Ada Kurikka

'THE BLAME GAME'
Representations of the Black Summer Bushfires in Australian Online Discourse

TIIVISTELMÄ

Australian katastrofaalinen maastopalokausi 2019–2020 aiheutti ennennäkemätöntä tuhoa luonnon monimuotoisuudelle ja kosketti monin tavoin tavallisten australialaisten elämää. "Mustan kesän" tapahtumista uutisoitiin mittavasti niin maan sisällä kuin globaalisti, ja etenkin palojen syistä levisi sosiaalisen median alustoilla ristiriitaisia väitteitä. Tämä tutkielma käsittelee maastopaloille annettuja merkityksiä australialaisessa verkkokeskustelussa kriittisen diskurssianalyysin keinoin. Aineistona toimivat *The Sydney Morning Herald* -lehden sekä *News.com.au* -uutissivuston verkkouutisten lukijakommentit (yhteensä 1038 kommenttia) kriisin keskeltä tammikuun 2020 alusta. Päätavoitteena on selvittää, miten maastopaloja tulkitaan ja millaisia hallitsevia diskursseja kommentoijien argumentaatiosta nousee.

Maastopalokeskustelua lähestytään työssä sosiaalisen konstruktionismin ja ekolingvistiikan näkökulmista tunnistaen, että kieli ja hallitsevat diskurssit vaikuttavat ymmärrykseemme luonnosta ja ekologisista kysymyksistä. Maastopalot ovat luonnollinen osa Australian ekosysteemiä, mutta ilmastonmuutos on tutkitusti lisännyt äärimmäisiä sääilmiöitä paloja kiihdyttäen. Kansalaisjournalismilla on puolestaan kasvava vaikutus siihen, miten luonnonkatastrofit kehystetään mediassa. Australia kärsii eturintamassa ilmastonmuutoksen konkreettisista vaikutuksista, joten on oleellista ymmärtää, miten maastopaloista keskustellaan ja kenen ääniä julkisessa keskustelussa kuullaan. Tarkastelemalla miten tapahtumat *selitetään* ja ketä tai mitä niistä *syytetään* voi oppia paljon tarkasteltavasta yhteiskunnasta. Valitut tutkimusmetodit ovat laadullisia ja monitieteellisiä. Kommenttipalstoja tutkitaan työhön sovitellussa kriittisessä diskurssianalyysissa kahdella eri tasolla: interdiskursiivisuuden sekä retoriikan kautta. Yhtäältä kommentteja peilataan australialaiseen kulttuurikontekstiin ja laajempaan maastopalodiskurssiin; toisaalta tehdään konkreettisia nostoja kommenteissa toistuvista syytöksistä ja syy-seuraussuhteista.

Analyysissa ilmeni, että monet *The Sydney Morning Heraldin* lukijat perustivat argumentointinsa maastopalojen ja ilmastonmuutoksen väliselle yhteydelle. Erityisesti hallituskoalition ja silloisen pääministeri Scott Morrisonin asenteita Australian ilmastopolitiikkaa ja hiiliteollisuutta kohtaan kritisoitiin kommenteissa. Australialaisia lokeroitiin retoriikan keinoin myös tiedostavaan vähemmistöön ja välinpitämättömään enemmistöön poliittisen suuntautumisen ja ilmastoasenteiden perusteella. *News.com.au* -sivustolla mielipiteet jakautuivat selkeämmin, mutta huomattava osa kommentoijista loi vastaväitteitä diskurssille, jossa maastopalot kehystettiin ihmisperäisen ilmastonmuutoksen seuraukseksi. Näissä argumenteissa paloja perusteltiin etenkin oletetuilla puutteilla ennaltaehkäisevässä metsänhoidossa. Varsinkin Australian vihreää puoluetta syytettiin paloja ennaltaehkäisevien ja hillitsevien kulotustekniikoiden käytön väitetystä rajoittamisesta. Lisäksi kommenteissa luotiin jakoja niin kaupunkilaisten luonnonsuojelijoiden ja maaseutujen maanomistajien kuin myös "ilmastoalarmistien" ja "ilmastodenialistien" välille. Osa kommentoijista syytti paloista myös tuhopolttajia ja retoriikalla Mustan kesän maastopaloja rinnastettiin Australian aiempiin maastopalokatastrofeihin.

Tulokset osoittavat, että keskustelijat molemmilla kommenttipalstoilla osallistuivat maastopalojen selittämiseen luoden erilaisia, toisensa poissulkevia tulkintoja tapahtumista. Vuosien 2019–2020 poikkeuksellinen maastopalokausi nähtiin verkkokeskustelussa herätyksenä ilmastokriisin kiireellisyyteen tai viimeisimpänä esimerkkinä maastopaloista väistämättömänä osana Australian luontoa ja kulttuuria. Poliittisen päätöksenteon rooli korostui kommenteissa palojen vaikutusten hillitsijänä joko ilmastotoimien tai palontorjuntastrategioiden kautta. Keskustelussa oli viitteitä polarisaatiosta sekä maastopalojen politisoitumisesta, ja kommentit heijastelivat ja rakensivat julkista huomiota saaneita, paikoin vääristyneitä, käsityksiä paloista. Mustan kesän maastopalodiskurssilla oli myös monia yhtymäkohtia laajempaan globaaliin ja australialaiseen ilmastokeskusteluun sekä maan aiempiin maastopalodiskursseihin.

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ABSTRACT

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Australia's catastrophic bushfire season of 2019–2020 wreaked unprecedented havoc on biodiversity and touched the lives of ordinary Australians on many levels. The events of the 'Black Summer' were widely covered both by the Australian and global press, and contradicting claims about the causes of the fires spread on social media platforms. This thesis discusses the meanings attributed to bushfires in Australian online discourse by the means of critical discourse analysis. The analysed data consists of the reader responses (a total of 1038 comments) to the online news articles published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* in the midst of the crisis in early January 2020. The main goal is to discover how the bushfires are construed and what kind of dominant discourses emerge from the argumentation of the commenters.

The thesis approaches the bushfire debate from the perspectives of social constructionism and ecolinguistics, acknowledging that language and dominant discourses affect our understanding of nature and ecological issues. Although bushfires are an intrinsic part of the Australian ecosystem, studies show that climate change has increased the number of extreme weather events thus accelerating the fires. Furthermore, participatory journalism has a growing impact on the framing of natural disasters in the media. As Australia is at the forefront of suffering the tangible effects of climate change, it is essential to understand how the bushfires are being discussed and whose voices are being heard in the public debate. Observing how the events are *explained* and who or what gets *blamed* for them can reveal much about the observed society. The study employs qualitative and multidisciplinary research methods. The version of critical discourse analysis adapted for the study examines the comments sections on two distinct levels, considering both interdiscursive aspects and rhetorical devices. On the one hand, the comments are analysed as part of the Australian cultural context and the broader bushfire discourse; on the other hand, concrete remarks are made regarding prominent blame patterns and causal relationships.

The analysis indicated that many readers of *The Sydney Morning Herald* based their argumentation on the link between the bushfires and climate change. Especially the attitudes of the Coalition government and the then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Australia's climate policy and coal industry were criticised in the comments. Australians were also divided by the means of rhetoric into categories of a conscious minority and an ignorant majority based on their political orientation and climate attitudes. On the *News.com.au* website, opinions were more diverse, but a significant number of commenters challenged the discourse in which the bushfires were framed as a product of anthropogenic climate change. These arguments explained the fires, above all, as the result of deficient preventive forest management. The Australian Green party, in particular, were blamed for the alleged restrictions on hazard reduction burning and backburning efforts. In addition, the comments created juxtapositions between urban-based environmentalists and rural landowners, as well as 'climate alarmists' and 'climate denialists'. Some commenters also blamed arsonists for the fires, and the rhetoric connected and contrasted the Black Summer bushfires to Australia's preceding bushfire disasters.

Results show that the debaters in both comments sections participated in explaining the bushfires, creating different, mutually exclusive interpretations of the events. The unparalleled bushfire season of 2019–2020 served in the online discussion, on the one hand, as a wake-up call for the urgency of the climate crisis, and on the other hand, as the latest example of bushfires as an inevitable part of Australian nature and culture. The comments emphasised the role of political decision-making in mitigating the impacts of the fires either through climate action or fire prevention strategies. The debate showed indications of polarisation and politicisation of the bushfires, and the comments reflected and constructed various, at times distorted, perceptions of the fires that had also received public attention. The Black Summer discourse also intersected in many ways with the wider, global, and Australian, climate discourse, as well as the country's previous bushfire debates.

Keywords: Black Summer, bushfires, Australia, online discourse, ecolinguistics, critical discourse analysis

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

> *Bushfire* is an Australian word for an uncontrolled fire in dry trees and shrubs, an event that
> can threaten homes and people, as well as vegetation and wildlife (Bromhead 2020, 115).

Although Australia is well accustomed to seasonal bushfires, their severity in the country's summer months of 2019–2020 was all but unprecedented and attracted significant attention both locally and globally. The *causes* of the fires became the very centre of the media coverage and were widely debated online as misinformation spread through social media (Mocatta and Hawley 2020; Weber et al. 2020, 159–172). The purpose of this thesis is to examine the online discourse concerning the Australian bushfire season of 2019–2020 through a qualitative mixed-method analysis, utilising the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and a selection of concepts related to the rhetoric of blame in natural disaster scenarios. More specifically, the study explores reader responses in the online comments sections of two Australian news articles by *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* published in the first week of January 2020 at the height of the crisis.

The past twenty years have shown a notable increase in climate-related disasters, and more recently, several extreme wildfire events have occurred around the world, also impacting areas not usually affected by seasonal fires (Filkov et al. 2020, 44; UNDRR 2020). In accordance with the theory of social constructionism, this thesis studies texts not as a mere mirror but as an actual part of the 'socially constructed [human] reality' (Berger and Luckmann 2011, 383). As natural disasters are inclined to gain media prominence, the most dominant discourses are also likely to influence our comprehension of ecological issues (Alexander 2018, 196–197; Döring 2018, 293). By studying the bushfire debate, this study aims to discover what societal phenomena and cultural aspects are reflected, constructed, and enhanced through the language of the Australian public. How are the bushfires understood, and what kind of overarching discourses might emerge from the arguments of the online newspaper commenters?

The theoretical framework of the study is interdisciplinary, as the above-described topic is connected to various broader areas of research, such as digital media discourse, ecolinguistics, and social sciences — in this case, in the Australian cultural context. The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter Two provides background information on digital journalism with a focus on environmental discourse, especially in relation to natural hazards and disasters. As some contextual knowledge is needed for properly understanding the discourses around bushfires, the chapter also presents a historical perspective on bushfires and offers an overview of the 2019–2020 fire season, commonly referred to as the 'Black Summer'. Next, Chapter Three describes how the present study was executed, introducing the study's approach to CDA, concrete research methods, and the chosen data in more detail. The findings of the research are presented and discussed further in Chapter Four, and finally, Chapter Five concludes the main observations, assesses both the significance and possible limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for further research.

A multitude of studies from different academic disciplines have already been conducted in an attempt to evaluate the social, ecological, and economic consequences of the Black Summer (see, e.g., Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020; Filkov et al. 2020; Wintle et al. 2020). However, it appears that somewhat less attention has been paid to *the language of bushfires* — the discursive, cultural meanings attached to the uncontained fire in the Australian public debate, the *understanding* of the bushfires in the nation's psyche. Recent research has begun to approach some of these issues from various perspectives, the following works included. Bromhead (2020) has conducted a corpus-assisted semantic analysis of *bushfire* in Australian English. Mocatta and Hawley (2020), in turn, have investigated the politicised nature of the Australian media coverage concerning the Black Summer, highlighting trends of both affirmation and denial of the 'climate blame frame' in the debate. Similar tendencies of dualism have been observed by Bromfield et al. (2021, 164), who note that Australia's 'seemingly endless contest over climate policy' influenced the rhetoric of party representatives' media statements and condolence speeches during the Black Summer fires. In

accordance with the previous observations, a study by Weber et al. (2020) has suggested that two polarised Twitter communities participated in the online discourse, others spreading misinformation about the 2019–2020 fires and others, in turn, debunking it.

In relation to the above, the present thesis aims to provide further data on the matter and contribute to the growing area of research exploring the discursive aspects of the Australian bushfires. The goal is also to determine whether similar elements of politicisation and opposing discourses can be found in the comments sections of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au*. As Australia, due to its location, is at the forefront of witnessing the most tangible effects of climate change, it is crucial to understand how the environmental issues are addressed and whose voices are heard in the public discourse.

2 THE BUSHFIRE DEBATE

This chapter contextualises the events of the Black Summer and outlines the theoretical framework chosen for this study. Starting from general aspects, Section 2.1 defines the core concepts for approaching the bushfire debate as part of a wider environmental discourse. Section 2.2 turns to consider how this thesis understands the role of bushfires in Australian culture, and lastly, Section 2.3 discusses the key moments of the 2019–2020 fire season relevant for the upcoming discourse analysis.

2.1 Digital media, environmental discourse, and natural disasters

In the past few decades, the emergence of digital platforms has changed the news media industry for good, offering many new unique features beyond the scope of traditional journalism (Ksiazek et al. 2014, 503). Not only are the news stories typically more accessible and easily distributed across different platforms, but there also is a prominent trend of user engagement and interactivity — the audience is encouraged to interact with each other and contribute to the content (ibid.). Singer et al. (2011, 2) describe the phenomenon as *participatory journalism*, emphasising the recent role of the public in capturing both devastating global events, such as natural disasters, and the experiences of individuals on a more local scale. As many scholars have noted, the continuous flow of topical online discussions even has a power to reconstruct the information received by journalists (Ksiazek et al. 2014, 504). The above-mentioned reasons make online news about climate-related natural disasters and the public discourse surrounding it a fascinating object of study.

Based on social constructionist thought, language serves as a social activity with an ability to structure the surrounding world and form new meanings (Jokinen et al. 2016, 26, 222). Fairclough (1999, 75) noted already at the turn of the century that '[a]s everyday lives become more pervasively textually mediated, people's lives are increasingly shaped by representations which are produced elsewhere'. As explained above, digitalisation of the media industry has since then offered a wide

range of new channels, making information all the more accessible. Moreover, as Alexander (2018, 196) suggests, 'the many-voiced discourse of scientists, corporate interests and media popularizers' affects our perceptions of ecological problems and their implications, and usually the discourse is 'filtered and […] distorted by the media or other presentations'. This thesis argues that Australia serves as a fascinating and complex context for studying environmental online discourse, as natural disasters, such as bushfires, are not only heavily featured in the media, but also experienced first-hand by the public. As stated by the RCNNDA[1] (2020a, 5), the Black Summer bushfires affected both directly and indirectly the lives of many Australians in every state and territory of the country.

The present study positions itself into the research field of ecolinguistics, more particularly, into its branch that addresses 'the question of how language construes our view of nature and environment' (Fill 2018, 1). As determined by Fill (ibid.), the main aim of ecolinguistics is to critique 'forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction' and 'search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world'. In agreement with Alexander's (2018, 196–197) propositions, this thesis sees language users as participants in social processes and acknowledges that 'the issue of relating to the destruction of the environment as humans is, at least partially, a linguistic or discourse predicament'. As argued by Whittaker and Mercer (2004, 264), it is impossible for humans to understand objectively 'the environment unmediated by social factors', and from this follows that nature can be understood as a *social construction*. This assumption enables researchers to study how the 'processes of social construction can *politicise seemingly natural and objective events*, such as bushfires, and lead to conflict' (ibid.).

According to Döring (2018, 293), the media coverage of natural disasters uses standardised and predefined text structures in terms of narratives of what happened (see Section 3.2 for more details). Furthermore, research on environmental disaster discourse shows that media

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[1] The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

typically participates in the so-called 'accountability work' with a purpose to explain 'how and why a disaster occurred' (Mocatta and Hawley 2020). Indeed, as argued by Mocatta & Hawley (ibid.), '[n]ews coverage of climate-related disasters is often revelatory both in tone and in cultural function' and the news narratives portraying them 'become processes that make visible what is hidden'. Correspondingly, the Black Summer can be observed from this angle, as the fire season 'unveiled the connection between climate change and extreme events' (ibid.).

Mocatta and Hawley (2020) note that the recent wildfire events around the world, fires in California, Russia, and the Amazon included, 'have all been reported in the media as having been exacerbated by climate change'. The topic was also prominently featured in the Australian media during the Black Summer, as the connection of climate change to increased bushfire risk had been put under discussion already in April 2019, after emergency leaders expressed concern over the unpreparedness for the upcoming fire season (ibid.). Bromfield et al. (2021, 150) refer to the Black Summer not only as an ecological but also as a political crisis that 'pierced an Australian policy environment in stasis' and functioned as 'a proxy battle in Australia's climate wars and "lost decade" of climate policy inaction'.

Media's emphasis on climate change in the context of bushfires can be perceived as a relatively new trend in Australia, as the country 'has long regarded itself as a "fire continent"' accustomed to bushfires (Mocatta and Hawley 2020). In addition to this, the question of the impacts of the anthropogenic climate change on Australians collides with the country's great interests in the coal industry, coal being 'at the centre of contemporary politics and economic policy in Australia' (Bacon and Nash 2012, 244–245). It is, however, acknowledged that the relationship between bushfires and climate change 'is becoming more of a part of the Australian consciousness' (Bromhead 2020, 129). In accordance with these remarks, Burgess et al. (2020) have observed a significant increase in climate change-related bushfire reporting between the Australian news coverages of the Black Summer fires and the preceding 2009 Black Saturday fires across the state of Victoria.

Thus far, the thesis has covered the key perspectives — participatory journalism, nature as a social construction, and environmental disaster discourse — through which this work examines the bushfire debate of 2019–2020. This section also discussed the recent trend in the global wildfire media coverage that highlights climate change, acknowledging the multidimensionality of the topic in the Australian context with regard to the coal industry and the country's proneness to bushfire occurrence. The following section takes a closer look at the cultural meanings of Australian bushfires and reviews existing research on the discourses connected to earlier fire events in the country.

2.2 A historical perspective on Australian bushfires

Bushfires are considered an intrinsic part of the Australian landscape, having shaped the continent's natural ecosystems throughout the ages (Geoscience Australia, n.d.). As Pyne (1997, 29) aptly puts it, '[f]ires dapple Australian geography and punctuate Australian history', and the most catastrophic conflagrations have remained in the cultural memory of Australians through their daunting names like *Ash Wednesday* and *Red Tuesday* — forming a 'calendar of environmental horror' (ibid., 35). Indeed, highlighting the significance of bushfires in shaping the nation's psyche, Bromhead (2020, 115, 118) argues that the word itself should be considered a *cultural keyword* carrying culture-specific meanings in Australian English. As it happens, Australians have developed over time a wide range of bushfire-related vocabulary that varies from scientific and community safety concepts to colloquialisms, such as 'vollie firies' [volunteer firefighters] (ibid., 118).

The hardships of life in the bush played an integral role in the emergence of the Australian national identity amongst the European settlers (Pyne 1997, 36). The 'bush legend' was romanticised by the late 19th-century poets, including Henry Lawson and A. B. Paterson, and, not unexpectedly, bushfires remain a recurrent theme in Australian literature and art (Logan 2015, 156; Pyne 1997, 36). Indeed, as noted by Bromhead (2020, 116–117), '[b]attling nature's elements and helping affected communities are seen as central to an Australian cultural ethos, which is both valorised and

contested.' With respect to the latter, Bromfield et al. (2021, 151) emphasise that the ever-present bush myth is deeply intertwined with 'settler-colonialism, masculinity, and whiteness' despite the modern multicultural approach to Australian culture. Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain excluded, or only conditionally included, in the national identity (ibid.).

In relation to the above, it is crucial to also consider the cultural significance of fire for Australia's Indigenous peoples. For over 60,000 years, Indigenous Australians have utilised fire to manage the environment through cultural burnings (RCNNDA 2020b, 4). As Gott (2005, 1203) remarks, by the time European colonisers arrived on the continent, the encountered landscapes already 'had a long history of Aboriginal intervention', yet its impact on the structure of the ecosystems 'has only recently been taken into account'. As noted by Indigenous Knowledge Institute (n.d.):

> Aboriginal fire management is a body of ancient traditional practices and knowledge about natural systems that are still practised today in some parts of Australia. […] Songs, ceremonies, sacred narratives and stories in Aboriginal languages about fire are used to teach important cultural concepts […]. Aboriginal people made fire an ally, a dangerous ally, yet not an enemy. By using fire to fight fire, Aboriginal people managed the wildfire-prone Australian landscapes.

Australians have, in fact, always sought to control and contain bushfires using various fire management and firefighting techniques, starting from Indigenous burning practices and continuing with the formation of an institutionalised fire protection strategy after the Second World War (Geoscience Australia, n.d.; Pyne 1998, 328–338). It is worth noting that often the progress has been preceded and stimulated by major bushfires incidents (Pyne 1998, 335). To illustrate the fact, after the disastrous fire season of 2019–2020, the Australian government established a royal commission 'to consider national natural disaster coordination arrangements' (RCNNDA 2020a, 5).

At times, nature has proved untameable despite the human effort. Some of the most disastrous bushfires in Southern Australia, preceding the Black Summer, include the Black Saturday fires in 2009, the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983, and the Black Friday in 1939 (Logan 2015, 157). Geoscience Australia (n.d.) notes that bushfires were responsible for more than 433 fatalities and

8000 injuries between 1967–2013, costing close to 4.7 billion Australian dollars to the country, indirect losses excluded. As far as accountability is considered, in Australia the government is typically expected to provide support and solutions in times of natural disasters (Logan 2015, 162). Furthermore, Logan (ibid.) argues that '[n]ot only are elections to be won or lost on the basis of perceived government and agency performance in dealing with bushfires but, as Australian society becomes increasingly litigious, all involved are concerned to avoid liability'. This view is supported by Whittaker and Mercer (2004, 263), who note that 'the apportioning of blame' has been a repeated feature in every serious bushfire event in the country.

Some research concerning the discourse on bushfire events preceding the Black Summer has been undertaken from various perspectives. For example, Zhang (2018) analysed the ways in which local media narratives tried to increase 'community cohesion' in the context of the 2013 Tasmanian bushfire. Leitch and Bohensky (2013) focused on the discourses of resilience in Australian newspaper articles from 2006–2010 in the wider context of the country's natural disaster coverage. Yell (2010), in turn, examined the increased emotionalisation in disaster reporting, comparing the print media coverage of the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria to that of the similarly disastrous 1983 Ash Wednesday fires and the 1939 Black Friday fires. As Yell argues (2010, 111):

> The events of the 2009 Victorian bushfires […] elicited strong emotions — with the high death toll, catastrophic dimensions, questions of blame and responsibility, narratives of miraculous survival, heroism of ordinary people, criminal acts of negligence of arson, and link to larger emotive issues such as whether climate change played a part in bringing on such an event.

Lastly, Whittaker and Mercer (2004) conducted a discourse analysis with a focus on the public debate after the Victorian bushfires of 2002–03. The study examines the apportioning of blame in the Victorian bushfire debate, the results indicating three contrasting environmental discourses (ibid., 259–282): 1) 'the conservationist' discourse, emphasising the narrative of bushfires as inevitable and natural, 2) the 'ruralist' discourse, framing the fires as avoidable and unnatural, and 3) the 'wise use' discourse, blaming environmentalists for the fire risk caused by mismanaged national parks. As the factors contributing to the Black Summer were also debated in the Australian society,

the last-mentioned observations are particularly relevant for the present thesis. It is interesting to see whether similar discourse patterns can be detected in the research data.

This section has described how bushfires can be perceived as a cultural key word connected to the Australian national identity. Having covered the bushfires on a more general level, the next section moves on to address what is already know about the Black Summer fires and the public discussion surrounding it.

2.3 The Black Summer fires of 2019–2020

The year 2019 was both the driest and warmest year in Australia's recorded weather history, which led to an increased occurrence of *fire weather* days[2] (CSIRO 2021). The CSIRO[3] (ibid.) states that while climate change does not directly start fires, its impacts have caused 'longer, more intense fire seasons' in many parts of the country since the 1950s. Commenting on the acknowledged link between climate change, extending fire seasons, and more extreme and frequent fire events, Filkov et al. (2020, 44) note that the Black Summer fires seem to be in line with these conclusions 'in terms of the ecological consequences and impacts on human population'. Nevertheless, as emphasised by Filkov et al. (ibid.), 'behind the mass media "noise" and subjective information, the real magnitude of Black Summer's events has not been compiled.' At the time of writing, new information on the Black Summer fires is constantly being published, and recent research has confirmed the influence of anthropogenic climate change on the fires. For example, Canadell et al. (2021, 1) have observed that the 'increase in forest burned area' corresponds to 'increasingly more dangerous fire weather conditions', 'increased risk factors associated with pyroconvection, including fire-generated thunderstorms, and increased ignitions from dry lightning'.

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[2] The CSIRO (2021) defines fire weather as 'a combination of strong winds, low humidity and high temperatures'.
[3] The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

The fire season began in September 2019 and the major fires were declared to be distinguished in March 2020, leaving behind a total of 33 directly fire-related casualties, nine firefighters included (Parliament of Australia 2020, 1–2). Researchers have also associated the air pollution generated by the bushfire smoke with severe health impacts and hundreds of excess deaths (Borchers Arriagada et al. 2020, 282–283). Studies estimate that the bushfires of the season destroyed more than three thousand houses and over 24 million hectares, including native forest and grasslands (Filkov et al. 2020, 54; RCNNDA 2020a, 354). Especially the states of New South Wales and Victoria were worst affected (Filkov et al. 2020, 44). Furthermore, according to Filkov et al. (ibid., 54) the number of perished animals exceeds the first estimates of one billion. In fact, a report by van Eeden et al. (2020) indicates that nearly three billion mammals, birds, reptiles, and frogs were affected by the fires. As Wintle et al. (2020, 753) emphasise, '[t]he 2019-20 megafires in Australia brought […] the most dramatic loss of habitat for threatened species and devastation of ecological communities in postcolonial history'.

The unparalleled severity of the fires was also reflected in the media coverage and reactions of the public to the crisis. As the bushfires intensified and merged, the events were widely covered in traditional and social media, and the internet was soon filled with devastating captures of raging flames, red skies, and injured animals (see, e.g., National Library of Australia, n.d.; The Walkley Foundation 2020). Several celebrities made donations and utilised social media to raise funds in support of Australia's firefighters and animal rescue groups (Reuters Staff, 2020), and as the crisis peaked in January 2021, climate action protests were organised both across Australia and overseas (The Guardian 2020). The Black Summer has also already left its mark in the Australian culture, for instance, in the form of various photo and recovery art exhibitions, publications of bushfire poetry, and awarded documentary films (see, e.g., Australian National Maritime Museum 2021; Amazon Prime, n.d.; Hughes 2020; Icon Film Distribution, n.d.; Kempsey Shire Council 2021; MAMA, n.d.).

According to the CSIRO (2021), weather, vegetation, and terrain combined with a direct cause of ignition, such as lightning strikes or mostly accidental human activity, serve as factors that contribute to bushfires. As summarised by Parliament of Australia (2020, 7–8), the majority of the 2019–2020 fires were reportedly started by lightning, excluding a few cases, where the fires had been allegedly deliberately (for example, the December 2019 fires in Tasmania) or accidentally lit. Nevertheless, the factors contributing to the fires were widely debated on social media, creating false juxtapositions of opposing narratives. In their study investigating misinformation circulating on Twitter, Weber et al. (2020, 160) report that the following false narratives[4] — later rebutted, were prominently present on social media: 1) 'the bushfires were caused by arson', 2) 'preventative backburning efforts[5] were reduced due to green activism', 3) 'Australia commonly experiences such bushfires', and 4) 'climate change is not related to bushfires'. As noted by Mocatta and Hawley (2020), the 'denialist discourses' later began to be addressed also by some Australian media outlets.

As explained earlier, media plays an integral part in shaping the public's understanding of ecological issues. It is thus necessary to discuss briefly how the Black Summer fires were framed by the press. A recent study by Burgess et al. (2020, 2)[6] indicates that the most prominent narratives in the Australian reporting of the Black Summer were 'triumph of humanity (18%), unstoppable power of nature (17%), loss of biodiversity (12%), health and fires (11%) and failure of planning (10%)'. Furthermore, climate change was mentioned in 49% of the articles, with only 5% taking a denialist approach (ibid.). Mocatta and Hawley (2020), in turn, emphasise media's ideological polarisation in bushfire reporting, noting that News Corp-owned media' largely 'sought to protect the status quo' and 'divert attention from the climate crisis', whereas 'other Australian and overseas media outlets revealed the fires' link to climate change and intransigent emissions policy'. This view

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[4] The tweets were commonly accompanied by a hashtag *#ArsonEmergency* (Weber et al. 2020, 159–160).
[5] See page 35 for further explanation of the term.
[6] The analysis used a sample of 700 Australian articles, published between the beginning of September 2019 and the end of January 2020 (Burgess et al. 2020, 10).

is supported by Burgess et al. (2020, 13) who claim that many articles 'either blamed or celebrated' the country's Coalition government, while some coverage also blamed The Australian Greens, colloquially known as the 'greenies'. Close to 12% of the articles blaming the Coalition government for the escalated fires addressed issues, such as 'lack of climate action, lack of leadership or lack of funding to the State or Territory Rural Fire Services' (ibid., 2–3).

This section sought to shed light on the events and impacts of the Black Summer, paying special attention to prominent media narratives, misinformation on social media platforms, and recent scientific research confirming the link between climate change and the increased bushfires in Australia. In the next chapter, the thesis discusses the concrete methods and research material of the study.

3 METHODS AND DATA

This chapter presents the methods and data used in the analysis, starting with the core principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in Section 3.1, and then turning to introduce the chosen analytical categories, including beneficial terminology related to natural disaster discourse, framing, and the rhetoric of blame in Section 3.2. Later, Section 3.3 presents the selected research material, briefly considers possible ethical issues related to the study, and explains how the analysis was executed.

3.1 Critical discourse analysis

Before proceeding to discuss the concrete methodological tools selected for the study, it is crucial to define how this thesis approaches and perceives CDA. Moreover, the interpretation of *discourse* as a concept varies among scholars and disciplines, requiring thus further clarification. According to a definition provided by Fairclough (2010, 230), the term discourse is conventionally used in the following, easily confusable senses: 1) 'meaning-making as an element of the social process', 2) 'the language associated with a particular social field or practice', and 3) 'a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective.'

The present study focuses on the first and third definitions, acknowledging the difference between *discourse* as an abstract, uncountable noun, and *a discourse*, a countable noun. To avoid confusion, Fairclough (2010, 230, 357) uses the term *semiosis* to refer to the former, most abstract sense, emphasising that discourse comprises not only language but also, for example, sound and visual images, and is closely interconnected with other elements of the social events and practices. As regards the latter sense, *discourses*, the semiotic ways of 'representing certain parts or aspects of the (physical, social, psychological) world' (ibid., 358), carry different, for example, ideological or political, stances on the issues at hand. In the context of the present study, the object of the research is, on an abstract level, the bushfire discourse as a whole. On a more concrete level, the upcoming

analysis, in turn, aims at identifying different discourses that represent various positions and social relations inside the Australian society with regard to the bushfire debate.

CDA, as a distinct school or a network of linguists, emerged at the beginning of the 1990s through the collaboration of van Dijk, Fairclough, Kress, van Leeuwen, and Wodak (Wodak 2001a, 4). It served as an answer to the disciplinary gap between linguistics with a focus on micro-level analysis of texts and social science with a tendency to analyse macro-level sociological questions (Fairclough 2010, 417). Having its roots in various different branches of linguistics[7] and classical rhetoric, CDA is now considered as an entrenched paradigm (Wodak 2001a, 3–4) and is generally described as an interdisciplinary *perspective* or *approach* to linguistic research on social issues rather than a single method or a theory (Fairclough 2010, 234; Huckin 1997, 80; Meyer 2001, 14; van Dijk 2001, 96, 98). Indeed, as Fairclough (2010, 6–7) argues, any method of textual analysis may as well be combined with CDA, as long as it remains compatible with CDA's principles and purposes. Thus, 'the specific methods used for a particular piece of research arise from the theoretical process of constructing its object' (ibid, 234). For instance, this thesis considers the wider bushfire discourse connected to argumentation — *explaining*, *casting blame*, and *debating the causes* of the fires —, and hence several concepts of argumentation theory and rhetoric are incorporated into the version of CDA adapted for the needs of this study (see Section 3.2).

On the question of what kind of research exactly counts as CDA, Fairclough (2010, 10) suggests the following criteria:

> 1) It is not just analysis of discourse (or more concretely text), it is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process.
> 2) It is not just general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts.
> 3) It is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them.

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[7] These include functional systemic linguistics, text linguistics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and pragmatics (Wodak 2001a, 3).

The third criterion related to social wrongs is worth a closer examination, as it separates CDA from much other research. As many scholars have emphasised, CDA, indeed, is interested in inequalities, discrimination, power relations, and their manifestation in language (Fairclough 2010, 8; Meyer 2001, 15; van Dijk 2001, 96; Wodak 2001a, 2). Although some scholars stress that CDA should acknowledge and defend its own socio-political position, this thesis agrees with Wodak (2001b, 65) who argues that rather than assessing right from wrong, CDA should 'make [transparent] choices at each point in the research itself, […] and justify theoretically why certain interpretations of discursive events seem more valid than others'. Regarding the present study, the purpose of Chapter Two was to offer sufficient amount of socio-contextual and scientific information on the Australian bushfires to help in the interpretation of the interconnected discourses surrounding them. Furthermore, the upcoming analysis strives to give a sense of the existing spectrum of discourses in the comments sections, which betters our overall understanding of the bushfire crisis.

Having defined the core aims of CDA, it remains necessary to give reasons as to why and how the chosen approach can be considered suitable for ecolinguistic research on the bushfire crisis. As indicated already in the previous chapter, ecolinguistics 'seeks to uncover ideologies that work against ecologically or environmentally sound principles' (Alexander 2018, 196). This thesis argues that environmental issues should, by their very nature, be studied from the point of view of social wrongs, the focal point of CDA, for a number of reasons. Firstly, human societies and political actions — indirectly including language and discourse — have an influence on the physical environment that we all share. Secondly, the effects of climate change are and will not be felt equally across the globe, much like the impacts of the severe bushfires do not affect all areas, states, and territories of Australia, or people with different socioeconomic status in a comparable manner. Thirdly, not all discourses concerning the bushfires are equally represented in the public sphere, and to fully comprehend the issue, it becomes important to gain understanding of the different positions and their prominence.

CDA has, in fact, been successfully applied and developed further in previous ecolinguistic research. For example, Döring (2018, 296–297) describes 'eco-critical discourse analysis' (ECDA) as an multidisciplinary approach with the following properties and characteristics: ECDA 'conceives ecological problems as naturally, socially and culturally contextualized', it analyses 'discourses directed to the environment' merging 'theories and methods from different scientific disciplines', and 'focuses on how discursive structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce and challenge framings of environmental issues'.

This section has defined the concept of discourse and reviewed the requirements of CDA and ECDA as the research approaches chosen for the study. A description of the implementation of discourse analysis on a more concrete level is provided below.

3.2 Disaster framing and the rhetoric of blame

According to van Dijk (2001, 98–99), discourse analysis is fundamentally never 'complete', as there are almost countless dimensions and structures of discourse to choose from. Indeed, due to the large number of individual online comments that form the research material, a very detailed linguistic analysis would not be executable in the scope of this thesis. Consequently, the chosen discourse-analytical categories and levels of analysis have been carefully selected, keeping in mind what is most relevant. Inspired by Fairclough's (2010, 238) idea of a twofold textual analysis that includes 1) *an interdiscursive* analysis, 'analysis of which genres, discourses, and styles are drawn upon, and how they are articulated together', and 2) a *linguistic* analysis, this thesis too divides the analysis into two distinct, yet interdependent levels.

On one level, the present analysis seeks a contextualised interpretation of the data, taking into consideration interdiscursive and intertextual aspects. In other words, the goal is to discover overarching themes that connect the bushfire discussion in the comments sections to the wider cultural context and social debates. Furthermore, the analysed data is interpreted as part of a broader natural disaster discourse (discussed in further detail below), and to help with this, the concept of

media frames is borrowed from framing theory (see, e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007). On another, more concrete level, the upcoming analysis draws from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (2013) argumentation theory and examines the data with the help of certain rhetorical strategies connected to causalities and casting blame.

With respect to the typical media coverage of natural disasters, framing theory proposes that any topic may be perceived from various angles and 'construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations' (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). According to Kuypers (2009, 181–182), frames can be defined as key organising ideas within a narrative account of an event and they 'provide the interpretive cues for otherwise neutral facts'. Frames may thus prompt the audience to view an issue in a way that promotes certain aspects and makes others less noticeable (ibid., 181). In fact, as frames have the power to shape our thinking by construing problems and defining causes (ibid., 181–182, 190), it is all but significant how disasters like bushfires are framed in the public discussion.

As was mentioned in Chapter Two, media accounts of natural disasters tend to follow repeating patterns, starting from dramatic headlines accompanied by images of destruction, and continuing with standardised 'linguistic and phenomenon-specific text structures' (Döring 2018, 293). As noted by Döring (ibid.), these include, for example, metaphors, grammatical constructions, narratives, and text linguistic structures. In terms of the typical text structure, Döring (ibid.) states that the written media accounts of natural disasters often include 'descriptions of causes, damages, number of victims, rescue operations, expert opinions, political statements and consequences for disaster and environmental management'. Acknowledging the concept of participatory journalism, the intertwined relationship between the media and the public (see Section 2.1), this thesis aspires to ascertain whether the discourses in the comments sections share any similarities with disaster reporting, echoing the framing of the Black Summer bushfires by the media.

What is particularly noteworthy concerning the disaster discourse and the framing of environmental disasters is the concept of *blame*. As Shuailong et al. (2019, 655) aptly note, studying blame is of the utmost importance, since 'sense-making processes inform what and who a society values, and ultimately shape lawmaking.' Similarly, Mocatta & Hawley (2020) mention that sometimes disasters are regarded as opportunities for change, which may trigger blame games or so-called 'framing contests'. Some actors emphasise the systematic issues behind the crisis, and others, feeling a threat towards the current state of affairs, reject the calls for policy change by trying to shift the blame away onto someone else (ibid.). As regards the present study, this thesis sees a connection between the above-mentioned blame games and the 'discursive construction of "us" and "them"', which, in Wodak's view (2001b, 73) is the very base of discourses of identity and difference. The analysis hence takes a special interest in the repeating blame patterns and the descriptions of causes for the fires in the online comments, and simultaneously pays attention to the representations of ingroups and outgroups in the blame narratives.

In accordance with Kuypers (2009, 185), this study views framing as an inherently rhetorical process, and as previously mentioned, the second level of the discourse analysis turns to concentrate on argumentation. Van Dijk (2001, 114) compares discourses to icebergs, as typically only some contextually relevant information is expressed and 'a vast part of presupposed knowledge' belonging to the 'sociocultural common ground' stays hidden. CDA research takes thus special interest in implicit meanings like allusion and presuppositions (ibid., 104). As far as the latter is concerned, Hucking (1997, 82) defines *presuppositions* as language use that takes 'certain ideas for granted'. Machin and Mayr (2012, 153), in turn, refer to presuppositions as meanings that are 'assumed as given', and not 'requiring definition' in spoken or written language. However, a closer look might reveal them as profoundly ideological or debatable (ibid.). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2013, 65) also address the same phenomenon in their work from a rhetorical perspective, noting that 'from start to finish, analysis of argumentation is concerned with what is supposed to be accepted by

the hearers'. These presupposed *objects of agreement* may include, for example, certain premises, connecting links, or the way they are employed in the argumentation (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2013, 65). According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (ibid., 33), every individual and every culture have their own idea of *the universal audience*, meaning what is 'regarded as *real*, *true*, and *objectively valid*'. Examining the presuppositions in the research data is thus especially interesting, as possible trends in the discourse might tell us something about the Australian society.

To make recognising and interpreting the presuppositions easier, this thesis attempts to identify relevant bushfire arguments in the comments sections by categorising them according to the following principle: The comment should include an explicit or implicit reference to *a target of blame* and/or to a *causal relationship* that either affirms or denies a link between the Black Summer fires and other factors. These elements could be expressed through different rhetorical devices and argumentation schemes, and the analysis focuses especially on the complementary processes of *association* and *dissociation*. As described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2013, 190) the processes of association 'bring separate elements together and allow us to establish a unity among them, which aims either at organizing them or at evaluating them, positively or negatively, by means of one another'. Dissociation, in turn, refers to 'techniques of separation which have the purpose of dissociating, separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group within some system of thought' (ibid.).

In summary, this section presented the chosen analysis method, starting with the higher level — an interdiscursive analysis specially interested in blame patterns of natural disaster discourse — and continuing to the lower level of analysis concerned with the language — more precisely, the rhetorical aspects — in the individual online comments. The following section, in turn, looks more closely at the analysed data.

3.3 Research material

As mentioned in Chapter One, this study focuses specifically on the reader response to Australian online news articles about the Black Summer fires. The comments sections of two online articles — 'The Australian bushfire crisis seen from abroad' by *The Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*) and 'How the world has reacted to Australia's "apocalyptic" bushfires' by *News.com.au* — were selected in the study as separate case studies for several different reasons. Firstly, both online articles were published by popular Australian news websites[8] owned by two different well-established media companies. *Smh.com.au*, the online platform of the daily newspaper *SMH,* has its roots in the weekly *Sydney Herald* founded already in 1831 (Nine 2022). The newspaper currently belongs to 'Australia's largest locally owned media company' Nine that merged with Fairfax Media in 2018 (ibid.). Before the bushfire crisis in May 2019, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2020b) masthead had over 8 million readers, and the numbers have since risen in both print and digital form. *News.com.au* (2019; 2021), in turn, is owned by News Corp Australia, and the website broke a record with 11 million readers in November 2019, advertising itself as Australia's leading commercial online news outlet.

Secondly, the articles appeared when the media coverage of the bushfire crisis was at its peak at the turn of the year. For example, during the first week of January the fires escalated especially in New South Wales and Victoria when many fire fronts merged (Bromfield et al. 2021, 155). As Burges et al. (2020, 11) note, considering the 'scale and length' of the fire season, thousands of news articles were published throughout the Black Summer. However, January 2020 comprised the most reporting connected to the fires and the most discussion of climate change (ibid.). The articles also provided openly accessible comments sections with a considerable number of messages, offering thus enough material for the analysis. Judging by the number of comments — *Smh.com.au* with a total of

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[8] According to the November 2019 digital news rankings by Nielsen (2019), *News.com.au* was Australia's most viewed news site, *The Sydney Morning Herald* taking the fourth position.

450 and *News.com.au* with 588[9] — the news articles indeed had a fairly wide audience participating in the discussion. This makes it possible for the researcher to detect possible repeating discourse patterns in the comments.

Thirdly, rather than counting as crisis communication that provides topical information in time of distress, both texts reviewed the global media reactions to the crisis, proving thus more suitable objects of study from an ethical point of view and with respect to the research question. To summarise, since 1) the online news platforms were owned by different companies, and 2) the articles themselves were published close to each other in time, had a similar following, and 3) addressed bushfires from an appropriate angle, the use of the comments sections as two exemplary cases was satisfactorily justified and the data could be relatively easily compared.

As far as the ethical issues are concerned, several aspects related to privacy, consent, and pseudonymity need to be addressed. A significant period of time has passed since the texts were published, and both comments sections have already been closed for further discussion. For this reason, it was not possible to notify the involved commenters and affirm their consent to participate in the study. However, the use of the material can be justified, as both the news articles and the comments were published openly on the internet (viewing them did not require any sort of registration to the websites when the data was collected), and the notable popularity of the websites implies that joining the *public* discourse was a conscious choice. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the sensitivity of the subject, as the study concerns a global tragedy that affected the lives of many Australians. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020, 18) notes that while the amount of data available to assess the short-term and long-term impacts of the bushfire crisis on mental health is still limited, '[t]here is strong evidence to suggest that disasters, including bushfires, can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of people who are directly and indirectly affected'.

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[9] Further details and hyperlinks to the research material are available in References. Selected texts have also been preserved in pseudonymised form by the author A.K. and are available upon request for research purposes.

Acknowledging this, the original usernames or any easily identifiable personal information are not included in this thesis to protect the privacy of the commenters.

The comments sections of the two articles were studied separately, following the CDA methods described in the previous section. The comments were thus analysed both from the interdiscursive and linguistic (more specifically, rhetorical) perspectives. It is worth noting that the approach to the analysis was purely qualitative, meaning that instead of focusing on statistical and numerical data, the intention was to form illustrative thematic groupings based on most prominent discourse patterns with respect to the research question and the chosen eco-critical approach. Furthermore, taking into consideration the large number of online comments, it was neither befitting nor possible to analyse every comment in great detail on word and sentence levels. Instead, the analysis focused on finding the arguments using the previously explained criteria. Afterwards, the results of the two case studies were compared with each other and, lastly, assessed in terms of their consistency with earlier research.

Having so far discussed the chosen theoretical and interpretive framework, research approaches, methods, and data selection, the following part of the thesis moves on to describe the results of the critical discourse analysis.

4 RESULTS

The objective of the research was to investigate the representations of the Black Summer bushfires by discovering and analysing overarching discourses in the online comments of Australian news sites. This chapter presents the results of the analysis, starting with the key findings concerning the comments under the online article by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Section 4.1, and continuing then to consider the comments under the article by *News.com.au* in Section 4.2. Finally, Section 4.3 examines the differences and similarities between the two comments sections and evaluates how the results compare to earlier findings.

The analysis showed that the majority of the arguments in the data could, indeed, be grouped into large categories — discourses of *failed climate politics*, *the ignorant majority*, *forest mismanagement*, *the rural–urban divide*, and *bushfire history* — based on the attributions of cause and blame. As it follows, Sections 4.1 and 4.2 cover the most notable observations on the arguments one category at a time, commenting the most prominent rhetorical and discursive features and underlying presuppositions. Since online comments are essentially connected to the published content on the news sites, both sections also offer a brief introduction to the framing of bushfires in the online articles before proceeding to discuss the actual findings.

Due to the qualitative approach of the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that the themes highlighted in this chapter do not stand for the discourse as a unified whole, as the arguments of both comments sections contained great quantity of contradicting framings of the Black Summer bushfires. To illustrate the features under observation, the sections include excerpts from the research data in the form of direct quotations. As some of the original comments contained several different arguments expressed through multiple sentences or paragraphs, the examples do not always comprise whole comments but rather chosen segments of them. Supplementary contextual clarifications are offered in brackets when needed, and some parts of the text are italicised to further emphasise certain

discourse features. Since the thesis deals with internet language, the label *[sic]* is not inserted after nonstandard spelling and grammar choices that do not disturb the interpretation of the quotation.

4.1 *Failed climate politics* and *the ignorant majority* discourses

The Sydney Morning Herald's online article 'The Australian bushfire crisis seen from abroad' published on 1 January 2020, is an analysis piece reviewing global media responses to the Australian bushfires around the New Year's Eve of 2020. As the framing of the Black Summer bushfires in the article served as a starting point for the online comments, it is important to consider shortly the perspectives presented to the reader. The article included various intertextual references in the form of webpage screenshots, quotations, and summaries of the foreign bushfire coverage by *Ouest-France* (France), *The BBC* (UK), *CNN* (US), *Toronto Sun* (Canada), *Franceinfo* (France), and *Al Jazeera* (Qatar). To paraphrase the contents of the article, the following frames and narratives were covered in the text:

> 1) *Ouest-France* accusing 'high on coal' Australia and its government of denying the relationship between carbon emissions and global warming in a 'stinging' analysis,
> 2) *Ouest-France* also critiquing the Prime Minister's Hawaiian holiday during the fires,
> 3) foreign countries 'aware of their own commitments or debts to the Paris accord' being observant of climate-related disasters abroad,
> 4) Australian bushfires gaining global importance due to climate protests and 'green activism', much like the Amazon fires and other extreme weather events of 2019,
> 5) the world grieving for Australia and the planet through the global coverage of local bushfire stories from Mallacoota, pictures of devastation, and a video of a dehydrated koala,
> 6) *Al Jazeera* mentioning Sydney's Lord Mayor Clover Moore's comments of climate change, rather than fireworks, being the real issue worthy of concern.

The emphasis of the analysis piece was discernibly on climate change, yet some word choices, for example, the use of certain metaphors, such as 'Ouest-France's *stinging* criticism' and '*teen warrior* Greta Thunberg', suggest a slightly critical stand towards the foreign media coverage and the global climate protests. Interestingly, the article also ends in a summarising indicative statement that seems to invite the readers to participate in the debate in the comments section: 'Not every publication everywhere gave the disasters the same prominence, but there's no doubt people around the globe got the message. The planet is getting hotter: just look at the pictures from Australia.'

Turning now to discuss the comments section, the commenters interacted both with the original article and with each other in original comments and various comment threads, as perhaps expected of the comments section text genre. The *Smh.com.au* site also has a 'respect' feature, which enabled the commenters to endorse comments they appreciated. The comments section consisted of 450 comments by a wide range of usernames, and the most highly rated comment had 278 likes, which suggests that a large number of people participated in the discussion. This assessment is also supported by the stylistic diversity of the arguments that employed both emphatic and neutral expression and varied from witty, concise, and at times semantically vague remarks to detailed analyses with hyperlinks to online sources of information.

As far as the research findings are concerned, the reader response appeared to be for the most part in accordance with the global interpretations of the Black Summer presented in the *SMH*'s article — framing the fires through climate change. Thus, in most arguments, the audience was expected to acknowledge and accept a connection between Australia's bushfires and climate change, whereas only few commenters directly challenged the interpretation. Two prominent, intertwined themes were established in the analysis of the arguments, named here as *failed climate politics* discourse and *the ignorant majority* discourse. The blame patterns and argumentation of both categories are discussed below in further detail.

As regards the first prominent discourse, one of the most notable characteristics throughout the comments section was the frustration towards Australia's Liberal-National Coalition[10] government of that time and its alleged incompetency to react properly not only to the bushfire crisis but also to climate change through the country's energy policies. In contrast, the opposing Australian Labor Party[11] received significantly less criticism. The arguments in this discourse category of *failed*

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[10] Liberal-National Coalition refers to a political alliance between centre-right parties Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party of Australia (Hardy 2020, 63–64). The Liberal Party traditionally leans toward conservative values and economic liberalism, whereas the National party represents typically voters from regional and rural communities (ibid.).
[11] The Australian Labor Party (ALP) is a major centre-left party, having its roots in supporting workers' rights and remaining during the Black Summer fires in federal opposition (Hardy 2020, 62).

climate politics both explicitly and implicitly associated the ongoing bushfire crisis with fossil fuels and the country's connection to coal and gas industry. In connection with this, commenters emphasised different perspectives in their argumentation, including the government's failure to care for the citizens (see Examples 1 and 2 below), its tendency to use the bushfires to promote selfish agendas (Examples 1 and 3), and its assumed corrupted ties with the mining industry and platforms supposedly promoting climate denialism (Example 3).

Example 1
I hate terms like "Red Tuesday" "Black Friday" etc
It distracts from the real issue that is *the government does not give a rats a#$@ about its people*. It's great to acknowledge everyone who volunteers to fight these fires and people who lost their homes or even worse lives but at the end, we need to focus on *trying to avoid these situations rather than using it for patriotic political campaigns*

Example 2
A pity or [our] leaders can't read French.
   [A reply:] They're obviously *struggling to understand plain English*.
   […]
   [A reply:] They definitely *can't decipher science*.

Example 3
People overseas, so far away, *get climate change,* and see *the link with the devastating bushfires* Australia is experiencing.
But *our government ministers* […] wilfully *ignore the science*, because it *doesn't suit their partisan political agenda*.
It really begs the question - what is really driving their agenda? *Who are they beholden to*?
The IPA [the Institute of Public Affairs]*, the Minerals Council...*
They are certainly *not being driven by the wellbeing and long term interests of Australians*.

The above-mentioned themes were explored in the comments section through various different rhetorical means and argument types. For instance, in Example 1, the writer refers to chosen characteristics of the existing public bushfire debate as an *illustration* — a means of strengthening 'a known and accepted rule' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 357) — which here alludes to the politicisation of the crisis. Example 2, in turn, shows commenters using elements of *ridicule*, defined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (ibid., 205–206) as a strategy of mocking the opponent, here the prevailing government, by condemning their opinions as illogical and foolish. Lastly, Example 3 can be interpreted as an argument essentially creating *sequential relations* — more specifically, *causal links* (ibid., 263) between existing structures of reality accepted by the audience — the climate change and the bushfires, political corruption and the government's climate actions. As described by

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2013, 263), this kind of argumentation attempts to 'reveal the existence of a cause which could have determined a given event' and 'show the effect which must result from a given event'.

As far as the specific targets of blame are concerned, the arguments of *failed climate politics* discourse included numerous mentions of Australia's then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison (of Liberal Party). In relation to this, one interesting discourse feature is that the references to Morrison were repeatedly made using either inventing and humorous wordplay (Examples 4, 5, and 6) or intertextual references (Examples 5, 7 and 8) to express dissatisfaction both in his perceived lack of leadership during the fires and in his support for Australia's fossil fuel industry.

Example 4
Our Prime Minister is great at cooking a BBQ. He does it for visiting dignitaries. *Where is he now?* What more practical way of support can *Scott Morrison* do, than dishing up burgers and buns at the crisis centres on the South Coast/ Come on *Scomo*, come and do *a smoko!*

Example 5
And *the Prime Minimal* [prime minister] is still *MIA*.
  [A reply:] He's not missing. He was busy with like, really important stuff. *Hosting the cricketers.*

Example 6
COALmo [Scott Morrison] is going to go down in history as a *science-denying* laughing stock at best, probably even a international pariah who *did nothing while his country burned*.

Example 7
Yes, Australia is having unprecedented bush fires but seriously, *how good is the cricket*!?

Example 8
Let's hope the foreign press never publish a photo of Morrison's smirk or the few remaining tatters of our reputation will well and truly go down the gurgler.
  [A reply:] Or that *photo of him fondling his precious lump of Coal in parliament*.

For example, in some comments Morrison's original nickname ScoMo was changed into 'Smoko', a word that in Australian English typically refers to 'a tea-break' or 'a stoppage of work in order to rest and smoke' (OED Online under *smoke-ho | smoke-oh*, n.), and in the online debate ironically alluded both to bushfire smoke and Morrison's much criticised, ill-timed overseas holiday (Probyn 2019). This implies a presupposed juxtaposition between the Prime Minister and the ordinary citizens who volunteered to fight the bushfires. Another satirical sobriquet in the data worth noting is 'Scotty from Marketing' that went viral during the 2019–2020 bushfires, referring to Morrison's

infamous background in tourism marketing (Wignall 2020). The usage of the pseudonym suggests general distrust in any statements of the Prime Minister. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt, where 'Scotty from Marketing' is combined with a *metaphor* of selling, 'a condensed analogy' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 399) between political speech and self-promotion: '*Scotty from Marketing* will have a lot of work to do *to sell his product*'. As regards the intertextual references, some comments alluded back to a 2017 speech Morrison gave in the Australian Parliament with a lump of coal in hand (Example 8 above). Others, in turn, called attention to Morrison's earlier cricket tweets and his speech at the New Year's Day Cricket reception that were perceived by many Australians as insensitive in the context of the fires (Examples 5 and 7) (SBS News 2019; Donohoe 2020).

In addition to the anger specifically directed at the Prime Minister, many arguments cast blame outside the government, singling out operators connected to the mine industry, including an Indian business organisation Adani Group (Examples 9 and 10) behind the controversial Carmichael mine project in the Galilee Basin in Queensland (Adani 2022; StopAdani, n.d.). Interestingly, also Rupert Murdoch, the Australian-born Executive Chairman of the News Corp media, and other influential conservative-leaning media personalities, such as radio broadcaster Alan Jones (News Corp 2022; Taylor 2014, 107) were brought up in the arguments and associated with climate denialism (Examples 10 and 11). These mentions indicate that the bushfire discourse on the *Smh.com.au* website is, in fact, tightly attached to the wider Australian climate discourse and political divide. As noted by Taylor (2014, xiii), the scientific knowledge of anthropogenic climate change and its effects on Australia were 'dramatically reframed as uncertainty' after the mid-1990s by policymakers and media. The diversity of economic and political views in the Australian media sector has also decreased due to media mergers from the 1980s onwards, and especially the Murdoch press has become renowned for its critical stance on climate change in the past decades (ibid., 106–107). Moreover, according to Hardy (2020, 69), News Corp-owned media is typically associated in

Australia with the Murdoch family, and the company has repeatedly been 'accused of bias towards the Liberal Party'.

> **Example 9**
> Smoko's [Scott Morrison] is going to India to
> 1. *Support the Adani coal mine*
> 2. Encourage more migration from India
> 3. Get some smoke free fresh air and have another holiday

> **Example 10**
> When *Rupert* [Murdoch] decides something should be done about climate change Smoko [Scott Morrison] will do as he's told. I won't hold my breath. I should as the air quality Where I live is 24 times the WHO safe level today courtesy of bushfires […]. Australia is now an embarrassing third world backwater courtesy of the LNP [The Liberal–National Coalition] policies. No doubt when the bleeding obvious dawns on *Murdoch,* [Alan] *Jones* and *their acolytes* they will have been committed to climate action all along. I find it difficult to believe that *these dopes are letting Adani go ahead*.

> **Example 11**
> Foreign media covers the Desaster [bushfire disaster] more detailed than *our own Murdoch newspapers*. Do *they* even report on us having lost areas larger than Belgium or *are they still praising Scotty from marketing* [Scott Morrison] for his magnificent leadership skills?

Moving on to the second discourse category of *the ignorant majority,* the analysis showed that the criticism in the comments extended not only to the authorities, but also to Australians as citizens. Whereas the arguments in the discourse category of *failed climate politics* blamed the government and created causal links between Australia's climate policies, climate change, and the bushfires, the comments of *the ignorant majority* discourse highlighted the role of the people in electing the leaders of that time in the first place. As illustrated in Examples 12–15 below, the commenters created ingroups and outgroups through their rhetoric. Example 12 shows how the arguments, on the one hand, depict Australians as a unified whole, emphasising mutual responsibility for the situation with the help of the first-person plural pronoun *we*. On the other hand, the commenters often simultaneously draw distinctions between the presupposed ignorant masses and the enlightened few, separating themselves from the 'most Australians', like in Examples 12 and 14. In these arguments, the voters of the then-government parties are presented as *an anti-model* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 366) that encourages the audience to avoid undesired characteristics, such as greed, ignorance, and indifference to climate change.

Example 12
We have to tolerate this government because *we*, that is *the electorate*, *bought their BS*. […]
Although I did not vote for this party, *enough of my friends, neighbours and fellow citizens*
did. *We* have only *ourselves to blame* for the last six years of non- government

Example 13
Most Australians voted for political parties that care more about *money* than they do about
the environment.

Example 14
Foreigners please note "While many Australian people have been calling for action on
climate change for decades, successive governments and *most voters* have endorsed *blindly
taking resource revenue without any consideration of future environmental impacts*"
#NotAllAustralians

Example 15
How good is it *being the basket case and laughing stock* of the world?
  [A reply:] Happened plenty of times over the last 6 years. *Quiet Australians* tend to *ignore* it and *re-elect
  the LNP* [The Liberal–National Coalition]

The rhetoric of the commenters included also various verbal expressions of shame and
embarrassment regarding the global criticism against Australia. This rhetorical construction of
collective embarrassment is especially evident in the following excerpts that utilise humour, self-
sarcasm (Examples 16 and 17), and self-irony (Example 18). Perhaps expectedly, considering the
global perspectives on the bushfires in the *SMH*'s article, the comments thus constructed us-versus-
them positioning not only according to internal political divides, but also between Australians and
foreigners. Regardless of this, some arguments also aimed at unifying the audience under the assumed
common goal of survival and climate change mitigation, as in Example 19.

Example 16
We are *too ignorant* to stand up to anything but a beer strike!

Example 17
Well at least *we might not have to spend much on defence. Who* would want to invade a desert?

Example 18
Seems *the majority of the world* no longer envies our lifestyle. *Seems people are not that into a country
that burns around them.*
  […]
  [A reply:] Yep, choking on smoke while terrified of your house being burnt to the ground.
  Can't beat that lifestyle! How good is Australia!

Example 19
We ALL need to take responsibility and do something. *The time for blame is long gone*. Who
cares what caused climate change if you are about to die in a wall of flames.

Interestingly, although the arguments in the *Smh.com.au* comments section included
numerous explicit and implicit attributions of cause and blame, many comments did not directly

mention the fires. Instead, in several comment threads the conversation seemed to shift from the bushfires to much wider climate discourse and politics. For example, coal exports were featured repeatedly in the discussion, especially with reference to global carbon dioxide emissions and Australia's role in the international cooperation on climate change. Some associative arguments even created an explicit causal link between Australia's coal exports and the bushfires, like the replies in Example 20. Also, China's role in the global efforts towards climate change mitigation was debated in many comments (Example 21), while others shifted the conversation to the climate policies of all the main political parties in Australia, without sparing the Labor from criticism either (Example 22).

Example 20
Coal didn't start the fires.
  […]
  [A reply:] No,but *it helped to produce the conditions* that transformed them into monsters.
  […]
  [A reply] Actually *Coal now *is* starting fires*. The coal-induced intensity of the current fires are now causing thunderstorms, and the lightning is creating more fires. See today's reports in this publication.

Example 21
China, the biggest polluter is *the root cause* of the Planet's climate change and bush fires.

Example 22
Wish these countries would all boycott Australian products and impose sanctions on us so our stupid government would act. Let the economy suffer. Only money talks in this increasingly backward, embarrassingly parochial country who voted Morrison into office. Labor continues to lose voters with [Anthony] Albanese trying to convince himself Labor can ever again have a blue-collar following. *Giving false hope to people desperate for work by opening coal mines that will never deliver meaningful jobs might get Labor a few voters, but Albo* [Albanese] *will lose the rest of us. Create jobs by leading the country into green energy production and Labor might have a chance of keeping the urban voters they need.*

In the two overarching discourse categories considered in this section — *failed climate politics* and *the ignorant majority*, the Black Summer bushfires appeared to represent several different issues, including the incompetence of the government, the ignorance of Australians, and the feeling of being ridiculed in the eyes of the international community. In the comments, blame was cast especially on the Prime Minister, the coal industry, alleged climate deniers, and the majority of Australians — the voters of the Liberal–National Coalition in particular. All of these aspects in the argumentation indicate a strong presupposition of a causal relationship between climate change and the 2019–2020 bushfires. In relation to this, the fires served in the discourse as a 'wake-up call'

illustrating the urgency of the climate crisis. Next, the thesis moves on to first outline the article by *News.com.au* and then to discuss the discourses in the comments section.

4.2 *Forest mismanagement*, *the rural–urban divide*, and *bushfire history* discourses

The article 'How the world has reacted to Australia's "apocalyptic" bushfires' by *News.com.au* was published two days after *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s analysis, on 3 January 2020, and it continued to survey the global reactions to the bushfires. The text contained webpage screenshots, pictures of the bushfire coverage in foreign front pages, embedded tweets, and photographs of the evacuees and the alarming red sky over Mallacoota, Victoria. Compared to the analysis piece by *SMH*, the text made references to relatively many foreign media outlets, including *The I* (UK), *Daily Mail* (UK), *Ouest-France* (France), *The New York Times* (US), *The BBC* (UK), *The Guardian* (UK), *Metro* (UK), *Vox* (US), *Bloomberg*, *CNN* (US), *ABC News* (US), and *NPR* (US). As regards the framing of the bushfires, the following narratives and perspectives were incorporated into the article:

> 1) The 'catastrophic fire conditions' on the east coast of Australia making global headlines along with reports of people across the globe celebrating the start of the new decade,
> 2) *The I*, *NPR*, and other media outlets emphasising the contrast between the devastating bushfire situation and the Sydney New Year's Eve fireworks,
> 3) *Ouest-France* and *The New York Times* reporting on the bushfires and criticising Scott Morrison's climate change denial,
> 4) several publications describing the 'terror' in Mallacoota, where people were forced to flee the fires to the shoreline,
> 5) shocked foreign readers of *The New York Times* and *BBC* reacting to the fires on social media,
> 6) Greta Thunberg commenting on ghastly bushfire content on Twitter with hashtags '#AustraliaFires' and '#thisisfine',
> 7) *Vox* explaining the record heatwave and the fires 'citing ocean circulation, years of drought and climate change',
> 8) *CNN* and *ABC News* sharing footage that shows Fire and Rescue New South Wales firefighters sheltering in their truck in the middle of a raging firefront.

Unlike *SMH* which was mostly interested in the foreign media responses, the article by *News.com.au* paid attention also to the horrified reactions of the global readers. For instance, the text gave examples of reader responses emphasising the tragic nature of the bushfire situation and criticising Scott Morrison for condemning climate protests. Although the text introduced the audience to news that associates bushfires with climate change, the main focus appeared to be on the stirring

portrayal of the bushfires by foreign media outlets. This is indicated by the choice to include scandalous headlines and dramatic diction, for example, 'apocalyptic', 'hellish', and 'mayhem', in the form of direct quotations. Furthermore, the decision to feature two tweets by Greta Thunberg of all possible public figures associates the bushfires with environmental activism and youth climate protests, which could hint at a certain level of deliberate provocation. Reflections on the past and meditations on the future are considered an established New Year's practice, and the theme was perceptible in the article in relation to actions on climate change. The article also provided an engaging starting point for the comments section by ending the text in the following quotation: '"Sydney is an absolute joke," one reader wrote. "Your state is burning down but it's okay the fireworks can still happen. Most ridiculous government decision ever."'

Like the *Smh.com.au* website, *News.com.au* includes a 'like' feature, allowing the readers to express their support for the opinions of others. The comments section had 588 comments in numerous comment threads by a large number of usernames, and the commenters reacted both to the original article and responded to each other. The most liked comment reached 57 likes, and although some individual users appeared more active than others in the discussion, the diversity of perspectives and the ample overall number of comments implies that a great number of people took part in the debate. Similar to the previous data, the comments also varied stylistically from short and ambiguous messages to complex, multi-paragraph arguments.

The analysis of the comments showed that the overall atmosphere of the online discussion was strikingly different to the reader responses to the *SMH* article. The commenters in the *News.com.au* comments section seemed quite a heterogenous group in terms of their political views and their perceptions of the bushfires and climate issues, as a considerable amount of dissonance could be noticed in the conversation. The most interesting finding was that a significant part of the commenters did not agree with associating the 2019–2020 bushfires with climate change but rather offered alternative counternarratives in their argumentation. For example, many commenters

highlighted the lack of proper preventive forest care actions and deprecated the role of anthropogenic climate change, further referring to Australia's history with bushfires. As the above-mentioned features differ considerably from the previous data, this section focuses on the attribution of blame in these arguments, discussing them as part of the inextricably linked wider discourse categories of *forest mismanagement*, *the rural–urban divide,* and *bushfire history* that emerged in the analysis.

Turning now to consider the results in more detail, the most salient discourse feature worth mentioning is the critique towards Australia's forest management. The *forest mismanagement* discourse included comments that emphasised the significance of fuel load[12], the lack of preparedness for the fire season with regard to hazard reduction burns[13], and limitations on backburning[14]. The arguments that created causal links between the allegedly insufficient bush and fire management and the Black Summer fires (see Examples 23, 24, and 27 below) typically served as an alternative explanation that either explicitly or implicitly excluded the climate change narrative as a possible influencing factor. Thus, the arguments employed techniques of disassociation and were based on a presupposition that climate change did not cause bushfires. In connection with this, some commenters criticised rules that constrain landowners from clearing trees and conducting unauthorised preventative burns on private properties (Examples 25 and 27). Others, in turn, paid special attention to forest management of national parks and state forests (Examples 25 and 26), or the supposed role of arsonists (Example 27) with demands for tougher penalties.

> **Example 23**
> The country is taking care of itself after *years of bush management neglect. The more trees*
> *we have the more fuel loads build up* until something like this natural disaster occurs.

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[12] According to Geoscience Australia (n.d.), fuel load refers to 'the amount of fallen bark, leaf litter and small branches accumulating in the landscape'. High fuel loads commonly lead to more intense fires (ibid.).

[13] Hazard reduction burning is one of the tools of fire management, and it means prescribed and controlled burning done deliberately to lessen the availability of the fuel load and to 'reduce the intensity, hazard, and impact of a bushfire' (Dawkins 2021). The technique can be used effectively only during low-risk weather conditions, but when done successfully, it helps the emergency services to manage smaller fires before they become uncontrollable (ibid.).

[14] Backburning is a risky fire suppression technique in which a fire is lit 'close to the edge of an active bushfire' to remove fuel and prevent the fire from spreading (The Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service 2020). Backburns tend to be confused with hazard reduction burns (also called as fuel-reduction burns, controlled burns, planned burns, or prescribed burns) in nonprofessional discussion (ibid.), which made it difficult to separate these two claims from each other in the research material.

Example 24
In regards to the fires and the blame game. *We spoke to several RFS* [Rural Fire Service] *personnel* prior to the events of NY's Eve and Day and the same statement kept being made. *The undergrowth, ground cover and vines that had grown wildly*, in some cases (*no controlled burn*) […] for the past 35 odd years was impossible to get through to get to the fire front. […] *To blame Climate Change for Starting Fires is nonsense*.

Example 25
Interesting, you can try and spin it any way you like but *national parks have been off limits for hazard reduction* for years and *land owners have been fined for creating fire breaks on their own property*. Some people seem to think "everything" just happened in the last 12 months or so.

Example 26
I call on the Andrews government [Daniel Andrews of Victorian Labor] to overturn their *Alpine grazing ban*.

Example 27
Sadly, none of this is due to "climate change" but rather *Council mis-management* and *arsonists*. Tonnes of *combustible materials left lying around* properties, because Council *refuses to allow residents to clear and manage debris around their properties*.

Interestingly, many of the above-described arguments are inherently connected to earlier public debates around bushfires and forest management in Australia. For example, a few commenters (Example 25) referred to a famous incident where a Victorian landowner was fined for creating an unauthorised firebreak on his property; a decision which later presumably saved his house while the neighbouring houses were destroyed in the Black Saturday fires of 2009 (see, e.g., Baker and McKenzie, 2009). This case was used in the arguments as an illustration of the alleged faults in the bushfire management and national environment laws, regulations, and policies. Some comments also alluded to a decade-long debate from 2005 to 2014 over the cattle grazing ban in the Alpine National Park in Victoria (see, e.g., McCarthy et al. 2015), which further links the Black Summer debate to the preceding environmental discourses in Australia. Furthermore, as regards the arson accusations in the comments (Example 27), according to Australian Institute of Criminology (2008, 1), bushfire arson is generally considered a critical question in the country, and during each fire season, allegedly deliberately ignited fires are brought to the attention of the public by the media. It is therefore not surprising to discover references to arson appearing to a certain extent in the comments. One explanation for the arson theory in the comments could also be the viral #ArsonEmergency

disinformation campaign that took place on Twitter at the beginning of the year 2020 (Graham and

Keller 2020).

Similar to the discourse patterns in the previous data, the Black Summer fires represented

failed and incompetent political actions also in the *News.com.au* data, although the narratives and

accused parties were otherwise different. While many *Smh.com.au* commenters mostly focused on

the federal leadership, criticising the Liberal–National Coalition government, a significant number of

News.com.au commenters turned the conversation on state and territory parliaments, and local

councils. In many of these cases blame was cast especially on 'greenies', the Australian Greens[15], or

more generally, on the supporters of green politics and ideology, like in Example 28 below. In fewer

cases, the Australian Labor Party also received criticism (Example 29).

> **Example 28**
> People are *right to blame environmentalists* for excessive fuel loads - despite their hollow
> argument "They're not in power".....It's *local government laws & Green influence / Ideology*
> that's been responsible for property owners not being able to reduce fuel loads to protect their
> own properties.
> About time those responsible were held to account.

> **Example 29**
> *The Greens* are wedded to *Labor*, who rely on them for power, so their *leftist influences* are
> appaarent.. *Councils* are mainly controlled by Greens members, who are responsible for fuel
> load reduction. Greens also team up with others to block legislation.

The above-mentioned critique towards environmentalists and the idea of 'locking up' the

national parks dates back to the late 1960s and 1970s when the rising environmental awareness

prompted questions on hazard reduction in native Australian forests (Whittaker and Mercer 2004,

267–268). According to Hudson (2020), accusations towards the 'greenies' emerge regularly during

Australian bushfires. For example, the same issue was raised in November 2019 by John Barilaro,

the then-leader of the New South Wales Nationals, although the claims have been 'thoroughly

debunked' (ibid.; RMIT ABC Fact Check 2019). The Greens (n.d.) themselves have announced that

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[15] The Greens are a growingly influential minor Australian party promoting environmental protection (Hardy 2020, 64).
According to Hardy (ibid., 65), Green politics typically stand for groups advocating for 'environmental conservation,
renewable energy, animal rights, non-violence and social justice'.

the party does support both hazard reduction burning and backburning 'when guided by the best scientific, ecological and emergency service expertise'.

What is especially fascinating is that just as in the results of the previous analysis, some of the above-described arguments created clear juxtapositions, categorising Australians into opposing groups depending on their political views and attitudes towards the role of climate change in the fires. This characteristic is named here as *the rural–urban divide* discourse, as the us-versus-them positioning in the arguments often essentially emphasised the experience of real bush-life or the lack of it — the contrast between periphery and centre (Examples 30, 31, and 32). For instance, rural firefighters and landowners held prestige and authority in the rhetoric of some commenters and they were presented as sensible *models* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 363) whose opinions the audience should value and imitate (Example 30). Supporters of green politics and 'left wing foreigners', in turn, were often constructed in these arguments as undesired *anti-models* (ibid. 366), whose thinking was portrayed as disconnected from rural realities (Examples 31 and 32). In connection with this, criticism was directed not only towards the Australian Greens but also towards global environmental activism and Greta Thunberg, whose tweets were cited in the original article (Example 33). Furthermore, the rhetoric of the commenters constructed strict dichotomy between different sides of the argument using the loaded labels 'climate alarmists' and 'climate deniers' (Example 34).

Example 30
Just goes to show just how much neglect, land mismanagement & poor prevention policies were put in place by our local governments & especially local mostly *Greens councils with Greens policies. There is no doubt who the rural landowners & firies* [firefighters] *believe should be held accountable.*

Example 31
The factors underlying these fires have more to do with poor forest management over several decades due to the fantastic views of *urban-based conservationists/Greens* restricting forest access and cool-burns of underbrush.

Example 32
It is time to give the authority to manage the land back to *country folk and indigenous peoples* who understand it, *not Greenie inner city soy latte sipping 'climate protestors'* who at every turn do more harm than good

Example 33
[Greta] *Thunberg* needs to keep *her useless comments* to herself, this has nothing to do with climate change.

Example 34
Comments from [climate] *alarmists* show the ignorance of their understanding.
  [A reply:] Whereas comments from *climate change-deniers* are wilfully ignorant and lack understanding

As the discourse in the comment threads was not unanimous and included a considerable number of contradicting views, it is important to briefly consider some counterarguments that reoccurred in the data. In several comments the blame for the bushfires was shifted from the Greens on the Liberal–National Coalition, specifically on alleged budget cuts for fire services in New South Wales (Example 35). These arguments tried to appeal to *incompatibility* (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2013, 195), an inconsistency in the opponents' propositions, claiming that the Greens could not have hindered hazard reduction efforts as they have not been in the government. In addition, others criticised directly climate change denialism (Example 36) or explained the claims of insufficient hazard reduction burns with prolonged periods of high-risk weather conditions connected to climate change (Example 37). A small number of commenters also attempted to debunk the false speculations of the significant role of arsonists in the Black Summer fires (Example 38), and lastly, a few commenters appealed for unity, arguing that debating over the causes of the fires should be postponed in time of crisis (Example 39).

Example 35
I agree there are some misguided people out there who dislike hazard reduction burns. However given *Liberals have been in political power for years now in NSW* [New South Wales] *and Federal governments, I don't think you can actually blame the greens* (let alone the Greens, who are pro-hazard reduction). *Blame Liberal government cost cutting, if anything*.

Example 36
Yeah it's strange to observe that *the climate science denialism gets stronger as the fire burns*. I think for some people, denying climate science is now more than just being ideologically entrenched but also about pride.

Example 37
As numerous RFS [Rural Fire Service] authorities have said the reason there were no controlled burns was because *there weren't enough safe days to perform burns because of climate change*.

Example 38
You can't backburn if the weather conditions are not conductive... And *where have any of the authorities stated that these fires are the complete result of arsonists*.??...

The last characteristic feature that emerged from the research data, the discourse of *bushfire history,* concerns references to Australia as a fire-prone continent through various rhetorical strategies. The arguments of this category dissociated the bushfires from the climate change frame by depicting the current bushfire season as an unavoidable part of the Australian nature and culture (Example 40). Several comments connected the Black Summer fires to the country's long history of bushfires by including specific mentions of earlier conflagrations, such as the Black Saturday fires of 2009, and Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 (Example 41). The rhetoric was thereby based on a specific kind of *causal link* that, according to the definition by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2013, 263) attaches 'successive events to each other'. In some comments, the Australian bushfire struggles and casualties of the past were also presented as something more serious than the current situation as a counter-response to the global shock reactions illustrated in the news article (Example 41). Additionally, the arguments of the *bushfire history* discourse featured mentions of El Niño[16] (Example 42) and a positive Indian Ocean Dipole phase[17] that have been associated with severe droughts and increased fire danger in southeast Australia in the past (Australian Bureau of Meteorology 2021). For example, Ash Wednesday and the severe fire seasons of 2002–03 and 2006–07 succeeded El Niño years (ibid.). Lastly, a couple of commenters alluded to Indigenous fire management practices as an illustration of the perennial character of the bushfire cycle and the importance of cultural and other controlled burns for the health of the habitat (Example 43).

Example 40
People overseas are commenting (in the name of 'climate change') on *something Australians have experienced (and recovered from) for decades/centuries (many times much worse than this and none of those were ever caused by 'climate change'*). As the famous early twentieth

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[16] According to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (2021), El Niño–Southern Oscillation, or ENSO, is a natural cycle and climate driver affecting Australia's weather. El Niño and La Niña refer to 'a sustained period (many months) of warming (El Niño) or cooling (La Niña) in the central and eastern tropical Pacific' (ibid.).

[17] Indian Ocean Dipole, or IOD, is a weather pattern connected to the changes in the sea surface temperatures of the western and eastern tropical Indian Ocean (Australian Bureau of Meteorology 2022).

century poem [by Dorothea Mackellar] reads, "Of droughts and flooding rains", and it reads that way for a very good reason (because *that's exactly what Australia has always been*).

Example 41
Sure, it's an above average bushfire season, but look at *Black Saturday from 10 years ago or Ash Wednesday from over 30 years ago. Far more loss of life and home/buildings lost* in those seasons. And I bet they barely made international media because *'climate change' wasn't the sensationalist fad back then*.

Example 42
The fires we are experiencing now surely must be as a result of the very dry conditions caused by cyclical weather conditions - *has everyone forgotten about the periodic changes caused by El Niño and La Niña*? We never hear of El Niño and La Niña nowadays, just climate change.

Example 43
Mother Earth needs to be rejuvenated which my people [the Wiradjuri] have done for centuries through burning (controlled).

Although the above-listed discourse trends were the most relevant in terms of the research questions of the thesis, the comments section also had several other repeating features. For example, since the *News.com.au* article covered news about the east coast of Australia most affected by the fires, some commenters focused especially on the states of New South Wales and Victoria (Example 44), and people's reactions to the evacuation warnings at the turn of the year (Example 45). Like in the case of the earlier *Smh.com.au* research material, much of the discussion also revolved purely around wider climate issues. However, while in the previous data the emphasis of the discourse seemed to be on coal exports and carbon dioxide emissions, here at the core of the debate lay the reliability of the climate science and the perceptions of climate change as either natural or anthropogenic (Examples 46 and 47).

Example 44
The speed and intensity of the last 2 days, has been seen dozens of times in *Victoria* over the last century. Nothing new there. […]
How dare you make out this is unheard of just because it is new to *NSW* [New South Wales]!!

Example 45
30,000 were advised to leave but more to the point *why would anyone decide to holiday in an active bushfire zone*?

Example 46
[T]he earth goes through natural warming and cooling. Minute changes in the earths axis help contribute to this natural phenomenon. We had a mini Ice Age not that long ago actually. *But people think scientists are always right and can never be questioned. Like religion actually..*

Example 47
Isolated examples about the Dipole plays no role in the science of climate change. Better to examine trends and studies over 50 plus years tracking greenhouse gases, deforestation,

temperature (ocean/air/land land), sea levels, extreme events, rainfall patterns. Multiple studies are best eg CSIRO or the climate council. There is no doubt.
Science is founded on peer-reviewed research and proven fact. Your science is based on warped populist opinion garnered from the famously derided herd mentality.

To conclude this section, the argumentation in the three main discourse categories — *forest mismanagement*, *the rural–urban divide,* and *bushfire history* — was based on processes of both dissociation and association. The commenters tried to detach the bushfires from the 'climate frame', constructing counternarratives that highlighted causal links between the Black Summer, the deficiency of preventative fire and forest management strategies, and earlier bushfires. The Black Summer bushfires were thus understood as a natural part of Australia and their scale as a result of incompetent decision-making. Moreover, the majority of the arguments contained a presupposition of anthropogenic climate change as an insignificant factor in the fires. Although the commenters seemed relatively disunited in their opinions, a significant portion of the commenters cast blame on the Greens (and Labor, to a lesser extent), local councils, and climate alarmists both in Australia and overseas, Greta Thunberg, in particular. The first-hand experience of rural residents was also valued and juxtaposed with urban-based decision-making and the environmental movement.

Having now presented the results of the analysis of both *Smh.com.au* and *News.com.au* comments sections, the final section of this chapter discusses the outcomes of the study and assesses how the results correspond to earlier research.

4.3 Discussion

Despite the fact that the comments sections provided very different examples of the Australian bushfire debate transpiring in 2019–2020, some common features could still be found in the discourses. The readers of both *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* participated in *explaining* the bushfires, offering various and often mutually exclusive narratives as the real, or most essential, reason behind the crisis. A notable part of the discourse on the *Smh.com.au* website supported the media allegations of a connection between the fires, climate change, and Australia's

climate policies, while many readers of *News.com.au* challenged this 'climate blame frame', offering alternative explanations like the alleged lack of hazard reduction burning or arson. In both cases, the rhetoric of the commenters seemed to both construct and reflect a possible ideological polarisation in the country that has been acknowledged in previous research (see, e.g., Bromfield et al. 2021; Burgess et al. 2020; Weber et al. 2020).

Although the accused parties and us-versus-them positioning in the two sets of data were somewhat contrasting, the rhetoric of the commenters in both news sites might indeed allude to the same existing political divisions in Australia. The differences in the discourse patterns thus suggest that the two news websites have a rather different following. One contributory factor could be that *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* are owned by different media companies, and earlier research by Mocatta and Hawley (2020) detected ideological polarisation in the media coverage of the Black Summer fires. However, further research is needed to establish any certain differences between the readerships of the two websites.

In any case, the online commenters on both platforms appeared to be aware of the opposing blame frames and causal explanations for the fires in the surrounding discourses. This is evident in the metadiscoursal elements that were found to some extent in both research materials, as readers expressed their own views on *how* the bushfires should be discussed. These comments directly addressed the politicisation of the debate by making the blame patterns in the arguments of the opponents visible (see Examples 48–51 below). In some cases, commenters also tried to turn the conversation away from unwanted directions by condemning the entire debate as untimely (Examples 50 and 51).

Example 48 (*Smh.com.au*)
It will be very interesting to see *how Scott Morrison's IPA Government Media Spin Unit deal with this negative Overseas reaction*..... Maybe *blame The Labor Party*... As usual?
  […]
  [A reply:] *Blame the Greens and lack of back-burning* is the current mantra

Example 49 (*Smh.com.au*)
Im not sure what we can do about climate change in Australia apart from mass mobilisation into the streets in protest and *then we would be called lefties greenies tree huggers and all the other terms the LNP members so often repeat* as a way of avoiding scientific fact.

Example 50 (*News.com.au*)
Ok *climate extremists*, we *need to take the politics out of the fires*. Please pull your heads in.
The issues are about saving lives, property and our communities.
There will be plenty of time for analysis afterwards.

Example 51 (*News.com.au*)
I don't want to hear about climate change, or bad Government errors... all I want to hear is
how we can help our Country from turning to ash. *Argue later, just help now.*
This is yours mine and our Country that is burning.

Taken together, the results imply that the discourses around the Black Summer are intertwined with Australian politics, and bushfires serve as a bridge to much wider political discourses. In fact, the comments included various interdiscursive and intertextual references to earlier debates on bushfire prevention strategies and on Australia's coal industry which remains at the very core of Australian politics (Bacon and Nash 2012, 244–245). This assessment is further supported by the fact that the bushfires represented failed political decision-making in both materials, although the *Smh.com.au* readers generally accused the Liberal–National Coalition and the *News.com.au* readers shifted the focus to the Australian Greens or green policies. This ties the online debates of the 2019–2020 fire season not only to earlier Australian bushfire discourses, but also to the global environmental disaster discourse and climate discourse. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, 'accountability work' is a typical feature of media coverage of environmental disasters (Mocatta and Hawley 2020), and earlier research shows that apportioning of blame is a fixed characteristic of major Australian bushfire events (see, e.g., Logan 2015; Whittaker and Mercer 2004). By joining the online debates, the readers of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* thus actively participated in these discursive processes as part of participatory journalism.

As for the more specific blame patterns, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions in connection with previous research, as the chosen data and research methods are not directly comparable with other studies on bushfire discourses. However, the results seem to somewhat align with certain observations made by other scholars on the public debates over the bushfires. For example, in their study on key narratives in the Black Summer news coverage, Burgess et al. (2020,

12) discovered that 10% of articles mentioning climate change also included a 'failure of planning' narrative which gained popularity as a response to Scott Morrison's Hawaiian holiday. In 42% of these cases blame was cast on the Coalition government rather than specific policies, and the intensity of the fires was typically associated either with inaction on climate change or budget cuts to the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (Burgess et al. 2020, 12). As the results in this chapter showed, dissatisfaction with the federal leadership and the Prime Minister was especially prominent in the *SMH* data. Moreover, 4% of the articles included in the study by Burgess et al. (ibid., 2) accused 'greenies' or the Australian Greens for the bushfires, and 54% of these cases appeared in publications by News Corp. As far as the results of the present thesis are concerned, similar narratives were especially prominent in the reader response on the *News.com.au* website owned by News Corp.

Interestingly, previous research indicates that some of the prominent discourses in the *Smh.com.au* and *News.com.au* comments sections were also present in the media statements of Australian politicians in the first week of January 2020. According to Bromfield et al. (2021, 155) Scott Morrison's rhetoric associated 'the temporality of cricket's rhythms in the summer holiday calendar to frame the public narrative', implying that life continues in the face of the crisis. This strategy was clearly contested by some online commenters in the research data. As noted by Bromfield et al. (ibid.), then-opposition leader Anthony Albanese, in turn, found fault with the government, highlighting its 'failure to conform to established bureaucratic processes via The Council of Australian Governments and the National Security Committee', which mirrors 'the ALP's technocratic approach to climate policy'. In addition, the then-leader of Australian Greens Richard Di Natale specifically criticised Scott Morrison for 'failing his duty' to protect Australians from harm (ibid.). These negative sentiments were also echoed in the research data of this thesis.

Considering the cultural meanings of bushfires in Australia, it was not particularly surprising to find some allusions to Australia's history as a fire continent (see Chapter 2) in the research data, despite the growing global trend of framing extreme weather events as climate change

issues. However, one significant observation to emerge from the results was that the prominent 'denialist' discourses diverting attention from climate change reflected the misinformation detected on social media platforms by earlier research (see, e.g., Mocatta and Hawley 2020; Weber et al. 2020). For example, the main false narratives Weber et al. (2020, 160) discovered circulating on Twitter during the Black Summer — the arson theory, green activism hindering backburning, the Black Summer fires not being unusual for Australia, and climate change not being a contributing factor — were presented and debated especially in the *News.com.au* comments section. The findings of the present thesis thus further confirm the prevalence of these theories among Australians during the fires.

Some of the discourse patterns in the research data appeared to also stem directly from earlier bushfire debates. Yell (2010, 111) detected discourses connected to both arson and climate change in the press coverage of the 2009 Victorian fires — both topics of which were also discovered in the present research data. As was mentioned in the previous section, blaming the Greens has also been a recurring feature in earlier bushfire debates (Hudson 2020). For example, according to Whittaker and Mercer (2004, 263, 272–277), the Victorian bushfires of 2002–03 were often claimed unnatural and avoidable, and 'city-based "greenies"' and the Victorian State government were commonly accused of insufficient fuel reduction burning and mismanaged national parks. Furthermore, Hudson (2020) mentions 'a long tradition of those opposed to strong climate action claiming only inner-city dwellers care about the issue', which appears to be connected to *the rural–urban divide* discourse detected in the *News.com.au* data. In November 2019, Michael McCormack, the then-Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party, also contributed to this discourse, referring to 'inner-city raving lunatics' and 'pure, enlightened and woke capital city greenies' in the context of New South Wales bushfires and climate change concerns (Crowe, 2019).

As the content of the online articles by *SMH* and *News.com.au* understandably guided the reader response in certain directions, it is challenging to evaluate what matters and perspectives were excluded or left unnoticed in the comments. However, since much of the discussion focused on

apportioning blame and debating wider climate issues, some of the widespread topics in the Australian bushfire reporting did not appear to be particularly popular among the online commenters. The study by Burgess et al. (2020, 2) showed that themes, such as 'triumph of humanity', 'unstoppable power of nature', 'loss of biodiversity', and 'health and fires' were prominent in the Australian media narratives, but only a few commenters in both comments sections focused on the heroism of volunteer firefighters, perished animals, or health impacts. According to Burgess et al. (ibid., 13), Indigenous fire management was also sometimes mentioned by the Australian press as part of a 'failure of planning' narrative, suggesting that traditional burning practices could have mitigated the bushfire risk. Although this argument was not notably significant in the present research material, the comments sections of both *Smh.com.au* and *News.com.au* included individual mentions of cultural burning, as the examples below show.

> **Example 52 (*Smh.com.au*)**
> The government should start *consulting with Aboriginal Elders who are the experts in land care and how the bush should be managed to avoid such devastating fires*.

> **Example 53 (*News.com.au*)**
> If *Aboriginal people managed to avoid catastrophes like this by controlled use of fire*, wouldn't you think the loony left who stopped all such activity would at least hang their heads in shame?

To conclude, this study identified several different discourses connected to the bushfires of 2019–2020 in the comments sections of *SMH* and *News.com.au* — *failed climate politics*, *the ignorant majority*, *forest mismanagement*, *the rural–urban divide*, and *bushfire history.* As discussed above, some of these discourses included overlapping elements, while others could be interpreted as opposing, rivalling narratives. The Black Summer discourse appears to be connected to global climate discourse, Australian culture and politics, as well as earlier bushfire debates, being thus a part of longer discursive processes. Importantly, the results also show that language has the power to transform bushfires into politicised events. Although the online comments included various one-sided portrayals of the crisis, the public debates might prompt society to investigate in detail any possible issues related to disaster prevention.

Opinion polls show that Australians are increasingly aware of climate change. According to Ipsos (2022, 5), the environment was for the first time the top issue for Australians in the aftermath of the bushfires in early 2020. Furthermore, the latest Ipsos survey from March 2022 indicates that 83% of Australians are concerned about climate change, without notable differences between regional and metropolitan residents (Ipsos 2022, 7). 68% of the citizens perceive climate change as 'a serious threat' to the Australian way of life within the following 25 years, and 70% sees Australia already being affected by climate change (ibid., 8). Nevertheless, the report (ibid., 8) states that 'the multiplicity of voices in the public domain still causes doubt for many Australians' on climate issues. As the salient discourses affect how ecological issues are understood, it thus remains crucial to continue exploring how the various interpretations of bushfires are constructed and what would reduce polarised public opinions and the politicisation of environmental issues.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to study the online discourse concerning Australia's Black Summer fires of 2019–2020. The main goal was to determine how the bushfires are constructed in the public debate, and what kind of discourses can be detected in the argumentation of the online newspaper commenters. Comments sections of two online articles by *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *News.com.au* were selected and studied separately, using methods of CDA with a focus on the rhetoric of blame in the context of natural disasters. To interpret the data, the study also contextualised the bushfire debate by discussing relevant aspects related to environmental discourse, Australian bushfire history, and the events of the Black Summer.

The research data included a total of 450 comments on the website of *SMH,* and 588 comments in the case of *News.com.au*. The qualitative analysis paid special attention to explicit and implicit references to *targets of blame* and *causal relationships* connecting the bushfires to other issues. The results indicate that the online bushfire discourse was both politicised and polarised, and various opposing narratives were present in the argumentation. Many online readers of *SMH* tried to associate the bushfire crisis to Australia's emissions and allegedly insufficient climate policy, and their arguments were often based on a presupposition of the Black Summer fires being the result of climate change. At times then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison's response to the crisis was also criticised. Although the commenters on *News.com.au* were more discordant, a large part of the arguments offered alternative explanations for the fires, disassociating them from climate change. Typically, the intensity of the fires was explained by restrictions on prescribed hazard reduction burns and allegedly mismanaged public lands, such as national parks. Some also blamed arsonists or attempted to downplay the scale of the disaster by referring to previous bushfire catastrophes and the unavoidability of bushfires in Australia.

The Black Summer fires seemed to symbolise the incompetence and ignorance of leaders and fellow Australians — partly in relation to climate action and partly in relation to preventative

bush management. Blame was cast specifically either on the federal Liberal–National Coalition government and the Prime Minister, or the influence of green politics and environmentalism. Also, Greta Thunberg received some criticism as a face of climate activism. Additionally, the bushfires were portrayed either as a global embarrassment of the latest example of bushfires as a perennial and unavoidable part of Australian landscape and identity. It seems that the detected discourses around the 2019–2020 bushfires were in many ways connected to wider climate discourse as well as earlier bushfire debates in Australia, making the Black Summer debates part of the longer discursive processes.

This thesis has provided some additional insight into the discursive aspects of the Black Summer fires, affirming that many common themes in the Australian media coverage and social media platforms were also featured in the comments sections of online newspapers. As a more detailed linguistic analysis was not possible due to the great overall number of comments, many questions remain yet to be answered and require further investigation. Based on the results of the analysis, there seems to be a striking amount of variation between the discourses of the readerships of *SMH* and *News.com.au.* It would therefore be fascinating to investigate whether there is any correlation between these results and other environment-related debates occurring on the same websites.

It would also be interesting to either choose a smaller sample of comments for closer qualitative linguistic examination or repeat the present study by incorporating additional quantitative approaches. Furthermore, as online comments might be subject to interpretation due to semantic vagueness, inaccuracy of wordings, and other possible ambiguities, combining corpus-linguistics to CDA could improve the reliability and objectivity of the research, the generalisability of the results included. Further studies could also expand the scope of the analysis to other Australian and global online platforms to gather a broader overall picture of the Black Summer debate and possible trends in the attributions of cause and blame.

While Australia is inherently prone to various natural hazard events due to its geography and climate, climate change has already affected the country's fire seasons, heatwaves, rainfall, and flood risk (RCNNDA 2020a, 58). Experts also estimate that climate-driven natural hazards will intensify and appear more frequently in the coming decades (ibid., 59). Future research on natural disaster discourse could thus explore possible longitudinal changes in online discourses and compare how bushfires and other natural disasters are construed by the public in the upcoming years. For example, the reactions to the Black Summer fires could already be analysed in comparison to the devastating floods of March 2022 in Queensland and New South Wales (Ipsos 2022, 3). Considering the above-discussed politicised tones in the Black Summer debate, further studies could additionally explore whether Labor's victory in the Australian Federal Election of 2022 affects future trends in public environmental discourses after close to a decade of Liberal–National rule. Furthermore, as many other countries also suffer from major wildfire catastrophes, it might be useful to study the reactions local climate-related catastrophes provoke around the world.

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