

# Sinking strangers

## Media representations of climate refugees on the BBC and Al Jazeera English

Elida Høeg & Christopher D. Tulloch

### 1. Introduction

«Goodbye from the world's biggest polluter». This was the phrase former US President George W. Bush decided to use when he left the Group of Eight's discussions on new targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions in 2008. Even though he was wrong – China was the world's biggest polluter then and continues to be so today – the message was clear: the United States will not take responsibility for the planet's rising temperatures. Donald Trump reiterated this position when he withdrew from the Paris climate agreement on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June last year.

The consequences of climate change are global, though they hit people differently. In many countries throughout the global South people are forced to leave their homes, becoming *climate refugees*. While there is no doubt about the urgency and severity of this issue, media coverage of climate refugees is scarce, arbitrary and prejudiced. Farbotko criticizes the media and blames journalists and activists for *wishful sinking*: «Only after they disappear will the islands become an absolute truth of the urgency of climate change, and thus act as a prompt towards saving the rest of the planet» (2010: 5). Bettini claims that dystopian narratives of fleeing refugees framed within both humanitarian and national security agendas, reduce the concerned populations to the status of victims, «either to protect or to fear» (2012: 70). Accurate and respectful coverage of climate refugees is vital to allow the global community to better deal with the issue. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how climate refugees are represented in two transnational media outlets: The BBC and Al Jazeera English (AJE) as representatives of both the global North and the global South. Drawing largely on framing theory this text reviews frames and discourses on environmental migrants and connects them to questions of global power structures in order to observe how they produce and shape knowledge about their plight.

## **2. Theoretical outline of the article**

The article begins by presenting the theoretical parameters and leading scholarly references regarding the media representation of refugees and migrants in a wider context before finetuning the text towards the very concept of the climate refugee and their specific projection in journalistic texts. The methodological design follows including both main research questions explored as well as details regarding the sample used and the framing theories employed to exploit the quantitative and qualitative results -including sources, photographic projection and deterministic representations- which emerge from the study.

### **2.1. Representations of refugees in the media**

When analysing why their media projection may be of interest to scholars of migrants and displaced minorities, Bleich et al. consider that the media i) provide a useful source of information about migrant groups and issues; (ii) convey and construct particular –and largely negative- representations of immigrants and (iii) ought to provide a space for the participation of migrants in a public sphere where they can advance their interests and identities. (2015: 3) The media representation of asylum seekers includes elements of race, religion and decontextualized narratives based on their (il)legal status and extensive scholarly work over different time periods and in different countries has established frames which simultaneously project refugees as innocent victims and a threat to the socioeconomic status quo of Western society (Klocker & Dunn 2003; Van Gorp 2005; Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017).

Media refugee discourse offers a narrative surrounding a speechless collective out-group on the fringes of legality silenced by damaging in-house professional practices. Such a modus operandi may include the deployment of prejudicial textual strategies, decontextualized and distorted graphic representation (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008, Horsti, 2007) or the provision of limited sourcing practices. One of the tenets of responsible journalistic praxis is the inclusion of diverse voices in the construction of news narrative in order to offer access to all potential actors and thus allowing the media outlet to serve as an agora for contrasting points of view. However, it is clear that minority groups such as migrants or refugees have clear access difficulties. While Hall distinguishes the “primary interpreters” from those cut off from the media (Hall et al, 1978) Phillips

emphasizes the advantages enjoyed by “insider groups” due to journalists’ predilection for “safe” sources itself as a result of production deadlines (Philips, 2010). This infra-representation of marginalized groups such as refugees and the deployment of accompanying “othering practices” has been conceptualized in numerous texts (Said, 1978; Orgad 2012). According to one observer, refugees are “silent passive others who when they do appear it is to confirm stereotypes and standard templates rather than actually conveying individual stories, diversity and agency” (Thorbjornsrud, 341).

## **2.2 The climate refugee concept**

Theories of marginalization could hardly be more pertinent than in the case of climate change refugees. Considered non-citizens, they have scarce access to media self-projection and do not dispose of a forum where they can impact decision-making processes. According to the United Nations, a refugee is an individual who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence – and is unable or unwilling to return «owing to the well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion» (UNHCR, 2016). A *climate refugee* is thus not recognized by the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 and cannot be granted refugee status as an asylum seeker within the current judicial system. On these grounds, the United Nations and the foremost international body working on the issue, the state-led Platform on Disaster Displacement, does not use the term, since the «concept does not exist in international law» (Platform on Disaster Displacement, n.d.). Instead, they use the term *cross-border disaster-displaced person*, referring to an individual that «flees or is displaced across borders in the context of sudden or slow-onset disasters or in the context of the effects of climate change» (ibid). While environmental organizations and engaged scholars have called for the legal recognition of climate refugees by including them in the Geneva Convention, this does not seem very likely as countries in both the global North and global South are reluctant to take on greater responsibilities towards refugees. The approach adopted by the Platform on Disaster Displacement reflects the global unwillingness to prioritize climate refugees in an international legal framework, as they have chosen to focus «on the integration of effective practices by States and sub-regional organizations into their own normative frameworks in accordance with their specific situations, rather than calling for a new binding international convention on cross-border disaster-displacement» (PDD, n.d.).

Afifi and Jäger (2010) assert that when referring to climate refugees, a conceptual division between a sociological and legal definition can be helpful. Following this approach, all people that are forced to migrate to survive meet the wider *sociological* definition of a refugee, while they may not meet the essential element of the *legal* one which includes the right to protection. However, the «climate refugee» concept is necessarily more nuanced. While a climate refugee is defined as someone who is forced to leave his or her original territory as a consequence of environmental changes such as rising sea levels, drought or extreme weather, like monsoons, hurricanes and tsunamis (Terminski, 2011) this forced migration does not happen in a vacuum. The reasons behind this flight are often complex and multifaceted as the refugee could be fleeing from poverty, conflict or discrimination in addition to the consequences of climate change. Climate change effects are therefore «intimately bound up with issues of development, population growth, and economic and social policy choices», and this accounts for the difficulty involved in quantifying the amount of climate refugees today and predicting their growth in the short and mid-term future (Afifi & Jäger, 2010: 7).

### **2.3 Climate refugees in the media**

Empirical research on the media representations of climate refugees is scarce and the vast majority of the research conducted is geographically specific. Most of it stems from Oceania and is focused around Pacific island states such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu as well as Australia and New Zealand. Farbotko is perhaps the most prominent scholar in the field. She identifies three different discourses about environmentally displaced people in the Pacific Ocean: Climate refugees, *skilful seafarers* and *oceanic drifters*, through a discourse analysis of newspapers in the Pacific islands, Australia and New Zealand (2012). While the author claims that the *skilful seafarers* and *drifter* discourse only had news value within Pacific audiences, the *climate refugee* discourse dominated the media in Australia and New Zealand where it is used for political leverage by these countries to construct their images as regional super powers (2012: 135).

Farbotko et al. develops these ideas into narrative frames which explain the various roles the climate refugees assume within the different discourses: victims, security threats, adaptive agents and political subjects. They write:

Within the contemporary policy debate unhelpful dichotomies still linger – between the North as developed and expert and South as victims and deficient – reducing the scope and reach of communication and advocacy. We have argued that this, in part, relates to the strong cultural resonance that the victim framing perpetuates (Farbotko et al. 2015: 114).

When it comes to the media, climate refugees have mainly two roles: Victims and security threats. The security threat frame is potentially very destructive. Hartmann (2010) reviews how the security threat frame is strategically used by the US Department of Defense to serve its interests and increase its budget. The author raises the question of how the alarmist rhetoric on climate refugees and the deployment of dramatic vocabulary such as «extinction» and «apocalypse», could further militarize development assistance and distort climate policy (Hartmann 2010: 233).

In line with Farbotko's concept of *wishful sinking*, Dreher and Voyer (2015) find another role assigned to climate refugees by investigating the Australian media's depictions of Kiribati and the focus on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as «proof» of climate change. Here, the authors argue that the «proof» frame, in addition to the «victim» and «refugee» frame, «undermine the desire of SIDS communities to be seen as proactive, self-determining, and active agents of change» (2015: 26). They then explore the Pacific islanders' own view of the coverage, and participants from Kiribati propose alternative media frames such as climate justice frames, frames of human rights, active change agents, and migration with dignity. Many observers consider that apocalyptic narratives on climate refugees recounted by the media are doing the climate refugees no good – and that maybe actually the opposite is happening. As part of his discourse analysis of documents stemming from both governmental and non-governmental actors, Bettini (2015) presents four discursive categories: “scientific”, “capitalist”, “humanitarian” and “radical”. In accordance with Farbotko's frames of victims and security threats, Bettini claims that the climate refugees are depicted as someone to either fear or protect in all the categories except the “radical” one. This in turn he argues, is taking away their possibilities to form their own political agency (2013: 68). As Nyers points out in the case of irregular migrants, these figures are “disqualified from sharing the stage with citizens as (political) actors and are rarely perceived as agents, actors, participants or subjects capable of making claims and demanding rights”. (2010: 130) In a similar vein, Hingly calls for the abolishment of the categorization of Pacific peoples as «climate refugees» altogether, naming it «irresponsible» and «insensitive». She claims the use of such a term dismisses these peoples' potential to contribute to the fight against climate change and

«is damaging as it depicts these peoples as a vulnerable, rather than resilient group» (2017: 2).

What is certain is these narratives leave underlying power structures untouched despite the fact climate refugee literature assumes that climate-based displacement is deemed to originate in the developing world. Studies such as that by Philo, Briant and Donald emphasize the role of Western countries in creating refugees and argue strongly that many of the conflicts from which refugees flee are “directly attributable to the actions of Western powers” (2013: 48).

it would seem appropriate to deploy a qualitative analysis on global news organizations and their frames in order to try and bring more specific information to the table.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research questions and purpose**

As mentioned in the literature review on the representations of refugees and specifically climate change migrants in the media, the main body of research on this issue has centred around peoples from the Pacific islands as the most widely known victims of climate change. This article tries to expand this horizon and look at the issue in a more global manner, recognizing the existence of climate vulnerability in many other parts of the world. In order to emphasize the transnational character of this subject, the authors aim to analyze the discursive frames employed on climate refugees through two international media platforms, namely the BBC and AJE websites in an attempt to address three research questions:

RQ1: *How are the climate refugees represented?*

RQ2: *In what way is historical climate responsibility part of the media discourse?*

RQ3: *How do the representations on the BBC and Al Jazeera differ from each other?*

#### **3.2 Defining the sample**

The sample is made up of a total of 29 individual online news stories -14 items from the BBC and 15 articles from Al Jazeera English- representing all stories produced by both media outlets on climate refugees throughout a 17-year period, from when the concept

was first mentioned in the year 2000 until the spring of 2017 when the sample was closed. The content has been gathered by entering the terms «climate refugee», «environmental refugee», «eco-refugee» and «climate migrant» on the BBC and AJE website search engines. News stories that may have been aired without being published and archived online, are not taken into account. Stories that have climate refugees as their main focus are included whereas those that only briefly mention climate migrants have been excluded from the sample. The stories are relatively evenly distributed throughout this time frame, although there are fewer articles during the first ten years in both media outlets, a trend which reflects the initial disinterest of the media towards this issue in comparison to recent growing media attention.

Varying media genres are all present -news and feature articles, opinion articles, photo, video and radio features, and TV and radio debates (see Fig 1)- and these genre differences can affect the modes of journalistic representation of refugees. A recent study by Horsti considers various journalistic modalities and diverges from legacy media production to consider online manifestations of news framing of migrants which shows that while frames of “threat” and “victim” dominate regular news stories, alternative frames such as refugees as surviving heroes are reserved for nuanced feature genres. (Horsti: 2016). However, the majority (18) of the stories in the sample are news articles or feature articles (eight on AJE and ten on the BBC). The news and feature articles contain text and images and quotes from one or several sources, and this is why these factors are the main focus points of the study. Criteria regarding article length, newswriting techniques and physical presence were used to distinguish between news item and feature article. As for opinion articles there are no interviews, which makes climate refugees unable to project their voice. Editorial articles on the issue are practically inexistent in line with previous studies (Turmo, 2010).

**Fig 1. Sample table, Al Jazeera English**

<b>Headline</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Year</b>
A1: Surge in eco-refugees predicted	News article	2005

A2: The Pacific's climate refugees	Feature article	2007
A3: Hungry tides in India's Sundarbans	Feature article	2009
A4: The 'ground zero' of climate change	Feature article	2009
A5: Tuvalu struggles amid water shortages	Feature article	2011
A6: Climate change: The next challenge for national security	Opinion article	2013
A7: Climate change 'complicates' global security	News article	2014
A8: Rising waters swamp Bangladesh island	Video feature	2014
A9: The looming tides	Opinion article	2015
A10: Somaliland: A parched earth	News feature	2015
A11: Where will the climate refugees go?	Feature article	2015
A12: The climate change and its impact on democracy	Opinion article	2016
A13: Madagascar: On the hunt for sharks	Photo feature	2016
A14: Displaced refugees fear more loss as Lake Chad shrinks	Photo feature	2016
A15: How to help those displaced by climate change?	TV debate	2017

### Sample table, BBC

Headline	Genre	Year
B1: West warned on climate refugees	News article	2000
B2: Climate victims 'are refugees'	News article	2003
B3: Rich nations have 'climate duty'	News article	2006
B4: More or less: Behind the Stats podcast: Climate refugees	Radio debate	2011
B5: UN chief Ban Ki-moon makes climate plea at Dhaka summit	News article	2011
B6: Climate change migration warning issued through report	News article	2011
B7: Costing the earth. Can Lawyers Save The World?	Radio feature	2013
B8: The Alaskan village set to disappear under water in a decade	Feature article	2013
B9: How many climate migrants will there be?	News article	2013
B10: Climate migration fears 'misplaced'	Opinion article	2013
B11: New Zealand denies climate change asylum bid	News article	2013
B12: The man who would be the first climate change refugee	Feature article	2015
B13: Should we recognize climate change refugees?	Radio debate	2015
B14: Website maps Vanuatu climate change flooding risk	News article	2016

This multimodal approach defined in Kress' landmark study on *social semiotics* allows the researcher to move away from traditional linear methods of interpretation to analyze multiple dimensions of mediated meaning-making. According to Kress the world of meaning has always been multimodal and that the modes we dispose of –including of course image and text- for communicating are multiple especially in the age of new

technologies which only serve to increase our options in the manufacture of sense. In this sense, two or more modes combine to form “modal ensembles” to communicate information (2010: 28).

Explanations for the modest aggregate number of news items refers back to newsroom practices such as the fact that media in general do not cover migrant issues on a regular basis, the lack of specialized knowledge in the field, an insufficient network of direct sources and the inferior news value of a nuanced portrayal of a complex and interdisciplinary subject. (Gemi, Ulasiuk & Triandafyllidou: 2013). If we consider the media to be event driven, a comparatively intangible phenomenon such as climate change does not coincide with this institutionalized function. In other words, if the newsworthiness of an event is classified by it being easy to understand, its capacity to convey a clear binary meaning and the implication of geopolitical elites (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) it would be safe to point out that climate change refugees are not top of the news agenda. If to that we add the question of power relations and the comparative “political weakness” of climate change refugees with limited rights, pertinence to a minority group and inability to influence the very mechanisms of news production (Banu, Akdenizil & Suro 2008: 74) the restricted salience of this issue in mainstream media is to be expected.

The reduced nature of the sample is compensated by three innovative aspects: i) an extended time frame -17 years- which allows for trends to be followed and theoretical extrapolations to be made. The literature on framing emphasizes time as an important factor for distinct patterns of frame differentiation (Snow et al. 2007; Muschert & Carr, 2006) and it is clear that in a 17 year-long study, this is a particularly relevant issue; 2) the fact that it is one of the few available studies with an Arab media outlet as previous studies on migrants and media have dealt with a single European press (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, Horsti 2013, Greussing & Boomgaarden 2015) multiple European countries (Gemi et al 2012) or the US press (Kim et al, 2001) and iii) the analysis of a wide range of media genres and forms.

The BBC and AJE were chosen as dynamic, global and multilingual outlets and as representatives of the global North and the global South. As hegemonic international news organizations, they contribute to constructing the political agenda on global issues such as climate change and migration whilst often adopting different stances. The former

colonial influence of the BBC still exercises a *soft power* in different parts of the world while Al Jazeera, representing Qatar -a former British protectorate that today has the highest income per capita in the world- is clearly critical of global North power politics particularly on its Arabic language website (Loomis, 2009).

### **3.3 Framing theory**

If we understand news discourse as a meaning-making exercise (Gemi et al: 267) then the frames used to attach meaning to events is a key element. When examining the framing of migrants and refugees in the media, Entman's benchmark approach to framing theory has guided this article. According to this author the act of framing is characterized by compliance with four criteria: The identification of a problem, a causal definition, a moral judgement and a proposed solution to the problem described (1993: 52). In the case of climate refugees, the problem-based definitions are embodied by the arrival of migrants by forced displacement, the non-assumption of responsibility for climate change by the Global North and the very definition of climate change refugee in itself. Solution-based frames include financial donation to the affected parties, more flexible border policies and the need for greater precision when referring to terms such as the *climate crisis*.

Building further on framing theory media are accused of omitting aspects of an issue (De Vreese, 2005) as part of journalistic practices based on institutional givens as to how a story should be told. In order to present an easily understandable media text, this information selection process allows the media to sponsor a problem definition leading its readers to adopt this line of reasoning, attitudes or biases (Scheufele, 2000) and enabling it to have greater widespread implications. In this sense, if stories about migrants or refugees consistently have a *criminality* or socioeconomic *threat* frame, they may convey a representation of those groups as deeply problematic for society as a whole.

## **4. Results**

As for results, the quantitative findings will provide an overview over the content and coverage of climate refugees on the BBC and AJE before moving to a more frame-based analysis which discusses the findings under these parameters. In order to manage the references, the news stories are referred to with their media outlet code – B for the BBC

and A for Al Jazeera – as well as their number from the sample reference list provided earlier (see Fig. 1)

#### **4.1 Quantitative findings**

Of the 14 news stories from the BBC, only three -the American island of Kivalina, the American city of New Orleans and the Pacific Island state Kiribati (B6, B8 and B12)- are covered «on the ground», at places where people are or may be forced to move because of climate change. The rest of the stories are assembled from the home desk in Britain, except for one article from Dhaka (B5) written by a desk journalist at BBC Bangladesh. The vast majority of the BBC’s coverage is thus produced in the global North. On the contrary, AJE presents extensive in-the-field reporting from the global South. In-situ coverage comprises the main part of the sample as nine of the channel’s fifteen stories are news features from Somalia, Bangladesh, Chad, India, Madagascar and Tuvalu. The remaining six stories are either news bureau articles from Reuters and AP or articles written by journalists and academics in Britain or the United States. The news features are *all* made in countries outside the global North.

The results show that the broader geographical range of reporting has an impact on the sources quoted in both media outlets. As regards the BBC’s coverage, only five out of 29 quoted sources -17% of the total- are climate refugees. The clear majority of these sources are in elite positions, such as the chief economist of the World Bank (B7), the UN Secretary General (B5), environment ministers in the UK and Bangladesh (B1) and Oxford University professors (B9). The level of direct source exclusion is evident in stories such as one about a climate refugee from a Pacific island state, which does not quote the refugee himself, even though he is named and depicted as the center of the story (B11). Only his lawyer and a judge from New Zealand are quoted. The clear majority of sources are based in the global North with just five exceptions in four articles: Two Bangladeshi environment ministers (B1 and B3), the Director-General of Vanuatu (B14), the president of Kiribati and a climate refugee from Kiribati (B12).

While 17 per cent of direct source citation may seem a small figure, it is in accordance with the wide-scale study of “irregular migrant” presence in the US, French and Norwegian press carried out by Thorbjornsrud & Figenschou (2016) which showed that they made up only 10 per cent of the quoted sources out of a total of 1355 articles. Such

findings on unequal access are also in line with scholars such as van Dijk who postulate that the opinions of migrants are both deliberately ignored or considered to be less credible or “newsworthy” by the social scripts employed by media organizations which systematically prefer those sociopolitical elites on which they themselves confer legitimacy (van Dijk, 1991) This self-fulfilling approach to source citation sidelines refugee voices who appear as powerless and disempowered whilst at the same time depriving journalistic coverage of the counterbalances necessary to offer a nuanced portrayal of events.

As for AJE’s coverage, 16 climate refugees –or 41%- are quoted out of a total of 39 sources altogether. The remaining 59 percent are, as in the case of the BBC, largely elite figures such as the foreign minister of New Zealand (B5), the Tuvaluan secretary of foreign affairs, and the UN refugee agency representative (A11). However, the coverage presents more local sources, people that are working directly with the issue on the ground, like NGO representatives in Somalia (A10) and Bangladesh (A8), and a water specialist in India (A3). In total, 23 of Al Jazeera’s 39 sources are based in countries in the global South.

As for the information producers themselves, the BBC articles are penned by journalists specialized in one area of transnational affairs: an environment correspondent (B2), an economics analyst (B4), a rural affairs correspondent (B6) or a science correspondent (B7). At AJE, the stories are mainly written by non-specialists who focus more on a geographic region –India, East Africa, Pacific Ocean- than on the specific topic itself. When it comes to the section under which articles are filed, the BBC content is mainly categorized under *science*, *science and environment* or *Asia*. Almost all the content on AJE is categorized under the section *environment* until the year 2015. Interestingly though, from 2015 and until today, AJE content is categorized under *climate change*, *Africa*, or – the most frequent one – *humanitarian crises*. This categorization defines the coverage in a way: the BBC studies climate refugees as a global scientific phenomenon, while Al Jazeera approaches the issue from a humanitarian perspective.

One of the main findings of the sample refers to how, in both BBC and AJE’s coverage, the vast majority of lead photos depict climate refugees without names, places and context. In eight of the BBC’s news stories, the head photo depicts an unnamed climate

refugee who is later not mentioned in the story, except in one case, where the climate refugee in Kiribati on the photo is quoted in the article (B12). Of the eight photos where «climate refugees» are portrayed, only two informs the reader about the place where the photo is taken. Except for the Kiribati photo, the rest of the pictures look like stock photos, and no information is given in order to put them into context. The situation is similar in Al Jazeera's visual coverage: Seven pictures show «climate refugees», but only two of them are named (A2 and A8). The five other individuals are anonymous, and the photo location is mentioned in only two cases (A10 and A13).

It is clear then that, in general terms, the quantitative data presents some surprising findings. Firstly, despite the emergence of climate change issues on the global political agenda the small number of articles on the websites of two of the world's biggest broadcasters underscores the perceived fact that the concept «climate refugee» remains a widely under-reported subject. Secondly, it is also noteworthy that the aggregate total of news articles is almost identical in the two media outlets. Due to their extended presence in the global South and widely-proclaimed social agenda it would have been reasonable to expect a greater number of articles from AJE about such a pressing issue as climate refugees. A third point to highlight is that pivotal climate change conferences such as the UN-sponsored sessions in Copenhagen (2009) or Paris (2015) does not translate into greater climate refugee coverage. From an agenda perspective, the coverage of both media outlets seems unstructured and arbitrary, centered around sporadic NGO reports, occasional juridical debates and occasional transnational meetings. As can be seen from the list, the media organizations under scrutiny do not cover climate refugees in regular fashion. An eye-catching headline may be followed by a months-long information vacuum. In his study of immigration in the European press, Gemi noted that “media tend to flood the media space with instant coverage when something dramatic happens but quickly drop the subject at “normal” times, thus prompting the public to think of immigration in the “problem/conflict/difficulty” framework (Gemi et al. 2016: 276). Similar dynamics are at play here.

## **4.2. Framing the climate refugee**

Throughout the sample, climate refugees were found to be framed in four different ways (see Fig. 2). The most widely-employed frame on both the BBC and AJE websites

perceives the environmental migrant as a *victim* (identified no less than 16 times in this way, six times on the BBC and on ten occasions on AJE). The victim frame presents climate refugees as those suffering the consequences of climate change and elicits a humanitarian discourse influenced by climate justice which calls on the global North to act and help them both regarding refugee policy and related legal and moral obligations (Harrell-Bond, 1999). Here, expressions such as «forced to flee», «huge loss» and «potential humanitarian disaster» are used to describe their plight and the visual content often depicts climate refugees as suffering people surrounded by degraded or destroyed environments (B2, A5, B5). Thorbjornsrud's analysis of the victim frame when applied to 'irregular' migrants is particularly appropriate here:

When the victim frame is used, a key critique is that those portrayed as victims (...) are exceptionally compatible with a classic victim template displaying characteristics such as innocence, high aesthetic appeal and emotional universal cues such as cuteness, vulnerability and kindness. (341)

The victim frame portrays climate refugees in need because of circumstances beyond their control and responsibilities (Horsti 2008) and is often gendered. While women are omnipresent as 'innocent victims' it is the depiction of child refugees who often lead the "hierarchy of innocence" (Moeller, 2002).

The three other frames -*security threat*, *activist* and *abstraction*- are equally salient throughout the sample, appearing six times each. When the climate refugee is framed as a *security threat*, a potential danger to countries in the global North is emphasized, and expressions such as «warning», «destabilize», «likely to trap» and «cause of conflict» abound along with lead photos that show poor people in great numbers, threatening to destabilize society (B1, B7 and A7). Triandafyllidou (2000) argues that such figures are framed as agent provocateurs capable of altering the political order and threatening geopolitical order. Metaphors related to elemental forces such as water and flooding are constant features (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008) and symbolic ostracization is the consequence of such media constructions.

## **Fig 2. Climate refugee frames**

	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Cause</b>	<b>Moral judgement</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>Victim</b> Humanitarian discourse w. climate justice	People are suffering or forced to flee their homes	Greenhouse gas emissions from rich countries	Rich countries should help climate refugees	Donate money to developing countries
<b>Security threat</b> Geopolitical discourse	Climate refugees come to countries in the global North	Climate change	No particular moral judgement	Climate refugees should adapt, with help from rich countries
<b>Activist</b> Radical discourse	Rich countries are not taking responsibility for climate refugees	Rich countries do not care about climate refugees	Rich countries exploit poorer countries	Open borders to climate refugees
<b>Abstraction</b> Scientific discourse	Climate refugees are hard to define	Future impacts of climate change are unpredictable	Call for scientific accuracy	Cancel «climate refugee crisis» / more accuracy

When climate refugees are framed as *activists*, they are «outraged» figures «challenging the situation» and «facing the direct consequences». In this case their faces are shown, confronting the reader directly (B12, A2). This more confrontational representation refers to climate refugees attempt to gain recognition in the legal system, arguing that rich countries should open their borders as a result of the historical responsibility they bear. This discourse of abandonment and the use of the system that works against refugees in general them is discussed powerfully in a wider sense by Webber (2012).

The *abstraction* frame portrays the climate refugee as a vague phenomenon and is subject of intangible scientific debate. The accompanying visual content tends to show climate refugees in a distanced way (B9, B10), or not to show them at all (A11). Here, statistics, definitions and predictions are the main focus, and while some news stories encourage more research in the field, others dismiss the gravity of the challenge: «Climate migration fears 'misplaced'» (B10) and «How many climate refugees will there be?» (B9). This inherently conservative approach postpones the proposition of direct solutions to an issue which ‘requires greater study’. A cross-comparison of these four frames shows that only

the “activist” frame challenges the conservative nature of the framed debate given that in different ways the other three options –whether victim, threat or abstraction- serve to keep the issue at a distance.

#### **4.2.1 Increasing, yet uncertain numbers**

One of the most prominent features of climate refugee coverage on the BBC and AJE is their alleged numerousness: «approximately 20 million people will become ecological refugees» (B1), «deteriorating environment could drive about 50 million people from their homes by 2010» (A1), «the UN is predicting 50 million environmental refugees by 2030» (A5), or «there are potentially hundreds of millions of people» (B12) are just some examples. The effects of such arbitrary figures affect the public perception of the issue. As climate refugees are an abstract concept for many readers, journalists aim to combat this uncertainty with a numerical estimate in order to contextualize the dimensions of this future challenge. However, when the coverage as a whole lacks the voices of climate refugees –as we have seen, they are seldom quoted- then they are *aggregated* in media discourse, and once turned into statistics, are deprived of their human features as individuals. This in turn, makes it harder for the reader to empathize with their situation. Arbitrary statistics are the core theme of many articles such as «Surge in eco-refugees predicted» (A1), «How many climate refugees will there be?» (B9) and «Fears of climate refugees “misplaced”» (B10). Such predictions not only shift the focus away from the people behind the numbers but are somewhat useless since it is impossible to predict how many climate refugees there will be in the future. Considering the scientists quoted in all the news stories on both the BBC and AJE (except for one «climate sceptic» interviewed in A15), one could draw the conclusion that no one knows how many climate refugees there will be, but everyone knows there will be many.

#### **4.2.2 Photographic depictions of climate refugees**

Aggregation mechanisms are further enforced by the visual content that accompany news stories on both the BBC and AJE websites. Many of the photos are long shots, providing social distance (A1, B5, A8). Secondly, many of the refugees are difficult to identify as they are photographed from behind (B9, A9). Thirdly, in those pictures where we can see those portrayed, the protagonists do not look at the viewer and are depicted as looking down or in another way (B6, A6, B10). Fourthly, a recurring image in both the BBC’s

and AJE's coverage shows nameless people walking or swimming in water up to their thighs (B10), waist (A6) and neck (B3). Here we can observe victims of rising sea levels although who and where they are is unknown. The woman in one picture (B10) is carrying her child, has a bag on her head and is clearly moving from one place to another. But to where, and from where? The two boys swimming in the second picture (A6) are also carrying things but we do not know if they crossing a river because it is faster or if they are really escaping their homes with their belongings. The third example -a smoking man with water up to his waist clinching his fist towards a bunch of small plants- is more difficult to interpret without the circumstantial details. All these pictures -credited to the news bureau AP and the photo agency EPA- need further explanation, but none is provided. The captions of the photos only refer to how there will be more people like these in the future and they do not provide valuable information by themselves. The people depicted are *de-territorialized* in the images; they are taken out of their specific, geographic context and made into rootless icons of a global – but distant – problem. Poor people fleeing. Even though we cannot be certain, all the photos depicting climate refugees look like they have been taken in the global South. Victims of Hurricane Katrina in the United States, for example, are not used to illustrate climate refugees, implying that this is an issue exclusive to southern hemisphere countries.

The people in these illustrating pictures are anonymous symbols rather than individuals. This does not encourage reader engagement but rather detachment, as we are not able to communicate with them through the pictures. Rigid framing and aggregation techniques makes them generic climate refugees, not specific people. The inattentive use of photographic evidence portrays them as *sinking strangers*, a collectivized group with few other functions than showing the consequences of human-made climate change.

#### **4.2.3 Sink or swim: Deterministic representations**

Throughout the sample, the consequences of climate change are often seen to be *deagentalized*, mere outcomes of actions committed by natural forces and not by human beings. This happens when the root causes of global warming are suppressed as in headlines which read «Rising sea levels have submerged several islands and created thousands of refugees» (A3) or «a million residents (...) face bleak future as climate refugees as level of water wipes out villages» (A8). This also happens when climate

change is represented as something inescapable, as in the feature article «The Alaskan village set to disappear under water in a decade» (B8):

«Almost no one in America has heard of the Alaskan village of Kivalina. It clings to a narrow spit of sand on the edge of the Bering Sea, far too small to feature on maps of Alaska, never mind the United States. Which is perhaps just as well, because within a decade Kivalina is likely to be under water. Gone, forever. Remembered - if at all - as the birthplace of America's first climate change refugees.» (B8)

While the journalistic overdramatization of the islanders' plight is a clear example of Farbotko's *wishful sinking*, the determinism in this portrayal is a key element in the way climate change refugees are portrayed. Whilst it may be true that efforts to stop climate change may not save the island of Kivalina, we can still observe how the consequences are powerfully depicted as unavoidable and thus make the public think that that there is not much they can do about it. When water in itself –and not what causes levels to rise– is depicted as the cause of the creation of climate refugees, the burden of responsibility of the global North is reduced.

## 5. Discussion

This modest study of climate refugee representations on the BBC and AJE has tried to identify dominant frames that emerge when journalists in both media outlets cover the issue. Findings indicate that through techniques such as aggregation, determinism, anonymity and disempowerment, climate refugees are broadly represented in a manner that reinforces existing power systems and conditions policies. While the climate refugee is framed in four different ways -as *victim*, *security threat*, *activist* and *abstraction*- all of them except the activist archetype identify underlying discourses on power relations between the global North and the global South. The research shows that the BBC dedicates a lot more time to talking about climate refugees than to actually interviewing them, a practice that affects their depicted agency. Al Jazeera, meanwhile takes the time to meet climate refugees where they are providing possible openings for common understanding and action. That said, the coverage that both the BBC and AJE provide has margins for improvement. Climate refugees are generally left aside, but when they become headline news they are collectivized and made into de-territorialized speechless actors. This research concludes that they are turned into *sinking strangers*, as unidentifiable «third world others» powerless to challenge those responsible for their condition.

## 5.1 Future research opportunities

This limited contribution to knowledge production on what has traditionally been a ‘black hole’ in environmental communication studies could be enhanced in many directions. Web-based content could be contrasted with regular television content on both platforms. Alternative non-English versions of the BBC and Al Jazeera -Arabic or Persian for example- could be used to compare Anglophone findings. Additional global South media players could also be introduced to widen the sample. In all cases, it is to be hoped that the climate refugee issue may ascend on the elite-centered news agenda as the consequences and impact of such global environmental irresponsibility come further to the fore.

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