

Climate responsibility in Finnish tabloid media

Analysing the shift from individual action to institutional accountability, 2019-2023

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Abstract

This study explores how climate responsibility was portrayed in Finland's largest tabloid newspaper, Ilta-Sanomat, in 2019 and 2023. The analysis approaches climate change as a structural injustice, drawing on Iris Marion Young's concept of the Social Connection Model of responsibility (SCM). The content analysis was conducted using a conceptual framework based on the SCM. The findings reveal a notable shift from emphasising individual responsibility and action in 2019 to focusing on institutional and national responsibility in 2023. The role of individuals transitioned from active agents to passive subjects of climate legislation. This may reflect the successful advancement of official climate politics, but it may also be seen as a result of major global crises and societal changes that occurred between 2019 and 2023. The SCM proved to be a structured yet flexible framework for qualitative text analysis. This study argues that the SCM can be effectively adapted beyond philosophy to analyse public discourse in mainstream media texts.

Keywords

Iris Marion Young, Social Connection Model, climate responsibility, tabloid media

Introduction

“Does a vegan diet, boycotting air travel or switching to an electric car really reduce your carbon footprint? Sitra’s recent report shows what changes Finns can make to reduce their climate burden”. (Ilta-Sanomat 17.5.2019)

“Finland threatens to fall behind the climate goals set by the EU [European Union] due to the reduction of carbon sinks”. (Ilta-Sanomat 9.5.2023)

The two excerpts above, published four years apart, are from the leading Finnish tabloid newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat*. Both are leads of climate change news, published in May 2019 and 2023, respectively. They illustrate the subtle yet important shift in how climate change – and particularly climate responsibility – has been framed recently. This article offers a detailed and analytical examination of this shift by analysing changes in the portrayal of climate responsibility from 2019 to 2023 in Finland and explores how the tabloid press articulates responsibility in the context of climate change.

In recent years, environmental journalism has faced challenges due to digitalisation, shifting media consumption habits, staff reductions, declining subscriptions, and growing competition (Lyytimäki et al., 2020). However, previous studies show that climate change is not a marginal issue in Finnish mainstream media (Vikström et al., 2023). The research focus has traditionally been on the leading broadsheet paper *Helsingin Sanomat* (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2017; Lyytimäki, 2011, 2015; Ridanpää, 2022) or National Broadcasting Company YLE (Vikström et al., 2023). Therefore, this research also addresses the underrepresentation of tabloid media in Finnish climate media research.

Tabloid journalism is characterised by a subjective and personalised reporting style, with a focus on entertainment, emotions, sports, and celebrities. The tabloids’ tendency to prioritise personal lives over in-depth political or economic analysis has traditionally been considered detrimental to political debate and society (Wasserman, 2019). The same has been said of the tabloidisation of climate news (M. T. Boykoff, 2008b). Although the Finnish tradition of tabloids is less sensational, and they appeal to a more diverse audience compared to their British counterparts (Kivioja, 2018), they still use an emotional style of reporting, adopt a human-interest point of view, and a discourse in which systems and elites are routinely set against individuals and everyday life. Finnish tabloids can be positioned somewhere in the middle of Serious-Popular Press and The Newsstand Tabloid Press, where the style of reporting leans on the human interest, content emphasises entertainment and sports, while still sharing many of the same news values as the broadsheet papers (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000, p. 15). However, climate scepticism is given only a minor role in Finnish tabloid journalism (Kumpu, 2023).

The emotional and simplifying style of reporting in tabloid media is not necessarily detrimental to public understanding. Tabloids serve a role in providing an alternative public sphere, providing a platform for voices sometimes excluded from prestige media, and addressing issues that are overlooked in the mainstream media (Örnebring & Jönsson,

2004). They help readers to make sense of the world and provide self-help tips (Wasserman, 2019). This makes tabloid news a particularly interesting case for examining journalism's manner of distributing climate responsibility, especially given its potential to frame it in ways that resonate with the collective identity of its readers.

Due to the event-centred nature of journalism, peaks in climate change reporting often focus on climate summits and other internationally significant occasions (Eide & Kunelius, 2020, p. 164; see also Kunelius, 2014, p. 69). The publication of the IPCC's *1.5°C Report* was a notable event, which garnered significant publicity and led to a sharp increase in news stories globally, including in Finland, with the momentum continuing into 2019 and even 2020 (Boykoff et al., 2019; Lyytimäki et al., 2020). While focused events serve as a good starting point, this study aims to go further. Eide and Kunelius write: "Ideally, journalism can support the sense of urgency and the need for systemic, policy-level reactions and solutions, thus politicising and energising the national climate debates and solutions" (2020, p. 168). Therefore, a longer research period is needed to understand how the media's coverage of climate change evolves over time.

Journalism doesn't happen in a vacuum. The political system, the structure of the political field, and national stakes in climate politics – just to mention a few relevant aspects – shape media coverage of climate change (Kunelius, 2014). As Kunelius observes, there are always underlying political and economic currents that also shape the journalistic content, in addition to news criteria. The research period of this study, spanning from 2019 to 2023, coincides with global and national events that significantly impacted society. In 2019 and 2023, Finland held parliamentary elections that reshaped the country's political power relations and affected its climate policy. It is therefore expected that public debates and social discourse intensify during election periods. Besides domestic politics, the global COVID-19 pandemic led governments to impose unprecedented restrictions on people's daily lives. Shortly after, the war between Russia and Ukraine, along with the rapidly changing geopolitical dynamics, ultimately led Finland to abandon its position of neutrality and join NATO. These events have inevitably influenced the media's perception of the roles of society and the government. Overlooking their impact on the framing of climate responsibility would be short-sighted.

Climate change is a systemic, global, and ongoing problem, and questions of *justice* and *responsibility* are deeply embedded in climate change debates. While closely connected, these terms are not synonymous. Climate justice is a normative framework concerned with the fairness of distributing the costs and efforts associated with mitigating climate change. It considers historical emissions and moral obligations related to emissions, as well as the social, geopolitical, and financial inequalities among nations (Grasso, 2004). In contrast, climate responsibility is concerned with the practical allocation of duties addressing climate change, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, creating and maintaining

carbon sinks, and developing clean energy (Caney, 2011, p. 60). Climate responsibility can be examined at multiple levels, such as personal (Schwenkenbecher, 2014), generational (Keij & van Meurs, 2023), corporate (Hormio, 2017), or political (Sardo, 2023) responsibilities – depending on the chosen perspective.

The distinction between justice and responsibility is sometimes blurred in the literature, and their meanings overlap. This is particularly evident when responsibility is framed in terms of remedying past harms. This perspective is closely aligned with justice, as those who have contributed to climate damage are seen as responsible for addressing it (Friman & Hjerpe, 2015). However, when responsibility is discussed in a forward-looking context, it refers to the duty to act now or in the future (Young, 2006). In such cases, climate justice serves as the foundation for determining how these duties and responsibilities should be allocated.

Developing a conceptual framework to better understand public discussions on climate responsibility forms the theoretical basis of this study. Using Iris Marion Young's Social Connection Model of responsibility (Young & Nussbaum, 2011), I will develop a framework to analyse how responsibility for climate change is attributed and operationalise this model for the analysis of news texts. With this framework, I will describe how journalistic coverage of climate responsibility has evolved in recent, turbulent years.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, this study aims to explore how Young's Social Connection Model can serve as a foundation for qualitative text analysis. By applying this framework, the study examines how climate responsibility is discussed in media coverage, particularly in the context of political events and shifts over time. By examining these issues, we can gain a deeper understanding of how journalism affects the relationship between society, human activities, and the natural environment. The research focuses on two key questions:

Research Question 1

How was responsibility perceived and attributed in climate change news in *Ilta-Sanomat* during the politically intense months surrounding the Finnish Parliamentary Elections in 2019 and 2023?

Research Question 2

How did the coverage of climate responsibility in *Ilta-Sanomat* change over the four years from 2019 to 2023, in terms of attribution, tone, and content?

The article is structured as follows: In Section 2, I will introduce Iris Marion Young's Social Connection Model (SCM) and briefly visit the key criticisms it has received. I will then examine how it has been applied in the context of climate change. Section 3 introduces my data and explains in detail how I operationalised SCM's theoretical framework into a practical text analysis method. I present the findings of the analysis in Sections 4 (RQ1)

and 5 (RQ2). In Section 6, I discuss the possible explanations behind the results and the implications of the analysis, and I conclude the article by evaluating the adaptability of SCM as a method for text analysis.

Media, SCM, and climate responsibility

Media outlets, such as newspapers, television, and online platforms, continue to play an important role in shaping public understanding of climate change. Thus, the media has a strong impact on people's awareness and attitudes towards climate change (Schäfer & Painter, 2021). A large number of studies focus on media representation of climate change in a particular country or area, e.g., global north or south (Boykoff et al., 2019; M. T. Boykoff, 2008b; Ejaz & Najam, 2023; Freeman, 2017; Guenther et al., 2023; Kundzewicz et al., 2019), or in different media forms, such as television, tabloids, or broadsheet papers (M. T. Boykoff, 2008a; Gillings & Dayrell, 2024; Hart & Feldman, 2014).

This study approaches the subject from the perspective of responsibility. Studies have found that, even though anthropogenic climate change is widely acknowledged, the attribution of climate responsibility varies, and the media frames the issue differently depending on the geopolitical context of the country (Murali et al., 2021; Post et al., 2019). Chang et al. (2016) found that the choice of news channel for science-related content influenced how South Korean audiences attributed climate responsibility to the government or corporations. Eckersley (2013) compared how Norwegian and Australian leaders constructed their respective discourses on climate responsibility. Media attribution of climate responsibility has been examined by Liu and Huang (2023), who compared how *China Daily* and *The New York Times* framed climate responsibilities, and by Post et al. (2019), who analysed how the UNFCCC's concept of common but differentiated responsibility was represented in the media of developed and emerging economies. These studies predominantly approach the concept of responsibility from a global perspective, with primary focus on the attribution of responsibility. Eckersley (2013) treats climate responsibility as a national and political issue. Both Post et al. Liu and Huang approach responsibility using Iyengar's causal (i.e., backward-looking) and treatment (forward-looking) responsibility framework (Iyengar, 1996).

Few studies have examined the intersection of climate change, responsibility, and journalism – particularly where responsibility is framed not merely as a matter of international climate policy, but as a broader societal issue shaped through media discourse. This highlights a research gap in understanding how media shapes perceptions of responsibility among different societal actors. Iris Marion Young's SCM offers a valuable framework for addressing this gap. From this perspective, SCM is well-suited to a climate responsibility and media context for two reasons: First, it approaches responsibility as a means to mitigate structural injustice, such as climate change. Second, it approaches responsibility as a multi-faceted concept, not just as a financial obligation or a topic of political debate. I

will next describe SCM and briefly address the criticism it has received, before elaborating on how this theoretical framework has been applied in the context of climate change.

Young addresses responsibility through the concept of structural injustice. She defines structural injustice as a social process that puts large numbers of people at risk while enabling others to benefit from the same processes. Structural injustice causes suffering without anyone intentionally meaning to do harm. Structural injustice is a by-product of individuals and institutions acting within the norms of society (Young & Nussbaum, 2011).

Young makes a clear distinction between the SCM and what she calls the Liability Model of responsibility, which she defines as backward-looking, with the purpose of condemning some people while absolving others. Although Young acknowledges that the Liability Model is indispensable for legal systems, she argues that it is inadequate for addressing structural injustice, because it is impossible to determine and separate the extent to which each individual contributes to the harm, and how that should be corrected (Young & Nussbaum, 2011).

Young (Young & Nussbaum, 2011) defines the SCM through five key features. The SCM *resists isolating* those who have directly contributed to the harm, thereby absolving others from bearing responsibility. It emphasises the need to consider *background conditions* – such as political, financial, or social structures of society – that reproduce the injustice. By doing so, the SCM highlights the collective, systemic nature of the responsibility. It stresses the importance of *looking forward* and determining how to correct the harm in the future. Finally, the model views the responsibility as *shared*, emphasising that everyone bears some responsibility, but no one bears it alone. All individuals connected to structural injustice are responsible for it, and therefore, *collective action* is needed to discharge it. Structural processes change only when thousands, or even millions of individuals participating in them alter the way they act. Consequently, Young argues that “the responsibility derived from social connection, then, is ultimately political responsibility” (Young, 2006, p. 123). By this, she refers to both government actions and citizen actions in civil society. Collective political action can mean many things, from traditional political activity to community work and protests (Sardo, 2023, p. 40).

McKeown (2021b) has systematically summarised the critiques presented towards the SCM. I will briefly discuss some aspects of the critique that I find relevant to my current study. Young’s decision to focus on the future and not on backward-looking blame has met criticism. Goodin and Barry (2021) particularly criticise the rejection of the Liability Model. They argue that in Young’s SCM, agents have no incentive to act, because if they are not held responsible for the past, they assume they will not be held responsible in the future either (see also Barry & Ferracioli, 2013). Goodin and Barry also argue that the SCM distributes responsibility unfairly, as responsibility to address the harm is not based on the amount of one’s contribution to it. Zheng has defended the SCM against such criticism,

arguing that while blame is not distributed to each culpable individual, this doesn't mean that agents would be absolved of their failures to work toward structural transformation (2019, p. 120). She also emphasises that when we face structural injustices, we are all so deeply responsible that keeping track of each harm would be pointless. Zheng (2019) points out that looking forward does not mean a lack of critique, but rather that critique is constructive and forward-looking instead of focusing on past wrongdoings.

Young states that *all* the actors – including the victims – of an unjust structure bear *some* responsibility. As Moellendorf (2021, p. 278) points out, the SCM risks victim-blaming. However, Young argues that “it is they who know the most about the harms they suffer, and thus it is up to them, though not them alone, to broadcast their situation and call it injustice” (Young & Nussbaum, 2011, p. 146). At least theoretically, as McKeown points out, this also grants agency to victims (2021a, p. 7).

Young (2006) used sweatshops and the global apparel industry as an example while developing the Social Connection Model. The model has since been applied to analyse many issues, such as colonial slave trade and slavery (Bessone, 2019; McKeown, 2021a), corporate responsibility (Phillips & Schrempf-Stirling, 2022), women's position in a patriarchal society (Kamishima, 2019), and global poverty (Moellendorf, 2021). McKeown argues that, indeed, “any field that is concerned with structural inequalities, disadvantage, or oppression, can utilize structural injustice theory” (2021a, p. 1; for a more comprehensive summary of the application of the SCM in different fields of research, see McKeown 2021b).

In recent years, the SCM has also been applied to climate change (Eckersley, 2016; Godoy, 2017; Keij & van Meurs, 2023; Larrère, 2018; Sardo, 2023). Climate change is a global problem, where the harm is both caused and maintained by the structures of society, which are reproduced by people living their everyday lives. Often, people and areas that are most vulnerable to the consequences of global warming are also the people that are poor and lands which are underdeveloped, with fewer resources for climate adaptation. At the same time, the affluent Western lifestyle is a major driver of greenhouse gas emissions. Already in 1992, the UNFCCC treaty acknowledged the unjust nature of climate change and the different positions of the nations in relation to it. The treaty expressed the global nature of climate change and the common but differentiated responsibilities that nations carried depending on their social and economic conditions (UNFCCC, 1992). Alongside the UNFCCC, the IPCC (2018) has similarly raised the issue of unequal distribution of the harms of global warming and its effects on the poor and vulnerable. In the *1.5°C Report*, the IPCC points out that the worst impact of global warming often falls on those countries that are least responsible for the problem.

Given the systemic and complex nature of climate change, it is very difficult to precisely define the extent to which various acts and agents contribute to the crisis. Distributing causal responsibility is thus a very complicated matter (Huggel et al., 2016; Müller et

al., 2009). This lends support to Young's argument that reliance on the Liability Model is insufficient to address responsibility for structural injustices.

Catherine Larrère elaborates further how the Liability Model "cannot be used to assign responsibility to private individuals for actions that are conducive to climate change but cannot be considered wrong" (2018, p. 433). The phenomenon is caused by millions of individual actions, and furthermore, more often than not, those actions are integral parts of our everyday lives; actions we take without intending any harm (Larrère, 2018). Therefore, isolating wrongdoers and distributing blame can be difficult and is not particularly helpful in solving the problem. However, as individuals not only participate in but also benefit from the structures causing the harm, they cannot escape responsibility (Sardo, 2023, p. 27).

Eckersley (2016) shows how the SCM, together *with* the Liability Model can help to address the problems of climate change and discuss who should be responsible for it. While Larrère (2018) has laid out the benefits of the SCM, Eckersley makes a case for not rejecting the Liability Model entirely.

Given the all-encompassing nature of climate change, emphasis on individual responsibility seems pointless. Therefore, collective responsibility at the national and institutional levels seems to be called for. However, as climate change is a global problem, its effects are "trans-boundary, making it hard to give out responsibilities to the different countries involved" (Larrère, 2018, p. 432). Although nations have taken some responsibility by committing to climate agreements, political issues still stand in the way of solutions, Larrère argues. The SCM addresses this problem: Responsibility is shared by each agent connected to the injustice, but only discharged by collective action. This approach acknowledges the political nature of the problem but does not absolve individuals of their responsibility. On the contrary, only individuals are able to change the structures they reproduce.

Data and method

Data

Ilta-Sanomat is the biggest tabloid in Finland. Its circulation (print and digital combined) in 2019 was 2,370,000 and in 2023 was 2,860,600, making *Ilta-Sanomat* the widest-reaching media outlet in Finland (Media Audit Finland, 2020; Media Metrics Finland, 2023). Readers, especially younger ones, are increasingly moving from print to tabloid websites, which also reach an audience across all socioeconomic groups (Kivioja, 2018, pp. 121-123).

The data for this research consists of news articles published on the *iltasanomat.fi* website between 1.1.2019-30.6.2019 and 1.1.2023-30.6.2023. Stories were retrieved from the digital archive of *iltasanomat.fi* using the website's search engine. The most commonly used Finnish word for climate change, *ilmastonmuutos*, was used as a search term. All the sections (news, columns, etc.) of *Ilta-Sanomat* were included in the search to ensure that

all content relating to climate change was found. All content on *iltasanomat.fi* was free and accessible without login or payment during the data collection periods.

From this initial harvest of texts, I first excluded all content that was not closely related to news, such as weather reports and opinion pieces. The final data included editorials, news articles, and journalistic commentary. This left me with 106 stories from 2019 and 120 stories from 2023 that mentioned climate change in a relevant news context. I then applied the SCM analysis framework. Of the 106 texts included in the 2019 data, 81 were coded using the framework. Similarly, of the 120 texts in the 2023 data, 80 were coded.

Because I collected the data using only one term – *climate change* – the original dataset also included stories that mentioned climate change without any connection to responsibility. For example, in 2019, President Trump's climate-sceptic views were mentioned in several stories. Sauli Niinistö, the president of Finland in 2019, also referred to climate change multiple times as the greatest threat to humankind. In 2023, climate change was mentioned in a number of stories as a cause of natural catastrophes such as droughts and heatwaves, or as a threat to biodiversity. In both years, climate change was also discussed as a political topic both before and after the elections. These are examples of news stories that were not coded or analysed, because they lacked any reference to responsibility.

The first six months, from January to June in 2019 and 2023, respectively, were chosen for analysis for two reasons: First, parliamentary elections were held in April in both years. The time period thus covered about three months before and after the election, when climate policy choices and responsibilities were part of the intense election debates. Secondly, both of these periods were influenced by major IPCC reports. The *1.5°C Report* was published in October 2018, and in early 2019, it continued to have a significant influence on the public conversation (Lyytimäki et al., 2020). In 2023, the IPCC published the *AR6 Synthesis Report* in March, which was also noted in the news. Before 2018, the IPCC was seldom mentioned in *Ilta-Sanomat* (Kumpu, 2023). Thus, my data consists of two comparable six-month periods that provided a cross-section of climate responsibility discourse in Finland during one election cycle.

SCM and media analysis

Thus far, the SCM has primarily been used as a theoretical framework in climate change research. One aim of this study was to use Young's framework as a starting point for media text analysis. I analysed the data through the lens of each of the five main features of the SCM. This was done by converting the most essential points of each feature into empirical, operational questions that could then be applied to the data. While reading each news text, I was looking for explicit mentions as well as implied connections between responsibility and climate change. I searched for sentences, words, and expressions that would answer these operational questions (as can be seen in Table 1).

Table 1*Operational questions of SCM*

Social Connection Model	Operational Questions
1. Not isolating (people or institutions)	How is <i>blame and causal responsibility</i> described and designated? Which actors are mentioned?
2. Acknowledging background conditions	What kind of <i>background conditions</i> are acknowledged and how – and by whom?
3. Looking forward	What is the <i>main temporal focus of the story</i> ; future, present, or the past?
4. Shared responsibility	How <i>sharing of responsibility</i> is described: socially, legally, practically, or some other way? Which agents share the responsibility, on an individual or institutional level?
5. Collective action	What kind of <i>collective action</i> is recognised? How is <i>political activism</i> described?

I manually coded the data, creating a code for each of the five main questions, with a varying number of sub codes depending on how the content presented itself. For example, “Shared responsibility” was split into several subcategories depending on who shared the responsibility, e.g., between politicians and citizens or between Finland and other countries. Atlas.ti software was used to support the organisation and coding of the data; however, its AI-assisted features were not employed. All analytical decisions were made by the researcher.

Climate responsibility in *Ilta-Sanomat* (RQ1)

Distributing blame

Young argues that SCM, in contrast to the Liability Model, does not aim to identify particular agents as responsible for harm. However, journalism’s purpose is to help readers make sense of the world; accordingly, *Ilta-Sanomat* (IS) frequently framed responsibility for global warming in terms of liability. Blame was mostly discussed temporally in the present or in the future: What is somebody doing right now that is harmful to nature? What is somebody *not* doing or not doing enough that would benefit the climate? In 2019, blame was often diffused to the general public; “we” or “the people” were to blame.

We talk about thousands of independent researchers from all over the world, who have the same conclusion: the climate is changing, we are causing it, and the consequences are usually quite bad. (IS 26.2.2019)

More specifically, young people and teenagers directly blamed “adults” or “older people” for ignoring climate change or not doing enough to address it. They observed that they did not have the same opportunities to make an impact and expressed disappointment and frustration toward political decision-makers and adults in general.

People say that children are the future, but how much do they care about us if they don't take care of our future? (IS 13.4.2019)

Four years later, in 2023, blame was primarily directed at organisations, governments, or nations. It also became more specific; for example, companies were blamed for excessive use of fossil fuels, airlines were accused of greenwashing in their marketing, and Middle Eastern countries were criticised for not using solar power, despite being geographically ideally situated. The discourse of blaming “us” or the “people” had disappeared.

IEA accuses oil and gas companies of not doing enough to cut methane emissions. (IS 21.2.2023)

Interestingly, the climate effects of sports remained in the news. Athletes were concerned about the warming of the climate and, e.g., how the loss of snow would affect winter sports. However, athletes were also blamed for ignoring the consequences of their actions, such as flying around the world. Discussion around sports often raises a moral issue: Is it ethically right for a professional athlete to fly to a competition? Is Formula 1 competition an acceptable form of sport? This topic consistently emerged in the data from both 2019 and 2023, showing little variation across the research periods.

Obviously, the blame frame was not used in all the climate change stories in *Ilta-Sanomat*. In this sense, the SCM's principle of avoiding the isolation of perpetrators of harm was also reflected in the coverage. However, given the tabloid's function of helping readers understand the world, it is unsurprising that a serious threat such as climate change was also discussed in terms of who should be blamed.

Acknowledging background conditions

In the SCM, background conditions are described as tacit circumstances in people's lives that shape and affect their choices and decisions. The structure of society sets the limits within which people operate in their everyday lives (Young, 2006). In the data, journalists did not discuss social structures. Primarily, the issue was raised by politicians and, on some occasions, by ordinary people. For politicians, background considerations were mainly systemic and often economic. Different measures against climate change were suggested and evaluated from the economic point of view: Would the results be as wished, and at what cost? If value-added tax is increased for some food items based on their carbon footprint, how would that affect low-income families?

Change must be done fairly, so that the poorest people don't end up paying for the prevention of climate change, [The Green Party's leader] Mikkonen said. (IS 16.1.2019)

Reflections of background structures are rare, mostly appearing in 2019. In general, the tabloid style of reporting is more simplistic, and the attention is more on the drama and the emotional side of the story, rather than on the context of background information

(M. T. Boykoff & Mansfield, 2008, p. 2). In-depth background analysis is therefore not expected in tabloid news.

Temporal focus of responsibility

In 2019, following the release of the IPCC's *1.5°C Report*, the focus of the news was very much on the present and the future. The approaching election was also spurring discussion to look forward, and none of the news articles discussed what had happened in the past. The news frequently used terms such as “mapping the future” or “building the future responsibly”, but this “future” was not anchored to any specific point in time.

The news topics in 2023 centred on legislation aimed at reducing emissions and increasing the use of renewable energy. Actions and goals had become more concrete, often referencing a specific year in the future. Additionally, official policy discourse had begun defining more tangible timelines.

EU bans the sale and registration of combustion engine cars – law to take effect in 2035.
The aim of the legislation concerning new cars and vans is traffic free from carbon dioxide emissions. (IS 14.2.2023)

Another temporal mode also emerges in the data, both in 2019 and 2023: a sense of urgency, where action is demanded *immediately*. Expressions like “time is running out” or “we don’t have time to wait” are frequent. Typically, a general call for action is made, but it is unclear what should be done or who should be responsible for the action.

The warming of the climate is not just a threat. It is a fact, it accelerates quickly – and it must be stopped before irreversible destruction happens. (IS 21.3.2023, Editorial)

While these abstract expressions convey the urgency of the matter, they often merely state the obvious rather than provide new information. In terms of responsibility, they offer no clear implications. It is easy for the reader to agree, but at the same time, such statements do not require concrete action from anyone.

Only rarely is anyone identified as being responsible for some wrongdoing in the past. China is mentioned once in 2019 as a nation responsible for releasing large amounts of carbon emissions into the atmosphere, although this is balanced with a reference to China’s commitment to future emission reductions. In 2023, two news stories reported evidence that the largest American fossil fuel companies contributed to global warming during the 20th century. Therefore, the liability frame is used only rarely in *Ilta-Sanomat* when discussing climate responsibility.

Whose responsibility?

Forward-looking responsibility was discussed from *individual*, *shared*, and *national* perspectives. In this study, individual responsibility refers to the responsibility that is not

shared by anyone – person or institution. Shared responsibility involves two or more agents. National responsibility was discussed in both frames.

Individual responsibility

In 2019, *Ilta-Sanomat* featured several stories that focused on individual people's responsibility for mitigating climate change. Climate experts, politicians, and journalists discussed the choices people should make and how their everyday decisions negatively affect the climate. In addition, ordinary people – along with athletes and celebrities – reflected on the impact of their personal choices. In interviews, individuals spoke about what they considered to be their personal contribution to fighting climate change:

[Finnish athlete] Matintalo knows her place in global decision-making.

- As an individual person or athlete, it is difficult to do big things, but even small ones can get you started. An example can be found in the family circle.
- Lauri and I have a hybrid car, Matintalo says, pointing to her life partner, skier Lauri Vuorinen. (IS 10.2.2019)

Another way of framing individual responsibility in *Ilta-Sanomat* in 2019 was through educating the reader: what they should do to decrease their carbon footprint. Individual responsibility was also emphasised by the publication of surveys and research findings of the actions that people were willing to take personally – and how they felt about them – in order to mitigate climate change.

Does a vegan diet, boycotting air travel or switching to an electric car really reduce your carbon footprint? Sitra's recent study shows what changes Finns can make to reduce their climate burden. (IS 17.5.2019)

Shared responsibility

The stories in *Ilta-Sanomat* identified several actors in relation to shared responsibility. Responsibility was sometimes described as being shared by “us”, but especially among politicians and citizens. This framing often happened in 2019. Although individual choices were frequently mentioned, there were also several references to decision-makers and citizens working together. While attempting to take climate action themselves, people demanded action from their representatives and ministers, as they observed that they couldn't make a difference alone.

Citizens have already taken responsibility for mitigating climate change, so it is high time politicians did the same. (IS 17.3.2019)

In 2023, the concept of shared responsibility between politicians and the people no longer appeared in the news. Instead, new actors emerged in sharing the responsibility: organisations and firms. Although only mentioned twice in 2019, they were regularly dis-

cussed as part of the solution and as sharing the responsibility in 2023. Organisations and their representatives proactively explained their participation in environmental efforts and discussed their commitment to climate goals.

National responsibility

National responsibility was discussed in terms of Finland's own efforts and as a shared duty with other countries. In 2019, the tone was generally optimistic, and political parties primarily presented *ideas* on how Finland could mitigate climate change. However, by 2023, the focus had shifted from ideas to actions that Finland had already taken or should take in the future to meet climate goals set by the EU or the Finnish government.

The European Union was often mentioned as a partner for Finland in environmental politics. It has the size and leverage to promote topics that Finland cannot address on its own. In 2019, following the release of the IPCC's report, *Ilta-Sanomat* published numerous stories featuring individuals who expressed opinions that global warming should be a priority for both Finland and the EU. In 2023, those calls had been answered, and the EU's directives and climate goals were influencing Finland on many levels.

Increasing carbon sinks became an even more central issue when it was announced that Finland's land use sector would change from a carbon sink to a source of emissions in 2021. Because of this, Finland threatens to fall behind the EU's obligations regarding carbon sinks for the years 2021-2025. (IS 13.2.2023)

In 2019, *Ilta-Sanomat* published several stories about international collaboration. Besides the EU, responsibility was also shared in the news "globally" or among "all Western countries", including Finland. Global responsibility was mentioned several times throughout the data by both Finnish and international leaders and researchers. Readers were reminded that global warming affects every country in the world, and therefore, the responsibility to find solutions is also global.

It seems that some people have forgotten that climate change doesn't respect borders. That's why environmental thinking should be global. (IS 2.5.2019)

It was often pointed out that change doesn't happen unless all nations – especially the major ones such as the USA and China – participate.

Interestingly, in 2023, the concept of global responsibility was also used as an argument for *absolving* Finland of responsibility. The right-wing Finns Party, in particular, regularly raised this issue before the 2023 elections, arguing that, as a global issue, Finland should not take too much action. The parliament elected in 2019 passed a law in 2022 requiring Finland to be carbon neutral by 2035, a goal more ambitious than that of the European Union. The Finns Party forcefully opposed the goal, arguing that it would harm Finland's economic situation without having any significant impact on the global climate.

Therefore, they argued that Finland should postpone the goal of carbon neutrality from 2035 to 2050.

Purra [leader of the Finns Party] emphasised that climate change is a global problem. – Even if Finland shuts itself down completely, it won't have any impact whatsoever on the Earth's average temperature, she commented. (IS 20.3.2023)

In short, in 2019, Finland was still operating in the world of possibilities, but by 2023, the climate goals left little room for flexibility. This was reflected in the political discussions of the respective years.

Collective action

Calls for collective action were easy to find in the news in 2019. The Fridays for Future movement as well as the School Strikes for Climate gained popularity both globally and in Finland, especially among young people. However, journalists and climate experts alike often mentioned voting in national elections as the best way for Finns to act against climate change. Nevertheless, people interviewed in the coverage rarely mentioned voting, unless the discussion was explicitly in the context of the elections. Teenagers pointed out that they needed other ways to make an impact because they were too young to vote.

Journalistic commentary in *Ilta-Sanomat* following climate activism events often carried a condescending tone. The journalists did not criticise the activists' work for a good cause per se, but it was clear that school strikes and demonstrations were not considered the right way to act. For instance, they suggested that, instead of marching in the streets, every participant should plant a tree and thus do something "useful". In the same vein, the journalists did not seem to take young people's worries very seriously, instead lecturing them on how a democratic society functions.

Climate strike came and went – what if the young people would next start doing something concrete, instead of talking? (IS 16.3.2019)

In 2023, the data suggest that collective action had shifted from large, peaceful demonstrations to smaller, more radical protests, which also took place outside Finland. Extinction Rebellion was mentioned several times. The goal of the group is to draw attention to climate change and to urge people to demand more action from decision-makers by conducting public stunts that attract attention and cause disruption. However, as the topic did not directly affect Finnish society, there seemed to be little perceived need to react beyond neutral reporting.

Shifting climate responsibility from 2019 to 2023 (RQ2)

At the concrete level of discourse, the attribution of climate responsibility underwent significant changes between 2019 and 2023. These changes were evident in both the attri-

bution of responsibility and the tone of the news. The key shifts, interpreted through the lens of SCM, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Overview of key shifts

Young's theory	2019	2023
1. Not isolating	· No mentions of causal responsibility · Blame is directed at people	· Rare mentions of causal responsibility · Blame is directed at organisations, nations, and governments
2. Acknowledging background conditions	· Politicians discussing financial and systemic implications	· No consideration of background conditions
3. Looking forward	· Sense of urgency · Vague vision of the future	· Sense of urgency · Climate goals anchored to specific years
4. Shared responsibility	· “We”, the people sharing it together, citizens and politicians · Global responsibility – all countries working together · Strong emphasis on individual responsibility · Blaming or educational tone	· Shared between Finland and EU · Global responsibility – but also absolving Finland · Organisations and companies now included the responsibility discourse
5. Collective action	· Young people, peaceful demonstrations · Condescending commentary by journalists · Occurs in Finland	· More radical acts abroad, presented neutrally · Ceased activity of grass-roots activism in Finland

In 2019, the focus was on people and their actions or inactions. Both blame and responsibility were often attributed to people. We had roles as citizens, consumers, and political decision-makers, and we were expected to act within those roles. People were understood to share responsibility, make informed and “right” choices, and work together to fight climate change. Individuals were portrayed as having the capacity to influence political decision-making. They were repeatedly reminded to vote in the upcoming election, but were also reported to be doing much more – for example, participating in school strikes and peaceful demonstrations. In 2019, the sense of shared responsibility was channelled into collective action, just as Young’s Social Connection Model suggests. However, somewhat paradoxically, tabloid media did not appear to support such collective actions, nor did they interpret them as meaningful acts of bearing responsibility.

By 2023, the focus had shifted to national or institutional responsibility, and concerns about individual actions had mostly disappeared. Collective, political activism had largely vanished from tabloid news, and voting in relation to climate change was not discussed

at all. Instead, the news discussed what *Finland* should do as a nation, either alone or in collaboration with the EU and other countries. In this discourse, society would set the rules and boundaries, which would then shape people's lives and decisions, leaving them with less direct ways to make an impact. Similarly, the blame for climate change was put on nations, organisations, and companies. In sum, if in 2019 the role of people was sometimes described as unrealistically powerful, by 2023, responsibility had been almost completely detached from people. Individuals were no longer responsible for making the change, institutions were.

This shift in focus from individuals to institutions is also reflected in the type of content *Ilta-Sanomat* publishes. In 2019, the paper published several commentary articles on climate-related topics, with the tone of these articles generally blaming or instructing. However, in 2023, there were only a few commentary articles, and the critique was now primarily directed at political decision-makers. It appears that in 2023, journalists no longer felt the need to admonish readers and emphasise the gravity of the situation, or possibly they considered readers educated enough and no longer in need of lectures on the impacts of climate change. However, it is also possible that attitudes had become more cynical and that individual people's chances of making an impact were considered so low that they no longer merited attention.

Discussion and conclusion

The differences in the tone of the news coverage, as well as the shift from individual responsibility to institutional responsibility, can partly be seen as a reflection of the successful advancement of official climate-friendly policies. The Regulation on the European Climate Law was adopted in 2021, setting a goal for the entire EU to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The EU is also committed to reducing its net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared with 1990 levels. To support these goals, Finland has also set its national target for carbon neutrality by 2035. These goals cannot be expected to be achieved solely through the efforts of individual citizens; as a consequence, the role of the people is also diminished in news coverage. This left room for critical views that questioned Finland's role, which were amplified by certain political actors prior to 2023 elections. Their provocative political arguments naturally resonated well with tabloid journalism.

However, two major crises between 2019 and 2023 must also be considered: a world-wide COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Especially the pandemic, with its peak years between 2020 and 2022, had an enormous impact on the world. Unprecedented restrictions were imposed on individual citizens of democratic countries in the name of public health and safety. The pandemic also decreased the amount of climate coverage in the media (Lyytimäki et al., 2020). The pandemic was barely over when Russia

invaded Ukraine in 2022, causing geopolitical crises that in Finland led the political – and media – focus to turn to foreign and security policy.

Such disruptions, with immediate and massive impacts on the economy and everyday life, not only affected how people's roles were perceived in society but also displaced climate change as a primary concern for individuals. These crises have emphasised the role of the state and institutions. Actively involved citizens, inspired by the *1.5°C Report*, have been relegated to passive observers – a shift that reflects a changing zeitgeist shaped by global crises.

Building on these developments, from 2019 to 2023, the locus of political power in Finland shifted from left to right. In early 2019, the IPCC's *1.5°C Report* and its implications made global warming the central issue in the 2019 elections and undoubtedly influenced the election results. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Green Party won the 2019 election, although the right-wing populist Finns Party also gained ground. However, the Finns Party was effectively side-lined from the negotiations by the SDP, partly due to the strong emphasis on progressive climate-change policies. Four years later, in 2023, the right-leaning National Coalition Party won the election and formed a coalition with the Finns Party. While the Left and the Greens held onto their climate policies, the Finns Party represented opposing views on environmental issues and climate actions.

The Finnish Climate Barometer 2023 (Ministry of the Environment, 2023), conducted by the Central Government Climate Communications Steering Group, examined shifts in Finnish attitudes toward climate issues between 2019 and 2023. The findings show that in 2023, Finns were generally less concerned about climate change and less inclined to alter their personal behaviour compared to 2019, with fewer people calling for stronger government- or EU-led climate action. Concern and willingness to act on climate issues remain notably stronger among left- and green-leaning voters, while right-leaning voters tend to be less engaged – a pattern also observed in the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, in Europe and the Nordic countries (Gregersen et al., 2020; Knollenborg & Sommer, 2023; Lind et al., 2023).

The tone of climate coverage, as well as how the responsibility was attributed in the news, changed notably between 2019 and 2023 in *Ilta-Sanomat*. In 2019, climate responsibility was heavily focused on individual actions. This was expected from a tabloid paper. Self-help tips on how to reduce one's carbon footprint were plentiful. While such content may seem trivial in the face of a vast, global problem, it still helps readers to make sense of the world, and the human-interest point of view engages them as individuals, not "only as citizens with political needs and obligations" (Wasserman, 2019, p. 278).

However, four years later, climate responsibility was primarily attributed to political institutions and corporations, while the role of citizens as individuals had largely diminished. The human-interest perspective was no longer presented in the same way as it was in 2019. A tabloid approach was evident in 2023, as the critical climate views of the Finns

Party received attention. The populist agenda of the Finns Party resonated well with *Ilta-Sanomat*. As Ridanpää notes, “people’s emotional attachment to their nation as a community is difficult to contest through the ideologies of environmentalism and globalism” (2022, p. 33), and the Finns Party played up this aspect skilfully, using it against the global climate-mitigation agenda. Colourful statements by the party leader Purra aligned well with the tabloid’s emotional reporting style.

Analysing this shift through the Social Connection Model, it is clear that neither of these discourses meets Young’s quite demanding normative solution of collective action. However, this contrast is not surprising in the context of tabloid media. It fits well with the tabloid’s tendency to make sense of the world, juxtaposing people and society. However, according to Young, “Our forward-looking responsibility consists in changing the institutions and processes so that their outcomes will be less unjust. None of us can do this on our own” (Young & Nussbaum, 2011, p. 111). Looking at the coverage through the lens of SCM, it is clear that *Ilta-Sanomat* is unable, and clearly at times unwilling, to recognize and articulate the collective responsibility of climate change. On the contrary, in 2019, when school strikes and other grassroots activities were reported, journalists were eager to condemn such activities.

Finally, this study aimed to explore how Iris Marion Young’s *Social Connection Model* serves as a foundation for qualitative text analysis. My results indicate that the SCM has benefits in practical text analysis. It provides a clearly defined analytical framework, enabling the analysis to focus on specific elements of responsibility in diverse debates. However, converting the SCM to an analytical framework for text analysis requires interpretation that is never completely free from the researcher’s bias. The SCM leaves room for such interpretation, though, because Young defines her features quite loosely.

Regarding this study, climate change is precisely the kind of structural problem for which the SCM was developed. Newspaper articles, as a medium, are similarly well-suited to use the SCM as the basis for analysis – the stories are representations of society, with its values and undercurrents hidden in plain sight. However, this approach is not to be used to judge journalists’ quality of work. Whether the news follows the features of the SCM to a greater or lesser extent is not evidence of the journalists’ capacity to tackle issues of climate responsibility. More accurately, the SCM offers a useful framework for analysing the overall societal public discussion regarding responsibility. Therefore, I argue that Young’s theory may well be used as a basis of news text analysis, not only as a philosophical framework for analysing structural injustices.

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