, rejected, and concealed, as well as the political consequences of such dynamics (Machin D., 2013).

Our analytical approach included several stages. Firstly, we transcribed the reportage, accounting for the different modes. This involved transcribing the (1) talk, identifying each speaker (the three young activists, referred to as “disciples,” four adults, and the reporter’s voice over), (2) categorising the moving images by identifying visual frames (a total of 181 frames) and their progression, and (3) registering the news captions (a total of 34). To better understand the interplay of these semiotic resources, we used Elan, an open-source software that aided in transcribing the different modes of discourse.

Secondly, we analysed elements of intertextuality in the reportage. We not only singled out each participant and sequences of interaction involving each participant and others, but also paid careful attention to those instances where a speaker expressed first person claims, indirect speech, and reported speech i.e., the presence and the means of reporting of utterances of the self and others (Fairclough, 1992b; Wang et al., 2023). We also examined the orders of discourse in the multimodal piece at the level of genres and discourse (Farrelly, 2020 Xing and Feng, 2023). We looked at genres as a socially typified communication activity with specific positions for the interlocutors (Fairclough, 1992a). Using Kress and Leeuwen’s (2006) visual grammar (also used by Xing and Feng, 2023), we analysed a combination of different elements to help define these genres, such as the participant and the objects surrounding them, the way they moved and interacted (process), the circumstances in which they are represented (setting), and camera positioning. We also looked at intertextuality at the level of discourses as practices “to signify a domain of

knowledge or experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1992a: 215) and how they were made to interact by allowing (or not) negotiation and hybridity of meanings.

Thirdly, we analysed the extent to which the intertextual nature of the piece creates spaces of recognition of conflicting perspectives, with a particular focus on the role of editing choices in facilitating the visibility of differences. It is in the interactions between actors and discourses, and how different actors are brought into the reportage in diverse settings, that semantic barriers become more prominent (e.g. avoidance, delegitimising, limiting, Gillespie, 2008, 2020). We specifically looked at how these different actors were made to address each other and the perspectives they were defending, contributing to the creation/perpetuation of us-them boundaries.

Fourthly, we analysed how these contacts or barriers help establish conflict and dispute of perspectives while recognising the parties involved as legitimate political actors (or not). This should involve the acknowledgement, discussion, and critical examination of each other's voices (Phelan, 2022), enabling the discussion of alternative paths beyond the ones being currently paved.

5. Analysis: On the legitimacy of different means to the same end

One of the main issues discussed in the reportage is the disruptive dissent of young climate activists to claim the immediate end of fossil fuels: school/university occupations. We show two moments from the reportage that may have worked to delegitimise their place in climate change politics.

5.1 Addressing public concerns and criticisms

In Figure 1, Matilde Ventura, a prominent activist within the End Fossil-Occupy! movement and a primary interviewee in this reportage, responds to the reporter. Matilde initiates her response by stating, “We hear that criticism a lot, from people.” Although the specific criticism is not audible due to the journalist’s question being cut out, as it is common in this type of reportage (Kaderka, 2023), the audience grasps the context of the response from its content: instead of advocating for occupying schools, activists are advised to consider being present in Parliament where negotiation and decision-making take place. Notably, Matilde does not solely address the reporter but extends her response to encompass “people,” framing the reporter’s perspective as representative of the public (Clayman, 2007). Matilde effectively utilises reported speech to acknowledge the reporter’s perspective as representative of the

public, establishing a boundary between the activists and the audience, indicating a lack of direct contact (Castro and Santos, 2021). It can be inferred that the reporter lent legitimacy to societal concerns, suggesting that political claims-making requires specific settings, such as the Parliament building.

Figure 1. Excerpt “Schools are the space that society has chosen for us to project ourselves into the future”

Screenshot	Audio layer Transcription
 News caption: young people pledge to carry on with occupations	Matilde Ventura’s voice-off: we hear that criticism a lot...
 News caption: young people pledge to carry on with occupations	...from people; they say “you should be in the Parliament instead”.
 News caption: young people pledge to carry on with occupations	We have already been to the Parliament, we have also been to the Ministry of Economy. Before this action. And nothing had happened.



Matilde Ventura: Schools are the space that society has chosen for us to project ourselves into the future. And this future, I'm not sure if it's going to happen.

News caption: young people pledge to carry on with occupations

Matilde's statement begins with a voice-off, accompanied by footage of young people surrounded by the police. Importantly, as she challenges the criticism that "they should be in the Parliament," the sequence unfolds with images of the police first, followed by their facing off with protesters, and finally transitioning to the interview setting after the images of protesters seated on the streets. While Matilde argues that schools are privileged spaces for claims-making, the decontextualized images emphasise confrontation and tension outside school grounds, establishing a protest frame (Cottle, 2008; Harlow and Brown, 2023), showcasing a place of suppression and control rather than a venue for claims-making. This example utilises different settings and social practices with distinct opportunities for voice. In one setting, a young activist is interviewed, while in another, activists are seen in the streets being controlled by the police, suppressing the protesters.

Yet, Matilde is offered the opportunity to provide information not covered in the visual layers: they had been in the Parliament and other institutional venues, but "nothing had happened." She suggests that the lack of action compelled them to resort to direct action. Matilde asserts, in her intervention, that schools are ideal spaces for young people to project and claim their future. The activist responds to societal concerns that their actions may be unlawful or illegitimate, asserting their rights as political actors. Asserting that traditional routes for claim-making are ineffective, she emphasises the urgency of their acts and their involvement by drawing from a post-apocalyptic scenario. Her argument carries both emotional and ethical weight, contending that they are not denied a future by the very same actors who want to keep them at school to, supposedly, build that future. This situation presents an important opportunity for clarification, facilitated by the editing of this piece and exemplifies how the interaction between the journalist and the interviewee fosters an

important space for discussion. The juxtaposition of the street images, however, highlighted the tension arising from their disruptive actions.

5.2 Comparing different young activists

Figure 2 features Francisco, another young person working to “defend the planet”. As will be clarified below, Francisco’s position is reconstructed via different multimodal relations than those of Matilde. In his first appearance, he is featured in a classroom, standing, and addressing his audience. The contrast is evident also in the reporter’s presentation of Francisco as a person who shares the same anxieties and fears as Matilde but “their methods are different”. The reporter thus connects the two interviews by presenting them as two alternatives, united in their ends or goals, divergent in the means they use.

Figure 2. Excerpt “I believe that young people like me have to bring irreverence to the political discourse”

Screenshot	Audio Layer Transcription
 News caption: Francisco teaches and provides training to other young people	Journalist’s voice over: Francisco and Matilde have the same aspirations and concerns, but their methods are different.
 News caption: Francisco exchanged the car for a scooter.	Francisco Araújo: I believe that young people like me must bring irreverence to the political discourse, but above all, we have to convey a message with substance because that will determine whether we prevent society from polarising.

In presenting his position, Francisco appears in a rather formal shoulder-cut, wearing a tailored suit and a tie, also employing a concessive format: he first acknowledges the need for “young people like me” to influence the political discourse, but he advocates for involvement with a “substantive message” to “prevent societal polarisation”. Employing a “yes, but” construction, he first identifies with the broader group of young people, then dissociates himself from a particular group of young people (Üzelgün et al., 2015). The previous voice over indicates that it is the young people leading the occupations who lack sophisticated arguments, bearing responsibility for polarisation. The intertextuality of the reportage here operates in a way to accentuate the dissociation offered by Francisco between two forms of dissent in youth action (O’Brien et al., 2018).

Notably, as Francisco speaks about the need for a message with “substance,” the news caption mentions his switch from a car to a scooter, accentuating the individual actions and behaviours, a strategy that downplays the importance of collective and political action, as reported in other media analyses (Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021). Francisco and, importantly, the editing decisions limit (Gillespie, 2020) the perspective of the young people that led occupations and downplay their strategy of conflict and confrontation in stirring relationships of power and decision-making.

The temporal organisation and intertextual sequence of voices in this example deny Matilde, the representative of young activists leading direct action, the opportunity to respond to the criticism that their movement “lacks substance.” The journalist also does not question Francisco’s “methods” in a way to openly discuss the forms of action he represents and other forms of participation and political imagination. Television editing fails in this sense to explore the points of tension and productive encounter between different forms of action and how they enable or disrupt hegemonic ideas of participation. The call for consensus is embodied by Francisco, who does not contest established power relations, featuring, in his visual presence, communication strategies akin to those between a teacher and students in a classroom, since he “teaches and provides training to other young people” (news caption). By alluding to the process of education and unidirectional paths of communication, the piece effectively restricts discursive spaces for imagining alternatives forms of participation and interaction in climate politics.

6. On epistemic capacity and legitimacy

The reportage also questions the legitimacy of young people in participating in climate politics in view of their scientific *knowledge* of the topic, instead of based on their *right* to demand a better future. In the interaction between young climate activists and, first, a climate change scientist, then a teacher, journalistic decisions stabilise who possesses the epistemic capacity and legitimacy.

6.1 Interacting with the voice of scientists

As a second key encounter, the reportage offers an interaction between a leading climate change scientist in Portugal (and review editor of the 5th edition of the IPCC AR) and Matilde (Figure 3). In this interaction, the scientist appears in an interview expressing disappointment with young people's climate literacy despite supporting their activism. Matilde then is allowed to reply to that accusation. This recontextualization, which results from editorial decisions, affords the possibility for young activists, personified by Matilde, to enter the debate on the role of young people in the climate struggle.

Figure 3. Excerpt “What is sometimes disappointing is that the level of education and information that these activists have is actually very low”

Screenshot	Audio Layer Transcription
 News caption: The planet is at risk of becoming uninhabitable.	Journalist's voice over: But it was the struggle of young people
	that brought the environment into the media agenda, albeit with a less rigorous and simpler discourse.

News caption: The struggle of young people put the topic of the environment on the agenda.



Filipe Duarte Santos: These [direct] actions are, in the end, to be expected to happen. What is sometimes disappointing is that the level of education and information that these activists have is actually very low.

News caption: The struggle of young people put the topic of the environment on the agenda.



Matilde Ventura: I am 18 years old, I can't explain all the intricacies of undergoing an energy transition and a drastic systemic change. I feel like I know enough, but sometimes when I'm asked to talk about super-specific things and super-specific alternatives, I... I can't speak about it. Because I'm not an expert, there are experts. I'm just trying to claim the future that I am entitled to.

News caption: The struggle of young people put the topic of the environment on the agenda.

Right before this interaction, the journalist explains that climate scientists have worked for many years to warn societies about the causes and risks of a changing climate. This reporter's voice-over is accompanied by images that have become standard, such as melting ice blocks, declaring, as reflected also in the news caption that "The planet is at risk of becoming uninhabitable." This helps to position the voice of the reportage itself as attentive to the serious risks involved. In a supportive tone towards the "young people's struggle", the voice over acknowledges their contribution in increasing the visibility of the cause but qualifies it as having been carried out "in a less rigorous and simpler" way. Subsequently, a climate scientist appears in an interview.

The scientist says that the level of young people's knowledge is “actually very low”, a statement that suggests that environmental advocates must be well-versed in science and implicitly delegitimising arguments grounded on other rights, such as the right to a future, as asserted by Matilde. The tension unveiled here highlights the consideration of citizenship as something earned rather than an immediate right to voice (Couldry, 2010). While Matilde discusses climate change in relation to values of social, political, and social priorities, the scientist’s involvement in the piece tends to confine the debate in the domain of scientific knowledge, contracting the politics of climate change to epistemic considerations (Üzelgün et al., 2022). Crucially, these considerations are constructed to operate as a gate which the young activists are required to pass to be considered as legitimate actors.

In her edited intervention, Matilde reiterates the important role of climate experts *while* emphasising that young people’s struggle is about amplifying their voice as the group most concerned and affected by climate inaction. She thereby attempts to bridge the gap occasioned between scientists and activists, arguing that young people like herself have an important role in raising awareness and experts are the ones responsible to explain “the intricacies” of an energy transition. By acknowledging that she “can't speak about” some “super-specific” details, she presents herself as a reasonable actor who recognises the epistemic hierarchy. Consequently, her perspective suggests that both scientists and activists hold legitimate positions, and that what each knows is sufficient for their varied claims and objectives.

The encounter with the scientist is thus presented in a way that tends to delegitimise the young activists’ current position in climate change action. The intertextuality operates in a way to pull the carpet from under the movement, compromising the transformative power of young activists’ voices. Crucially, while the scientist and reporter reinforce epistemic authority based on scientific knowledge, Matilde attempts to level their emotional experience of uncertainty as equally relevant for her political voice to be *heard*.

6.2 Juxtaposing the teacher’s voice on school occupations

The educational system, and the voice of the teacher, also plays a role in this reportage, albeit more visually than verbally, with an encounter fashioned through images (Figure 4). The teacher appears first within the citizenship class in which she tries to “incentivise student awareness on environmental issues”. She then criticises the congruency of the young people’s call to end fossil fuels.

Figure 4. Excerpt “Do all of you truly know the reasons why you are fighting?”

Screenshot	Audio Layer Transcription
	Reporter’s voice over: The recent youth movement didn’t catch her by surprise. Not even the most radical protests.
News caption: Teacher is hopeful when it comes to the youngest ones	
	Teresa Pacheco: They engage in these types of actions, they protest, but then their behaviours don't change. They want to end fossil fuels, but maybe they don't want to walk to school. Perhaps they want to continue going by car.
News caption: Teacher is hopeful when it comes to the youngest ones	
	Activists (screaming/chanting): Occupy Camões High School, Occupy Camões High School, Occupy Camões High School, Occupy Camões High School!
News caption: Teacher is hopeful when it comes to the youngest ones	



News caption: Teacher is hopeful when it comes to the youngest ones

Teresa Pacheco (voice-off): Do all of you truly know the reasons why you are fighting? The end of fossil fuels...



News caption: There are doubts whether young people know what they are fighting for

... Do you understand the implications of ending fossil fuels?

The teacher is shown to understand the perspective of young people and their pressing concerns. Young people are advocating for something perceived as consensual and shared by all. However, the teacher accuses them of inconsistency, pointing out that despite their protests, there are no discernible signs of individual and behavioural change. This *tu quoque* argument – a specific kind of *ad hominem* attack, literally, “and you”? – can be devastating for its target’s legitimacy, as it exposes hypocrisy (Aikin, 2008). By pointing out that the activists do not practise what they preach, the teacher’s intervention tends to delegitimise (Gillespie, 2008) the whole youth movement. To cast the inconsistency claim, the teacher presupposes a higher relevance and importance of individual action in climate impact, downplaying the potential of collective action in fostering social transformation (Carvalho et al., 2021; Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021).

The interplay between the images of the teacher and those of the students occupying schools performs two functions: 1) to identify the precise target of the teacher’s criticism, and 2) to depict young people unwilling or incapable to answer to her criticism. The teacher expresses doubts about young people’s knowledge, reinforcing her own role as a teacher and establishing the relationship of the knowledgeable and the unknowledgeable. The passive

form of the screen caption sentence – “There are doubts whether young people know what they are fighting for” – implies that there may be more people thinking the same way. Utilising stereotypical representations of young people as uninformed and apolitical (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus, 2023), the teacher insinuates that their participation in protests is superficial and lacks informed reasoning. The teacher, sceptical of their radical demand for an immediate end to fossil fuels, insinuates that they do not grasp the complexities of an energy transition. It is also crucial to note that this segment marks one of the final sections of the reportage and conveys one of its concluding messages. As suggested above, this delegitimising strategy had been absent in Portuguese media so far (Almeida, 2022; Santos et al., 2023).

7. Discussion

This article delves into multimodal intertextuality in a television report exploring the extent to which it creates spaces for “respectful contestation” (Maesele and Raeijmaekers, 2020) in the representation of young climate activism. We analysed the journalistic choices involved in mediating activists’ arguments and interactions. In examining a lengthy piece in-depth, we observed how journalists juxtapose different social actors and their discourses.

Editorial choices may have worked to discredit the voices of young climate activists leading school occupations while attempting to retain an appearance of neutrality (Clayman, 2007; Ekström, 2001; Patrona, 2012). The piece (re-)created power dynamics that rendered some youth discourses more legitimate than others, thereby obscuring their diverse political imaginaries, and perpetuating a post-political ethos (Swyngedouw, 2007).

This piece may signal a new phase in the reporting of young climate activism, at least in Portugal. In the earlier phase, between 2019 and 2021 (Almeida, 2022; Santos et al., 2023), the representation of the youth movement was considerably more positive than in other countries (Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021; Jacobsson, 2021). More importantly, young people’s voices were often depicted as reflecting a shared sentiment, largely because of their construal as a generic claim for more stringent action, which is not necessarily at odds with hegemonic discourses (Marquardt, 2020). The examined reportage offers clues on how the unified image of young people can be divided into two types: a disagreeable, petty, and rather strongly criticised form of youth activism, and a docile, professional, and acceptable form of youth action focused on education and individual behaviour change (see Castro et al., 2016; Marquardt, 2020). This distinction largely hinges

on the perceived acceptability of their differing discourses and political imaginaries. The first group is largely constructed as ineligible and speaks from a delegitimised place in climate politics because they challenge the status quo (O'Brien et al., 2018). In contrast, the second group, inscribed within the limits of the dominant political imaginary (McAfee, 2017), is represented as capable and in its legitimate place, namely inside the classroom. In the piece's depiction, docile activists actually appear in a (relatively) empowered position, that of the lecturer.

We demonstrated how this piece ultimately worked to delegitimise (Van Dijk, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2007) and, in certain cases, diminish the value of school occupations and other forms of disruptive dissent in climate politics (Gillespie, 2020). The reportage was structured in ways that left young climate activists without a platform to respond to accusations or negotiate their concerns in a broader debate with the other voices involved. This suggests the need for two key considerations in journalistic practice: 1) Who is invited to engage with or challenge young people and their political visions? More specifically, what voices, perspectives and values are chosen to confront young activist proposals? 2) Do those voices – and, critically, their media reconstruction (through selection, interplay, salience, etc.) – foster meaningful discussion on the issues presented, or do they operate in ways that shut down the debate?

By relying solely on the voices of established and dominant discourses—such as a teacher or climate scientist—, the reportage fails to recognize young people's ways of knowing and their visions of "drastic change" (Bowman, 2020; Bowman and Germaine, 2022). Ethnographic research on occupations shows that, during these events, young people often experiment with equitable and horizontal forms of social interaction, prefiguring the future that they aspire to create (Castro, 2024). However, the reportage grants epistemic authority to biophysical disciplines and their representatives (Carvalho, 2010; Peeples and Depoe, 2014), which reinforced ageist portrayals by emphasizing the “immaturity” and “lack of knowledge” of young climate activists (Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020). We argue that an exclusive focus on STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) may inadvertently overlook the social, ethical, and political dimensions of the debate. Notably, no experts from humanities or social sciences were featured in the reportage. This omission exemplifies how the political imaginaries of young activists were disregarded and left undiscussed by experts that have also worked to envision these changes. A recent analysis of this activist group's communication in Portugal indicates that there is no lack of substantive content, contrary to what the reportage suggests. In fact, they reflect on societal

transformation in complex ways, without ever disregarding science and scholarly perspectives (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024).

Media attention on young activists, especially through a dedicated in-depth reportage, remains crucial for the visibility of the movement (Cammaerts, 2012). Our case study, due to its length and diverse perspectives, featured claims and counter-claims that are essential for identifying alternative political imaginaries. Showcasing conflicting views is important, but requires further debate. The recontextualization of the voice of the actors could have helped to thematise their positions further (Ekström, 2001), particularly, by crediting young people with an adversarial representation in relation to social actors that hold more power in shaping ideas, values, and identities. Recognizing political action is equally important, if not more so, than individual efforts in combating climate change—a stance the reportage seems to obscure by emphasizing individual actions over youth-led protests and broader transformative change.

Further research could focus on how editorial decisions are made in producing timely debates and on how editors, journalists, and reporters utilise established journalistic genres to shape the unfolding of these debates (e.g., Kaderka, 2023). Interviews with journalists highlight a gap between acknowledged practices and actual execution, influenced by various interrelated factors, on how journalists perform their duties, adhere to journalistic norms, and function within their professional environments (Okoliko and de Wit, 2023). Specifically, more research is needed to examine how differing opinions are constructed as polarizing to varying degrees. This sometimes results in moralizing dichotomies (Vochocová and Rosenfeldová, 2023). Alternatively, journalism can promote greater diversity by fostering a common democratic understanding (Phelan, 2022). When different views clash, it is not merely as a question of “who is right”. Rather, it involves presenting conflicting viewpoints as valuable material for thinking beyond established discourses and structures, offering a nuanced and complex mediated field on political causes and solutions. Evidently, the precarity of the profession, and the limited level of editorial freedom influence journalistic processes in news report production, potentially creating barriers for this kind of discourse (Okoliko and de Wit, 2023). Nevertheless, newsrooms, as well as journalism training, should encourage spaces for discussing the political value of “respectful contestation” for diversity and how mediated communication can foster such an ethos.

Funding: This work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Portugal under grant PTDC/COM-OUT/7669/2020 (<http://doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/COM-OUT/7669/2020>).

Declarations of interest: none

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