

Environmental diplomacy: from transnational policies to the role of ambassadors – the contribution of David Attenborough (2018–2020)

Environmental
diplomacy

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Abstract

Purpose – The concept of environmental diplomacy appears associated with events (conventions) promoted between states and transnational organisations to discuss aspects related to regulating the use of natural resources and regulating pollution. In this study, the authors intend to highlight the contribution brought to environmental diplomacy by leading television figure David Attenborough and his focus on the destruction of biodiversity by humans (the problem). It is intended to analyse the frames of his public interventions, comparing them with the prevailing frames in the UNFCCC policies.

Design/methodology/approach – A predominantly inductive method of qualitative and interpretative nature is used. In epistemological terms, the framing analysis stems from a social constructivist perspective. A theoretical model for frame analysis was defined by combining the frameworks proposed by Entman (1993) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and considering previous studies (Anholt, 2015; Seelig, 2019). Analysis scrutinised a two-fold corpus comprising articles regarding actions and statements by David Attenborough published in *The Guardian* between 2018 and 2020, and the UN's legal framework for climate change.

Findings – The most prominent frames regarding climate crisis in transnational policies are responsibilities. Attenborough's calls for action highlight the frames of "morality", "responsibilities" and "problems". However, it is necessary to make a distinction between the discourse used in transnational treaties and that by Attenborough. In the former, discourse is more technical and impersonal, presented in a structure of legal diplomas and barely accessible to the public. In contrast, Attenborough's speech is more emotional, appealing and sometimes dramatic. His message is transmitted straightforwardly to the public in a pedagogical, personal tone.

Social implications – The choice of high-profile personalities like David Attenborough as ambassadors has implications in the visibility of the environmental cause, and in the multiplication of initiatives that denounce environmental degradation.

Originality/value – This study explores and analyses the narrative construct regarding climate change as carried out by a trusted and respected media voice. The authors intend to contribute to understanding the amplification role of public figures in controversial issues and diplomatic matters. The main contribution of this study is to highlight the strategic nature of the choice of SDA by political powers to voice the drama of climate emergency.

Keywords Ethics, Sustainable development, Public relations, Framing, Public diplomacy

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, society's awareness about environmental issues has been steadily increasing and people accept that there are real threats to the environment. Several players, including states, corporations, civil society organisations and groups, gather around environmental issues to discuss them and forge guidelines to raise awareness and change behaviours to tackle the main environmental issues.

A way to address the question has been the use of screened presentations such as film, television and digital media, promoting environmentalist ideals in the hopes that if audiences are entertained, then perhaps these narratives can subtly influence thinking and behaviour (Seelig, 2019). This way, they aim to demonstrate to audiences why the environment is important and why behaviours need to be adjusted to protect biodiversity.

Despite the importance of popularized media raising awareness and educating audiences, instances of criticism have been pointed to their narratives. The most significant is their failure to point out the role and the responsibilities of governments or other power structures (e.g. corporations, businesses) and the inadequate addressing of government actions and policies necessary to mitigate or prevent threats to the environment (Seelig, 2019). In short, criticism mainly regards the lack of two frames: the responsibility attribution frame and the solutions frame. This, in turn, may distort the way people learn from television (Bates, 1980; Bandura, 1986) and their consequent modelling of behaviours based on media content. It should be noted that the public uses the media as a primary source of information about scientific issues (Anderson, 2011).

The use of a mediatized approach to win the "hearts and minds" of foreign audiences can be identified in public diplomacy. However, the credibility and trustworthiness of governments, as the primary sponsor or communicator of public diplomacy, are often suspect because audiences tend to perceive a government's public diplomacy programmes as manipulative propaganda (Jiang, 2015, p. 180). Truth and truthfulness remain a pivotal ethical standard to evaluate public diplomacy programmes. In particular, truth and truthfulness denote accuracy, clarity, correctness, validity and disapproval of any forms of falsity, incompleteness and distortion (p. 177). As noted by Cull (2010, p. 13), not only must public diplomacy "be connected to policy" (lesson two) but also "effective public diplomacy requires credibility" (lesson four).

In this study, we aim at highlighting the contribution brought to environmental diplomacy by leading television figure David Attenborough and his focus on the destruction of biodiversity by humans (the problem). Using a predominantly inductive analytical approach, both qualitative and explanatory, it is intended to analyse the frames of his public interventions, comparing them with the prevailing frames in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) policies.

This study's main contribution is to shed light on the construction of the narrative related to the climate crisis carried out by a trusted and respected media voice: Sir David Attenborough (SDA). Although he is not a scientific expert on the climate crisis (Attenborough, 2011) and despite some critics questioning his credibility (Monbiot, 2018), he is a media powerhouse in the field of biology and biodiversity, also elected the most loved man in Britain (McCarthy, 2013). Throughout his career, Attenborough has been the voice of the natural world on the BBC, the public broadcasting of the United Kingdom (UK), being valued and respected by global audiences and by political actors alike (e.g. Barack Obama and Queen Elizabeth II).

We intend to contribute to the understanding of the amplification role of public figures in controversial issues and diplomatic matters, namely by having in mind Cull's (2010) seven lessons for the future of diplomacy. Firstly, we explore the concepts of public diplomacy and environmental diplomacy, emphasising the use of media and celebrities by players developing diplomatic practices regarding the environmental crisis and the UNFCCC transnational regulatory context. Secondly, the framing theory and its use in strategic communication are explained from a theoretical basis. An explanation of the empirical study

follows, detailing the methodological procedure, and including the definition of the corpus, its systematisation and codification. After the frame analysis of both *The Guardian's* articles and the UNFCCC's diplomas, results are discussed and conclusions presented.

2. Public diplomacy and environmental diplomacy

Public diplomacy can be defined as a specific governmental form or function of public relations. It can also be defined as the strategic communication of a state in the international arena (Zaharna, 2010). Public diplomacy “deals with the management of communication among diplomatic actors, including nations and non-state actors, which have specific informational or motivational objectives toward reaching the foreign publics through various channels of communication to promote national interest” (Golan and Yang, 2015, p. 2). This definition emphasises a relational approach and a two-way flow of communication to attract foreign publics and engage them in the co-creation and negotiation of meanings that ultimately support a nation's foreign policy.

Following Golan's (2013) integrated approach to public diplomacy, our attention is put on the mediated public diplomacy dimension (Entman, 2008; Sheaffer and Gabay, 2009), focusing on government attempts to shape and influence framing in the global news media (short-term perspective). In this sense, public diplomacy efforts are advertised and aimed at promoting engagement with foreign publics, increasing exposure and possibilities for public scrutiny and criticism.

According to Golan (2013, p. 1251), “the mediated public diplomacy approach is focused on government-to-citizen engagement that is mediated by a third party - the global news media”. Global governments compete to shape international debate and salient international relations issues. Governments strategically seek to promote their agenda and frames, using media tools that can include campaigns, programmes and individuals. The aims of these efforts include attracting attention, influencing attitudes and behaviours of foreign publics positively and favourably to the interests of the state, which initiates the efforts of mediated public diplomacy. It is important to stress that media channels and media celebrities are crucial in the dissemination and interpretation of news and information regarding a nation.

In the complex social context in which we live, a short-term approach to public diplomacy is insufficient. The competition for public attention is fierce. State and non-state actors compete with one another over media framing of salient events and also with a variety of third party interests (Sheaffer and Gabay, 2009). Information sources tend to be diversified by the proliferation of digital platforms and by changing individuals' media diet (van der Meer et al., 2020). Individuals have the power to select and avoid information in the myriad of options that are placed on them.

Besides, governments' images are tempered by increasing levels of mistrust, lack of confidence and discrediting of political actors. As portrayed by Anderson (2011), the institutionalised and politicised discourse is neither as popular nor as hooking as celebrities are. Hence, a wider variety of competing sources entered the media arena. The emergence of other actors in the diplomatic sphere is, therefore, a consequence of technological evolution and life in society. The integrated approach to public diplomacy insists on the long-term relational approach, forcing the “effective two-way communication and public engagement that connect governments and various non-state actors with key foreign publics through an exchange of information, ideas, education, and culture” (Golan and Yang, 2015, p. 8). Non-state actors, like corporations, and NGOs tend to help create quality relationships between groups with similar values and aims.

All countries need to work on their global perception and build soft power for the sake of their foreign policy. According to Anholt (2015) it is with competitive identity that states

“build standing, credibility, and soft power” (p. 198). And there are many “different types of power, influence, appeal and authority that a country can wield over the public imagination and over reality” (Anholt, 2015, p. 199).

The same author points out four major attributes of national standing: morality, aesthetics, strength, and relevance, co-existing and overlapping in diverse combinations. *Morality* is concerned with the *approval* of the country (associated to its leaders, its population, and its commercial and public institutions). Perception of morality is very significant because young people tend to be influenced by their moral sense and are less inclined to cynicism and the influence of *Realpolitik*. The older people who form the elites and the individually powerful are in turn influenced by the public opinion of young people. “Thus, one of the most effective drivers of positive acceptance (in other words, effective soft power) for any country is a clearly marked moral position” (Anholt, 2015, p. 199). *Aesthetics* is a measure of whether the country (in terms of its people, its built and natural environment, products, cultural output, etc.) is regarded as pleasing to the eye or to the other senses. *Strength* regards the perception that a country can wield influence over others. It includes hard power (military and economic) but also media power tied to “the country’s ability to force its views on international public opinion via its ownership or influence over a substantial portion of the media messages reaching people” (Anholt, 2015, p. 200). *Relevance* is a more complex concept than the previous three. It involves an audience perception that is more difficult to predict and manipulate.

Public diplomacy for global public goods appeals to wider audiences, because they are issues of worldwide concern that can be classified into five types: environment, health, knowledge, peace and security, and governance (Kaul *et al.*, 1999). As such, global public goods require a “humanity-centred public diplomacy able to respond to the needs of human societies, harnessing our capacity to collaborate in collective decision-making and problem-solving” (Zaharna and Huang, 2022, p. 7).

Messages for such a universal audience should focus on convincing them that the reasons presented are self-evident, universal, and possess absolute and timeless validity. Such rhetoric should transcend differences, conflicts and inconsistencies in the social world. For promoting global public goods, public diplomacy rhetoric needs to emphasise dialogue, mutual understanding and consensus (Zhang and Swartz, 2009). Therefore, the choice of the spokesperson will complement the rational and emotional appeal of the public diplomacy rhetoric around these themes. The choice will be strategic if it falls on a figure with credibility, relevance, coherence and consistency in their approach to the focused issue.

Environmental diplomacy is an example of public diplomacy focused on global public goods: the environment and associated issues like climate change, loss of biodiversity. The concept of environmental diplomacy appeared in the late twentieth century associated with events (conventions) promoted between states and transnational organisations to discuss aspects related to regulating the use of natural resources and pollution. The issue regarding the environment, its protection and actions to remedy some of its problems have been ascertained over many years. Conventions, multilateral treaties and transnational organisations have come to light of day, been intensively covered by media, but still, economic interests have often prevailed over environmental considerations. Environmental issues have never been a priority in the foreign policy of the more powerful states.

Global environment governance, with structural reforms of major transnational institutions such as the United Nations (UN), may be the most effective method for mitigating climate crisis. A goal that is only achievable with global cooperation. People need to cooperate to accomplish what they cannot do alone (Sennett, 2012). For example, common problems and the management of global public goods take on proportions with dramatic consequences for humans and demand collective cooperative international actions (Jiang, 2015; Zhang and Swartz, 2009).

The complex and interacting nature of environmental issues, the number and variety of groups involved in the process of writing and agreeing on global conventions (Broadhurst and Ledgerwood, 1998), step up the role of NGOs and citizens. Besides, the increase in scientific knowledge and public awareness changed the course of environmental diplomacy during the twenty-first century. In this sense, knowledge about how to preserve the environment assumes a novel moral role: “knowledge (...) becomes a prime duty” (Jonas, 1984, p. 7). Likewise, the changing nature of human activity “changes the very nature of politics” (p. 9) and morality needs to invade public policy. Considering the role of responsibility in ethics, Jonas (1984) proposed a new imperative addressed to public policy: “do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on Earth” (p. 11). The preservation of nature is hence a moral and ethical concern that should be embedded in all manner of “being” and “doing”.

2.1 UNFCCC

The UN has focused on public diplomacy since its foundation with the creation of the UN Information Office, established in New York in 1942 (Cooper, 2020). Following several international scientific meetings in the 1980s, governments decided to create the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), supported by the UN Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation. These were tasked with keeping abreast of climate change science, assess social and economic impacts, and project potential response strategies. In 1989, the UN General Assembly provided a mandate to negotiate what became, in 1992, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The legally binding framework agreement was a straightforward manner for tackling the global efforts to address climate change.

Environmental diplomacy truly came of age at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (also known as the “Earth Summit”). With its creation, UN environmental programmes with concrete objectives materialised to foster cooperation between the parties, particularly those that involve financial assistance, the development of best practices and technology transfers to the developing countries (Broadhurst and Ledgerwood, 1998). Because of the UNCED process, nation-states could no longer dismiss environmental concerns as irrelevant to “grand” aspects of national policy. It became clear that everyone has a stake in the condition of the environment. Most countries have by now established national councils on sustainable development bringing together several kinds of organisations, from local governments to citizens’ groups. In this line of thought, Susskind (1994) underpins the need for either a strengthened UN or enlarged national regulatory roles or even a vaster incorporation of NGOs in the treaty-making process. This may require reforming UN procedures for negotiating international treaties, seeking to minimize state obstructionism.

Since 1992, the UNFCCC has been the primary multilateral vehicle for international cooperation among national governments to address greenhouse gases (GHG)-induced climate change (United Nations Climate Change, online). One of the instruments used by the UNFCCC is the Conference of Parties (COP), the supreme decision-making body of the Convention that gathers all States that are Parties to the Convention. The COP meets annually unless the Parties decide otherwise (e.g. the 2020 meeting was postponed due to the pandemic). One of the main tasks of the COP is to review the information sent by the Parties to assess the effects of the measures adopted in pursuing the objectives of the Convention.

In the COP24, held at Katowice (Poland) in December 2018, Kristalina Georgieva, the CEO of the World Bank warned that “we are clearly the last generation that can change the course of climate change, but we are also the first generation with its consequences”. The debate was centred on creating a rulebook for implementing the 2015 Paris Agreement and raising countries’ level of ambition to pledge climate change, progress has been slow and divisions

have emerged between four fossil-fuel powers (the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) and the rest of the world. Despite the flaws of multilateralism, protection of the environment nowadays is the top priority on the agenda of the International Community of decision-makers.

An increase in activities including, but not limited to, overlapping agreements, voluntary initiatives and non-state actions, poses challenges to the way the subject is communicated (Sweet, 2016). Nevertheless, COP24 has gained public notoriety due to two interventions: Sir David Attenborough's and Greta Thunberg's. Attenborough opened the summit claiming that without action "the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon" (Carrington, December 4, 2018b). In the same line, school student Thunberg made an emotional speech, accusing world leaders of behaving like irresponsible children. She also stated "we are facing an existential threat. This is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced. First, we have to realise this and then as fast as possible do something to stop the emissions and try to save what we can save" (Carrington, December 4, 2018b).

Despite the use of a multiplicity of tactics, several campaigns and causes promoted by the UN resort to the mobilization of celebrities. In 2002, an event gathered 46 prominent UN messengers of peace and goodwill ambassadors from the worlds of art, music, film, sports, literature and public affairs (Cooper, 2020, p. 187). Celebrity-driven public diplomacy adds visibility to a significant range of global problems and focuses on global public good and humanitarian issues. In practice, celebrity ambassadors are most successful when they are linked to causes at the core of the UN's aspirational mandate. Celebrities have access to leaders and to mass publics, a process of interaction in which they have some comparative advantage. Celebrities can benefit from the somehow emotional attachments they have with members of the public. These connections make their messages more easily received (Cooper, 2020, p. 192).

2.2 Sir David Attenborough

David Frederick Attenborough (b.1926) is a British naturalist, known the world over as a broadcaster and writer of award-winning natural world documentaries. A Cambridge University graduate in natural sciences by Clare College, he is credited with the creation of innovative, educational television series. To this day, he remains an influence in the world of documentary-making and was a pioneer in establishing a tele-visual grammar for television programmes since joining the BBC in 1952 (Attenborough, 2010). From 1968 to 1972, Attenborough was director of television programming for the BBC, resigning a career behind the desk to write and produce television series on a freelance basis. In 1985 he received a first knighthood and a second in 2022 (BBC Newsround, 2022, 9 June, online).

Attenborough's broadcasting career spans over six decades during which time he has mesmerised audiences by bringing the wonders of the natural world, as well as the life of distant peoples, into living rooms across the planet. David Attenborough has written and narrated a succession of acclaimed television programmes in both anthropology and natural history, most notably the Life series. His work is best renowned for educating people about the natural world and environmental issues such as global warming.

Attenborough's voice and narration qualities have contributed to make him an instantly recognised household name and led him to receiving an Emmy Award for the narration of *Blue Planet II* (2017). In 2019, besides narrating *Our Planet*, from Netflix, the BBC also broadcasted his documentary *Climate Change – The Facts*, in which he warned that the failure to act could lead to "the collapse of our societies." The documentary *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future* appeared in 2020 to portrait Attenborough's first-hand testimonial about the monumental scale of environmental change caused by human actions.

Choosing a celebrity to be the spokesperson and/or ambassador for a cause is strategic. It is essential that the public trust the celebrity to prevent cognitive dissonance in their association with the cause. Though fleeting, celebrity attracts audiences. However, such attraction is inherently emotional and therefore unstable.

In recent years, Attenborough has agreed to act as an ambassador to promote a worldwide landmark study into biodiversity loss and its impact on the economy. The British government is demonstrating its determination to fight the climate emergency by appointing a beloved public figure, and an iconic storyteller. This may also be the recognition that in public diplomacy “sometimes the most credible voice is not one’s own” (lesson five, Cull, 2010).

Aware of his social role and the importance of his voice before public opinion, Sir David is the spokesperson for several initiatives related to the environmental cause, particularly biodiversity conservation. Attenborough frequently argues that human error and bad planning are some of the main causes for biodiversity destruction (e.g. *The Guardian news*, 22 January 2019).

His political liaison became more significant when in May 2015, he went to the White House in Washington D.C. to maintain a conversation with then President [Barack Obama](#). Together, they discussed the future of the planet, their passion for nature and what measures could be taken to protect the environment.

After the UK became the first country to legally commit to net zero carbon emissions by 2050 (in an amendment to the Climate Change Act laid by Parliament on June 12 2019), Attenborough was named ambassador to the Treasury’s economics of biodiversity review. Commissioned by the British Treasury, the review aims to demonstrate the UK’s position at the forefront of environmental protection. Attenborough acts as an ambassador to promote the review around the world, highlighting the British government’s commitment to fight the climate emergency.

3. Framing

In a study developed by [Lock et al. \(2020\)](#), framing emerges as the second most used communication theory in studies published in the field of strategic communication. Framing implies emphasising or excluding aspects of political and social life, which facilitate communication (by simplifying messages), conditioning perceptions and providing context for information processing ([Hallahan, 2011](#)).

Climate change (and climate crisis) is a controversial public affairs issue that can be communicated using generic and issue-specific frames ([Engesser and Brüggemann, 2016](#)). The first are wider patterns of interpretation that can be applied to different issues while the latter are frames tailored to the topic. In this article, generic frames models are used in the frame analysis because it is not intended to detail the issue of climate change. Instead, the focus is on the contribution brought to environmental diplomacy by David Attenborough.

Several generic framing frameworks can be found in communication studies. For example and given its relevance in political terms, [Semetko and Valkenburg \(2000\)](#) chose to build a model for analysing news frames based on five axes: conflict, economic consequences, human interest, morality and responsibility. In political issues, the attribution of responsibility can be of two types: causal and treatment. Causal responsibility concerns the origin of a problem; while the treatment responsibility is related to who or what has the ability to relieve the problem ([Iyengar, 1996](#), p. 60). According to [Iyengar \(1996\)](#), beliefs that affect the attribution of responsibility tend to shift upon the presentation of information and its context.

Frame analysis, as a global concept, allows explaining the genesis and the agreement of different frames resulting from constellations of social and cultural power. The frame is, therefore, determined by the culture (national, organisational, professional) in which it is developed since it can be described as the construction of a narrative around an issue. In this

sense, [Entman \(2010\)](#) associates framing with the distribution of power, arguing that it has implications in political and democratic terms, particularly in the definition of who gets what, when and how. After all, democracy requires frames that indicate what to think and how to think to influence the attitudes and behaviours of individuals.

Gaining favourable media coverage and conquering appropriate frames is a prerequisite for all public diplomacy efforts. Therefore, diplomatic actors engage in the active frame-building promotion to strategically position themselves within the international arenas ([Golan, 2015](#), p. 421).

Framing can be used in the study of mediated public diplomacy and international broadcasting, i.e. in public relations efforts that produce an information intervention and use electronic media (television, web-based media) by one society to shape the opinion of the global publics. “While deeply geopolitical, information intervention is fundamentally constructive, focusing on cultivating new thinking and relationships” ([Powers and Samuel-Azran, 2015](#), p. 247), offering an ideological perspective embedded, for example, in cultural and educational programmes, like the ones of the BBC World Service ([Arceneaux and Powers, 2020](#); [Fisher, 2020](#)).

From a critical standpoint, frame analysis relates to the production of discourse. As stated by [Foucault \(1971\)](#) “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (p. 8). Among these procedures, it is possible to find exclusion, since not everything can be said. Decisions about what can be said, how it is said and by whom it is said are closely tied to who has the power, who wants to gain power, how power is disputed and in which arenas power is disputed. Consequently, and considering the media arena where power and the attention of audiences are disputed, the one who has the power is the one who masters media discourse. If we are to use media, its rituals need to be acquired by the actor. That is, the one who speaks according to the required ritual, foretelling the future with authority and enunciating the message with the right form and sense, is the one who knows how to frame a discourse and will be in a better position to gain attention and access power.

It is intended with this study to highlight the contribution brought to environmental diplomacy by leading television figure David Attenborough and his focus on the destruction of biodiversity by humans (problem). A frame analysis of his public interventions is developed so that these can be compared with the prevailing frames of the UNFCCC’s policies.

The research questions are:

- RQ1. Which frame is more salient in Attenborough’s public interventions about the climate crisis?
- RQ2. Which frame is more salient in the UN framework for climate change treaties?
- RQ3. Does Attenborough’s direct speech in diplomatic settings incorporate the most salient frames of the UN framework for climate change treaties?

4. Method

A predominantly inductive analytical approach, both qualitative and explanatory is used. In epistemological terms, the framing process stems from a social constructivist perspective. In this perspective, the researcher seeks to clarify “what” and “how” meanings are embedded in the language and actions of social actors, paying attention to the details and complexity of the phenomena and what is represented ([Schwandt, 1998](#)).

In this study, the authors have employed content analysis with both emergent and theory driven coding. Frame analysis is performed on articles published in *The Guardian* in the years 2018–2020 to identify more salient frames used in the construction of the narrative

related to the climate crisis carried out by Attenborough in his public interventions. The choice of *The Guardian* as media news outlet was inspired by previous studies like [Nacu-Schmidt et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Engesser and Brüggemann \(2016\)](#). It was mostly motivated by the global recognition of *The Guardian's* environmental journalism and because, in January 2020, its media editor Jim Waterson announced the paper would no longer accept advertising from fossil fuel companies and carbon-based energy corporations.

4.1 Corpus

The corpus includes articles published by *The Guardian*, between 2018 and 2020, focusing on statements and actions by Attenborough. This period was chosen because it includes Attenborough's participation in COP24 – where the #TakeYourSeat campaign was launched and his participation in the organisation of COP26 (under British organisation, but meanwhile postponed to 2021). The UN framework for climate change treaties (Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreements) were also analysed to identify the frames in transnational policies and to gauge whether they are the most highlighted by the media public figure in his interventions and in *The Guardian's* coverage of those interventions.

4.2 Coding procedure

The corpus was systematised considering the framing development. In the interpretation phase, four levels of coding were set. In the first level, all the articles published by *The Guardian* between 2018 and 2020 (full years) mentioning Attenborough were selected. 76 articles were collected: 31 (2018), 27 (2019) and 18 (2020). In a second phase, the 76 articles were coded considering the focused theme: television (related to the professional activity including the launch of new programs, contracts with the BBC and Netflix), public interventions (civil, political and diplomatic setting). Of the 76 pieces, 35 are about television shows and Attenborough's work as a presenter and producer, including his criticism of the BBC's programming options. Two of these articles concentrated on the discussion about Attenborough's retirement and replacement in biodiversity programmes. Finally, we identified 41 articles about Attenborough's involvement in public affairs related to the climate crisis ([Table 1](#)). In the first three levels, categories were emergent, since we read the articles to identify the topic and classified it as a civil, diplomatic or political setting. During the classification, we felt the need to create a fourth category entitled "other". This category includes three editorials in which Attenborough's statements are mentioned as a reference on the climate crisis and two news articles that reinforce the public profile of the presenter, namely after the announcement of his name being given to a scientific expeditions boat.

The three first levels of coding enforced an inductive procedure to interpret the text's framing, allow the emergence of new categories and considerations about how to develop the fourth phase.

The 41 articles related to public interventions were selected to give salience (second phase of framing) in the fourth level of analysis. A theoretical model for frame analysis was defined combining the frameworks proposed by [Entman \(1993\)](#) and [Semetko and Valkenburg \(2000\)](#) and considering previous studies ([Anholt, 2015](#); [Seelig, 2019](#)). Therefore, *a priori* categories were used and frame analysis was developed considering the frames: problem (climate change and biodiversity hazards), consequences of the problem, moral assessment or appeal, solutions to solve the problem and responsibilities (causal and treatment).

This frame analysis model was applied categorising and assembling excerpts from the articles (third level of framing – inclusion). In the definition of frames (fourth phase of framing) an additional distinction was made between the frames considering direct speech (transcription of Attenborough's words) and indirect speech (instances of speech by third parties are duly noted as "not by David Attenborough but about David Attenborough"). The

Level	Categories	Number of articles	Total	
<i>First</i> (keyword: David Attenborough)	2018	31	76	
	2019	27		
	2020	18		
Second	Television	35	76	
	Public Interventions	41		
<i>Third</i> Public Interventions	Civil setting	Support/encounter with activists/ social movements	3	16
		Discourse to citizens (events)	2	
		Interviews (call to action and appeal to people)	8	
	Diplomatic setting	FFI study presentation	1	11
		Letters of support from the readers	2	
		Acting as diplomat	5	
		Spokesperson UN Davos 2019	5	
		Documentary as a diplomatic instrument	1	
	Political setting	Discourse in Parliament select committee	5	9
		Encounters with political actors	2	
		Media interviews with appeal and critics to politicians	2	
	Other	Mentioned in the Guardian	3	5
		Editorial		
Boat named after Sir David		2		

Table 1.
Coding procedure
(three first levels)

interpretative note about what was considered direct speech and indirect speech is the result of a coding validation held considering each author segments' codification. The first inter coding validation test had a result of 97.06%. With the clarification of what was considered indirect speech, the result of the inter-coding validation test is 98.5%.

MAXQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, was used to systematise the corpus, to code text segments, to perform intercoding validation test, to analyse and to extract outputs regarding the frame categories (fifth level of framing).

5. Results

In 2018, David Attenborough went to the COP24 and launched the UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People named #TakeYourSeat (UN news, 23 November 2018; UN Climate Change, 3 December 2018). The broadcaster presented the campaign as the result of the new activism promoted by citizens using digital platforms. These served as a basis for the debate, for the presentation of proposals and, above all, for voicing environmental concerns. Attenborough stressed the popular pressure on leaders to act on behalf of monitoring and mitigating climate change: "The world's people have spoken. Time is running out. They want you, the decision-makers, to act now. Leaders of the world, you must lead. The continuation of civilisations and the natural world upon which we depend is in your hands" (Carrington, 3 December 2018a).

His appeals continued in Davos in 2019. In an interview with HRH the Duke of Cambridge, Attenborough warned that humankind has the power to exterminate whole ecosystems because "we're now so numerous, so powerful, so all-pervasive, the mechanisms we have for destruction are so wholesale and so frightening" (The Guardian news, 22 January 2019), and

urged world leaders to treat the natural world with respect. In October 2020, SDA was named a member of the Earthshot Prize Council, an initiative of the Duke of Cambridge to find solutions to environmental issues.

RQ1a. Which frame is more salient in Attenborough’s public interventions about the climate crisis?

The analysis of the 41 articles published by *The Guardian* that represented Attenborough’s public interventions allowed the encoding of 86 excerpts, in the previously defined frames. It is possible to verify the predominance of the salience of the frames “moral” (26 excerpts), “responsibilities” (21 excerpts) and “problem” (19 excerpts). Noteworthy is the prevalence of “direct speech” in the approach to the mostly identified frames (see [Table 2](#)).

The moral frame is connected to [Jonas’ \(1984\)](#) principle that envisages the preservation of nature as a moral concern and to the moral attributes of national standing ([Anholt, 2015](#)). Some examples of the *moral frame*, in direct speech, include:

- (1) The verification of Man’s disrespect for nature (“the overwhelming feeling I had was that you can treat nature badly”; “this huge devastation that humanity created in Chernobyl”; “nature was treated very badly indeed”);
- (2) General pleas for change in Man’s behaviour (“people ought to be concerned”; “we have an obligation on our shoulders and it would be to our deep eternal shame if we fail to acknowledge that”; “not only care for the natural world but treat it with a degree of respect and reverence”);
- (3) Direct appeals to actions (“I encourage everyone to take their seats and to add their voice (. . .) together we can make real change happen”; “to be part of the most important discussion of this century; the unprecedented action needed to reach the Paris agreement targets”).

The *responsibility frame* guides the coding of excerpts where the responsibility for the destruction of biodiversity and climate change is attributed to someone or something (causal responsibility) or when someone or something is appointed to have the ability to relieve the problem (treatment responsibility). Examples of the responsibility attribution, in direct speech, include:

Frame	Salience	
<i>Moral</i>	26	
Direct speech (moral)	19	
Indirect speech (moral)	7	
<i>Responsibilities</i>	21	
Direct speech (responsibilities)	13	
Indirect speech (responsibilities)	8	
<i>Problem</i>	19	
Direct speech (problem)	16	
Indirect speech (problem)	3	
Solutions	13	
Direct speech (solutions)	6	
Indirect speech (solutions)	7	
Consequences	7	
Direct speech (consequences)	2	
Indirect speech (consequences)	5	

Table 2.
Codebook (frames) and salience of Attenborough’s public interventions

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- (1) Causal responsibility – The logical observation about the power that Man’s actions have in altering the natural world (e.g. “we are part of the natural world. If we damage the natural world, we damage ourselves”; “there is no species with anything like the power *Homo sapiens* has over the natural world”; “we have been putting things off year after year”; “my generation (. . .) we have done terrible things”; “helping people to (. . .) recognise that they too must play their part”);
 - (2) Treatment responsibility – The liability of governments’ decisions and actions (e.g. “I am sorry that there are people who are in power”; “people can see the problem (. . .) and that must force governments to take action”; “leaders of the world, you must lead”).
-

Mention of environmental issues underlies all Attenborough’s public interventions, even when related to his media work. The “presence” of the problem is latent, not only because awareness about already exists but also because constant references could create fatigue in the audience. Presently, it is necessary to appeal to action, stating who is responsible for it (treatment *responsibility*). Nevertheless, it is possible to illustrate manifest mentions to the *problem frame* in direct speech. Examples are: “the tragedy of our time has been happening all around us (. . .): the loss of our planet’s wild places, its biodiversity”; “risks creating terrible impacts that cannot be reversed”; “because the temperatures of the Earth are increasing”; “right now we are facing a manmade disaster of global scale, (. . .): climate change”.

A sum up of Attenborough’s public interventions in political and diplomatic setting, which include the three emphasised frames (moral, responsibility and problem), can be illustrated with his words at Davos ([The Guardian news, 22 January 2019](#)):

We’re now so numerous, so powerful, so all-pervasive, the mechanisms we have for destruction are so wholesale and so frightening, that we can actually exterminate whole ecosystems without even noticing it.

RQ2a. Which frame is more salient in the UN framework for climate change treaties?

Also known as the Rio Convention ([United Nations, n. d. b.](#)), the UNFCCC comprises 26 articles establishing its organic and regulatory provisions. The preamble to this diploma not only mentions the problem (GHG-induced climate change) but also sets forth a series of considerations on the need for multilateral cooperation to avoid dire consequences. The following six articles describe the concepts, the objective, the principles, the commitments and responsibilities of the parties. Articles 7 to 26 define the legal instruments, the secretariat, the subsidiary bodies, the financial mechanism, the themes and modes of information related to the implementation of measures by each Party. The procedures for the resolution of conflicts, vote and adoption of possible amendments to the convention are also laid down on this latter section.

The first subsidiary agreement to the UNFCCC was the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (KP), which became effective in 2005 ([United Nations, n. d. a.](#)). The KP established legally binding targets for 37 high-income countries and the European Union (EU) to reduce their GHG emissions on average by 5% below 1990 levels during 2009–2012. KP comprises 28 articles and 2 annexes. Several articles of the protocol (14) dealt with the responsibilities of the Parties in the pursuit of defined goals, the establishment of control and surveillance systems for the implementation of concrete measures, reporting to the Conference of the Parties and mutual assistance among them. Articles 20 to 28 are related to amendments, annexes, voting

and ratification procedures, and entering into force conditions. The remaining articles are about the organics of the KP.

The Paris Agreement (PA) is the second major subsidiary agreement under the UNFCCC. The PA is to eventually replace the KP as the primary subsidiary vehicle for process and actions under the UNFCCC. The PA requires that Parties submit nonbinding pledges, in “Nationally Determined Contributions”, to mitigate their GHG emissions and enhance removals. Some provisions are binding (e.g. reporting and review), while others are recommendations or collective commitments. The PA consists of 29 articles. The first 14 describe the concepts, the objective, the principles, the commitments and responsibilities of the parties. Remaining articles define organics, the roles, the provisions, the financial mechanism; the mechanism of implementation and transparency; the procedures for the resolution of conflicts, vote, provisions and conditions for entering into force of the PA.

The Parties’ responsibilities and their role in the organics of the Convention are the focus of both documents (*responsibility treatment frame*). However, the preamble of the PA presents a narrative more diverse than the KP. Examples of the moral frame are: “the principle of equity”; “the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs”; “climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights”.

The *moral frame* appears linked to the recognition of the *consequences* of climate change and the measures adopted by some Parties (e.g. “recognising that Parties may be affected not only by climate change but also by the impacts of the measures taken in response to it”; “emphasising the intrinsic relationship that climate change actions, responses and impacts have with equitable access to sustainable development and eradication of poverty”).

RQ3a. Does Attenborough’s direct speech in diplomatic settings incorporate the most salient frames of the UN framework for climate change treaties?

The most prominent frames regarding climate crisis in transnational policies are treatment responsibilities. Treaties are built with a technical language mostly aimed at defining roles of the Parties, needed actions and organic functioning of the Convention of the Parties. The exception is the preamble of the PA that presents a somehow moralising narrative (e.g. “principle of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”, “Parties should . . .”; “recognizing”, “emphasizing”, “taking full account”, “with developed country Parties taking the lead”), an inclusive and rather expressive language (“the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth”; “noting the importance for some of the concept of ‘climate justice’”). The preamble also describes several dimensions of the problem (e.g. “the need for an effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change”, “the specific needs and special situations”).

Attenborough’s calls for action addressed to the public and to decision-makers urging decision-making and action, highlight the frames of “morality”, “responsibilities”, “problems” in the narratives presented in articles related to his diplomatic interventions.

However, the Attenborough’s approach is more generic. It refers to the need for intervention by decision-makers, but does not specify in which aspects, mentioning the common interest of protecting biodiversity. The PA mentions concrete principles such as decent work, social justice and sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, inequality of the Parties and possible consequences for the less developed of the measures to be adopted to face the climate emergency.

6. Discussion

The importance of successfully shaping foreign media framing of salient international events is further magnified when considering its potential outcome. The successful promotion of

salient frames may improve public opinion and potentially influence foreign elites (Sheafer and Shenhav, 2009).

SDA has dedicated his life to the production and narration of educational television programmes about the natural world. His presence in the media, especially on television, has been characterised by a concern to make the particulars of life on Earth known to the public and thus emphasise the value of biodiversity. The worsening of the climate problem and the consequences of the meltdown of polar ice caps has increased international debate in transnational instances involving states and pro-environmentalist non-governmental organisations. From the 2000s onwards, Attenborough has become involved in denouncing Man's responsibilities in the climate crisis, taking advantage of his high media profile and somehow impersonating the "imperative of responsibility" invoked by Jonas (1984). With his public activity, advocating for action and solutions regarding climate crisis, Attenborough used his knowledge (not to forget he is a scientist) and influence to become the voice of several interest groups, associations and, ultimately, of the natural world. It is important to stress "public diplomacy is everyone's business" (lesson seven, Cull, 2010).

Attenborough's notoriety and legitimacy are reinforced by his constant presence in articles published by *The Guardian*. News and opinion articles about the television programmes and documentaries that he produces and narrates, about his books and his participation in television programmes (35 in 76 pieces collected between 2018 and 2020) can be classified as publicity and their function is to reinforce his media profile. With high media exposure and an educational function recognised by the public, Attenborough's public responsibility increases. Neither are his interventions deemed "light" nor is his image used merely to increase the media visibility of climate change. Attenborough can be classified both as a celebrity advocate and as a celebrity endorser (Anderson, 2011) despite his discourse not being the discourse of a celebrity but of an expert. He both gains publicity and calls to action, in an educative and assertive way, fostering to "moralise" everyone, since everyone is responsible for environmental degradation.

There are moral issues raised by the altered nature of human action, the magnitude and novelty of its works and their impact on Man's global future (Jonas, 1984). A new reflection on ethical principles has to include responsibility for what is at stake and how man has to be held accountable for it. The range of human action and thus responsibility is not circumscribed. The nature of human action has changed. Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of ethics needs revision, and so do the ways to approach it. The critical vulnerability of nature to technological intervention stresses that nature is a human responsibility, not only of decision-makers but of everyone as well.

Results from previous surveys suggest "there are very low levels of reported trust in (. . .) government leaders with comparably much higher levels of trust in scientists" and "levels of trust in environmental groups tend to be significantly higher than trust in government or industry" (Anderson, 2011, p. 542). Consequently, Attenborough's public interventions in civil, political and diplomatic settings tend to be highly anticipated for the level of trust they represent. His calls for action addressed to the public and to decision-makers urging decision-making and action, highlight the frames of "morality", "responsibilities", "problems" in the narratives presented in the 46 articles analysed in the category of public interventions. Responsibilities are also the predominant frame in UNFCCC treaties. However, it is necessary to make a distinction between the discourse used in transnational treaties and that by Attenborough. In the former, discourse is more technical and impersonal, presented in a structure of legal diplomas, and barely accessible to the public. The focus is treatment responsibilities establishing the role of parties to collaborate and alleviate the problem (Iyengar, 1996).

In contrast, Attenborough's speech is more emotional (e.g. "I am sorry", "deep eternal shame", "the overwhelming feeling"), appealing (e.g. "I encourage everyone to take their seats and to add their voice", "must force governments to take action") and sometimes dramatic

(e.g. “terrible impacts”, “the tragedy of our time”, “the mechanisms we have for destruction are so wholesale and so frightening”, “If we were not making progress with young people, we are done?”). His message is transmitted straightforwardly to the public in a pedagogical, personal tone. Oscillating between causal responsibility (humankind is responsible for environmental degradation) and the need for decision-makers to assume their treatment responsibility, i.e. to solve, not exacerbate or alleviate the problem (Iyengar, 1996).

In short, there may be a coincidence in the text frames; there is no coincidence in the discourse and in the effective communication of the subject. Convoking Foucault’s discourse theory (1971), we dare to underline that if the aim is to call the public’s attention and demand civil actions to tackle the climate crisis, then Attenborough is the one who speaks according to the required ritual. His *ethos* allows him to foretell the future with authority and to enunciate the message with the right form and sense. Thus, he is the aptest diplomat for environmental issues.

The choice of SDA by the UK government seems to be strategic if we consider Anholt’s competitive identity theory (2015). Face and voice of the BBC, an instrument of UK’s public diplomacy (Fisher, 2020), Attenborough is also a symbol of the UK’s media power (strength and relevance). His approach to the natural world and the breadth of his programmes on biodiversity reveal the beauty of nature that is not only located in the UK but throughout the world (aesthetics). On several occasions (both on television and in public interventions), Attenborough has voiced his concerns and attributes responsibilities to human beings for the destruction of natural habitats and the climate crisis. Therefore, along with youth movements (e.g. Extinction Rebellion, Friday for Future), he stands as a moral stance towards the global public good.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we have explored how trusted and respected media authority voices are involved in constructing narratives related to the climate crisis within public diplomacy. The analysis developed in theoretical and empirical terms shows the high media profile of Sir David Attenborough. His choice as the UK government’s ambassador for the environment cause seems to be strategic. Attenborough is a symbol of the UK’s media power. He voices his concerns and attributes responsibilities to Man for the destruction of natural habitats and the climate crisis. Therefore, along with youth movements, he stands as a moral stance towards the preservation of the natural world. Attenborough repeatedly addresses the younger generations, praising and supporting their demonstrations in favour of the environment.

Our study contradicts instances of criticism about the failure of media narratives about the environment to point out the responsibilities of governments or other power structures. The responsibility attribution frame is one of the prominent frames in the analysed articles. Attenborough has no restraint in explaining the problems, assigning responsibilities (causal and treatment) and moralising those accountable, urging greater respect for nature and future generations.

As discussed, he is a world reference and authority on issues related to the natural world, biodiversity and the climate crisis. The main contribution of this study is to highlight the strategic nature of the choice of SDA by political powers to voice the drama of climate emergency. His choice by the British Government as an ambassador for the climatic cause is due to this profile. Still, Attenborough is more than the ambassador of the British Government. Considering his recognised credibility and the authority of his discourse, we dare call him the “Voice of the Planet”. Representing more than state institutions, NGOs or anonymous citizens, he is the voice of the voiceless natural world and its biodiversity. Besides, his voice has both timbre and emotional resonance. It is the voice of an old man, a symbol of stability and noble-mindedness. He is seen as someone on whom we can rely.

The choice of celebrities with the SDA profile as ambassadors has implications in the visibility for the environmental cause, as well as the multiplication of initiatives that

denounce environmental degradation. For example, at the political level, the launch of the Green Deal (2019) to answer what the European commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, called the "existential issue" of the climate emergency is worthy of note. In 2022, *The Guardian* launched a newsletter featuring exclusive weekly piece from their top climate crisis correspondents called Down to Earth.

This study has methodological limitations related to the analysis of UNFCCC policies. There are substantial differences between the legal language of these documents and the journalistic language of *The Guardian's* articles. These differences hindered the interpretative analysis of the excerpts encoded for frame analysis. Another limitation can be seen in the fact that only articles published in *The Guardian* were considered. This limitation allows us to suggest that future studies include other British and non-British news outlets, seeking to determine Attenborough's media representation globally.

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