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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Between Scare Quotes and Criminalization: Media Discourses of “Eco-Terrorism” (2020–2024)

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## ABSTRACT

In print and online news media, “eco-terrorism,” has been invoked to delegitimize nonviolent civil disobedience, obstruction, and symbolic sabotage. As the climate crisis intensifies, it is increasingly important to clearly identify different forms of environmental harm and activist resistance. The current study performs a discourse analysis of articles from print and online news sources published between 2020 and 2024 and cataloged in LexisUni (n = 204). The results show that claims of “eco-terrorism” are often voiced by government officials, editorialists, or individual citizens writing letters to the editor; however, compared to previous research on media mentions in the United States between 1999 and 2009, professional journalists seem to contextualize or qualify claims of eco-terrorism more often, using “scare quotes” to implicitly question its validity. While this may somewhat lessen its rhetorical heft, the “terrorist” label and related criminalization of environmental activists charged under terrorism laws remain severe. Therefore, the persistent, uncritical usage of “eco-terrorism” and its continued conflation with “environmental terrorism” risks undermining democratic deliberation and public understanding of climate resistance. This research contributes to ongoing debates on media ethics and environmental justice while seeking a deeper understanding of the moral and scientific imperatives that motivate climate discourse.

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Eco-terrorism; radical activism; climate change; protest; media discourse

## 1. Introduction

The accelerating ecological crisis presents some of the most profound moral, political, and communication challenges of our time. Scientific consensus warns of catastrophic climate impacts unless rapid and systemic changes are made to decarbonize the global economy and protect remaining ecosystems (IPCC, 2023). Despite mounting evidence and public concern, governments and industries continue to promote carbon-intensive consumption and extractive practices forcing feedback-driven, abrupt, irreversible change to planetary systems and local habitats (McKay et al., 2022). Conventional channels of advocacy and protest are proving insufficient. These failures have provoked radical responses from environmental groups and networks, many of them based in the Global North and operating as Tyre extinguishers, Just Stop Oil, Futuro Vegetal, Ende Gelände, or Letzte Generation. In recent years, members of these groups have obstructed or attacked fossil infrastructure, targeted symbols of elite consumption (e.g. SUVs), and performed symbolic actions such as throwing soup at paintings.

Such actions have systematically avoided targeting civilians (Vanderheiden, 2005); however, politicians, law enforcement, conservative media, and some scholars (Ackerman, 2003) have

fixated on the legality, sensibility, and slippery-slope claims that conflate civil disobedience and ecotage with “eco-terrorist” violence. The loose application in media discourse seems exemplified by the 2024 arson attack on a power line near a Tesla Motors factory in Germany. On X, Tesla CEO Elon Musk responded to a “breaking news” post about the incident by writing: “These are either the dumbest eco-terrorists on Earth or they’re puppets of those who don’t have good environmental goals. Stopping production of electric vehicles, rather than fossil fuel vehicles, *ist extrem dumm*” (Musk, 2024). Many media outlets repeated Musk’s labeling in their headlines – “Musk attacks ‘dumb eco-terrorists’ over Tesla fire” (BBC, 2024) and “‘Eco-terrorists’ shut down Tesla factory in Berlin” (Titcomb, 2024). With Musk’s broad audience and international influence, Musk’s post may have also influenced local officials, with one Brandenburg politician declaring that “attacks on our critical infrastructure are a form of terrorism” (Titcomb, 2024).

The term “eco-terrorism” has a long and contested political history. Ron Arnold claims he coined the term in the 1980s to raise awareness about a construed threat: “no one was aware that environmentalism was a problem until we came along” (qtd. in Smith, 2008, p. 545). After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the legal scope of the term began to widen and, in 2002, the FBI defined “eco-terrorism” as “the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or property by an environmentally oriented, subnational group for environmental – political reasons, or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature” (FBI, 2002). This framing of violence against people *or property* (i.e. the “critical infrastructure” connecting factories to a grid) has become a legal battlefield, with activists increasingly prosecuted under terrorism statutes (Loa-denthal, 2013; Vanderheiden, 2005). Human rights organizations have documented this escalation, with UN experts warning against “the labelling of activists as hooligans, saboteurs or eco-terrorists” in ways that restrict fundamental rights to assembly and expression (Gayle et al., 2023).

To better understand the term’s (mis)use and acceptance at the turn of the twenty-first century, a seminal study by Sumner and Weidman (2013) asked three key questions: What was the frequency of “eco-terrorism” and related terms in print news coverage from 1999 to 2009? Did journalists or their sources use these terms? Did speakers accept or distance themselves from the label? To answer these questions, they analyzed 594 news articles from the United States and found that 85.3% accepted the “ecoterrorism” label even when acts clearly avoided harming human lives (Sumner & Weidman, 2013). This acceptance was displayed across news (86.3%), opinion (84.2%), and letters to the editor (81.8%). As mass media framing functions as agenda setting and shapes how the public perceives the legitimacy and severity of environmental activism, Sumner and Weidman concluded with a call for more exact terminology: if the action seeks to disrupt economic activity or destroy property while avoiding injury or death, it should be described with more precise terms: “obstruction,” “trespassing,” “vandalism,” “sabotage,” or “arson,” but not “eco-terrorism” (p. 874).

Building directly from Sumner and Weidman (2013), the current discourse analysis adopts similar questions with three significant modifications. First, we broadened the geographic scope to include international English-language media to see how this term has circulated outside the United States. Second, we extended the temporal frame to 2020–2024 to capture contemporary climate activism to explore whether and how the acceptance has changed in recent years. Third, we acknowledged the diversified media landscape of the 2020s, incorporating print newspapers, online-only news websites, wire services, and a selection of politically aligned blogs whose bias we determined by cross-referencing different sources including Media Bias/Fact Check.

Before elaborating on these methods and offering our results, we examine the evolution of environmental protest language and its material consequences for how activists are perceived, policed, and prosecuted.

## 2. Background

Radical environmental activism is not a recent phenomenon: extreme environmental actions date back to the 1960s (Smith, 2008). Early radical environmental and animal liberation

movements were inspired by notions of deep ecology and liberationist ethics (Fitzgerald and Pellow, 2014; Naess, 1973). Unsatisfied with what they viewed as weak environmental regulations, corporate greed, and unconstrained industrial development, they engaged in clandestine forms of direct action (Singer, 1975). Groups such as the Hunt Saboteurs Association, the Band of Mercy (BOM), and later the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Earth Liberation Front (ELF), and Earth First! institutionalized sabotage and economic disruption as political praxis. Primarily working in small groups without direct leadership, their guerrilla-style actions ranged from road blockades, tree-spiking, and tree-sitting (Seel and Plows, 2000) to the destruction of heavy equipment and transmission infrastructure (Foreman, 2024). In 1998, members of the Earth Liberation Front sparked a massive fire at Vail Ski Resort causing \$12 million in damages (Christiansen, 2009). While diverse in their motivations, targets, and tactics, they generally maintained strict codes against harming humans and, when necessary, conducted reconnaissance to ensure buildings were empty and issued warnings before unleashing their destruction (Leader and Probst, 2003).

Rather than engage with the environmental concerns these actions highlighted, many politicians, media sources, and law enforcement groups labeled these groups and their actions as “eco-terrorism” or “environmental terrorism” (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde, 2014; Leader and Probst, 2003; Pellow, 2019). However, activists and scholars maintain that such property-focused direct actions are more accurately termed “ecotage” (Fleming, 2024; Vanderheiden, 2005), meaning *sabotage* triggered by *ecological* motivations and aiming for negative economic impacts.

The term “ecotage,” first popularized by Abbey’s novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), refers to nonviolent sabotage of infrastructure implicated in environmental harm (Buell, 2009). As the ringleader of the fictional Monkey Wrenchers explains, their “cardinal rule” is “no violence to human beings” in part because, “we’re not dealing with humans” but instead, seeking to destroy “the megamachine. A megalomaniacal megamachine” (Abbey, 1975, p. 155). *The Monkey Wrench Gang* operated as a cultural script that legitimized ecotage as direct action against environmentally destructive infrastructure. Abbey himself explicitly linked the novel to the emerging Earth First! movement and positioned “monkeywrenching” as a nameable, discussable, tangible, and ethically defensible tactic within radical environmental ethics (Abbey, 1983; McTaggart, 2020). The novel’s influence persisted in shaping activist direct action tactics and activists’ “rhetoric of moral confrontation” (Short, 1991). It also shaped how those tactics were reported and governed. As Earth First! and similar movements gained visibility through the 1980s and 1990s, conservative political actors and industry groups began a coordinated counteroffensive to reframe the ethics of “monkeywrenching” (Loadenthal, 2013; Smith, 2008). Indeed, shortly after Ron Arnold’s introduction of the term, in 1998 the *New York Times Magazine* characterized Abbey as the “face of eco-terrorism” and the “godfather of ecoterrorism” (Sullivan, qtd. in Buell, 2009, p. 158).

The pejorative label has since circulated widely (Turner, 2006). Mainstream media continue to amplify this punitive framing. Wagner (2008) found a post-9/11 spike in fear-laden language, with the term “eco-terrorism” applied indiscriminately, often without regard to the intent or effects of the act. As Watson and Wyatt (2014) explain, “manipulation of the terrorist label focuses attention on groups that ... are potentially not as dangerous as those attaching the label” (p. 59). This rhetorical inversion shields powerful actors while exposing environmental defenders to surveillance, stigma, and subjugation. Yet these frames polarize audiences: Feldman et al.’s (2017) study of national media found that hostile media perceptions can “boost climate activism, albeit incrementally, among liberals” (p. 1115) and also “further alienate and disengage those who are predisposed to be dismissive or doubtful about global warming” (p. 1118). For pundits and politicians, attaching this label can serve a dual purpose: it capitalizes on the shock value and newsworthiness of unpredicted disruption to generate public alarm while also framing activists as dangerous extremists rather than legitimate political actors.

While existing scholarship has extensively documented the strategic deployment of “eco-terror” rhetoric by political and corporate actors, how professional journalists have been recently

navigating this contested terminology remains underexplored. Sumner and Weidman's (2013) foundational study revealed widespread uncritical acceptance of the "eco-terrorism" label from 1999 to 2009. More recently, Lederer et al. (2024) have argued that German print media have played a key role in the delegitimization of climate protest groups by labeling emerging climate activists a new "Green Army Faction" linked to the historically violent "Red Army Faction." As they reason, "what began as a warning or reflection on the potential consequences of inadequate climate policy evolved into a struggle for interpretive sovereignty, in which the primary goal often was to criminalize, discredit, and delegitimize climate activists" (Lederer et al., 2024, p. 8). The growing awareness of activist criminalization and evolving journalistic norms around loaded political language suggest that contemporary coverage may differ from earlier patterns.

Therefore, our study builds directly on Sumner and Weidman's (2013) framework while expanding geographically beyond the U.S., extending temporally into the 2020s, and examining whether journalists now demonstrate greater reflexivity in their use of "eco-terrorism" terminology – particularly through contextualization, qualification, and the use of distancing devices like scare quotes. By analyzing how mainstream news media frame radical environmental activism in an era of escalating climate crisis and intensifying state repression, this research illuminates the evolving role of journalism in either reinforcing or challenging the criminalization of climate dissent.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Design and theoretical framework

To investigate how radical environmental protest, ecotage, and eco-terrorism are framed in contemporary news publications, we conducted a discourse analysis of print and online articles published during a five-year period (01/01/2020–31/12/2024).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines how language constructs social realities and reflects power dynamics (Fairclough, 1995) and illuminates processes of news production by journalists and comprehension by readers (Van Dijk, 1988). More specifically, our approach builds upon and extends the methodological framework established by Sumner and Weidman (2013), who examined how U.S. newspapers used the term "eco-terrorism" between 1999 and 2009.

We retained the core dimensions of the Sumner and Weidman study by systemically identifying relevant coverage of "eco-terrorism," identifying the type of article ("news," "editorial," or "letter to the editor," who used the term ("journalist, politician, law enforcement, etc.") and whether the use showed "accepting," "distancing" or "novel" use of the term. For the type of article, we marked "opinion" pieces written by journalists, politicians, or identified experts as "editorial" and items such as "comment" from individual citizens as "letters." In addition, we further delineated "novel" uses of the term as "explicit debate" as in these articles one or more speakers debated whether something did or did not qualify as "ecoterrorism."

We also expanded their framework in three important ways. First, we broadened the geographic scope to include international English-language media which shows how the term operates in distinct national contexts. Second, we extended the temporal frame to 2020–2024 to capture contemporary climate activism, including the rise of groups like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. Third, we acknowledged the diversified media landscape of the 2020s, which includes not only traditional newspapers but also online-only publications, wire services with varied editorial treatments, and politically aligned media outlets with explicit ideological commitments. Therefore, we identified the political bias of each news source by cross-referencing classifications from Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC), AllSides, and Ad Fontes Media (AFM), with final bias labels assigned based on convergence across sources. Finally, our discourse analysis identifies recurring discursive themes and allows us to examine not just who uses the term, but how it operates strategically in different political, cultural, and media environments.

### 3.2. Data sampling

Our primary data source was Lexis Uni, a database of global, full-text English-language news outlets. We also ensured representation of different types of media outlets, including national newspapers, regional newspapers, wire services, news magazines, and online news websites.

The search terms included “ecoterror\*” and the hyphenated “eco-terror\*” and “environmental terrorism.” The timeframe spanned from 1 January 2020 through 31 December 2024. The search yielded an initial dataset of 947 articles. Duplicate articles were removed, though we retained wire service content that was edited differently by outlets as these variations could indicate meaningful differences in framing. This reduced the dataset to 543 articles. During a second stage of screening, we noticed 81 of the remaining results appeared under the title “CE Noticias Financieras English” which, after some investigation, we found refers to “Content Engine LLC,” a newswire agency. As we could not verify the primary source of CE Noticias articles and removed them from our dataset – 462 articles remained.

Our third round of screening focused on relevance. We reviewed article titles and leads to identify irrelevant content, including television program announcements and video game reviews. We then removed 47 articles that announced or reviewed *Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade*, in which players adopt roles in the eco-terrorist group “Avalanche” fighting to stop the “Shinra Electric Power Company.” While millions downloaded and played the game, and its impact could be compared with fictional films like *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, it did seem to prompt journalists (or politicians) to reflect on its potential to incite real-world “eco-terrorism” and therefore, discussions of *Final Fantasy VII* were not included. Overall, this stage removed 436 articles, leaving 284 articles for full-text review.

Finally, we began to read the articles and locate specific URLs for the pieces as these are not provided in LexisUni results. During this process, we identified articles from fringe blogs and websites with extreme bias and low journalistic standards, such as Granite Grok and Newsbusters.org. After debate, we removed some of the more extreme and seemingly unreliable news sources and blogs while retaining results from other less mainstream sites such as The Daily Caller (USA) and the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (CAN) to maintain a dataset of 204 articles.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Overview of dataset and general patterns by geography and bias

The final dataset shows 204 articles published by 112 different media outlets across 22 countries. The publications were concentrated in English-speaking countries – the United Kingdom (33%, 68 articles), United States (23%, 47 articles), and Canada (14%, 28 articles) – with substantial representations from Azerbaijan (5%, 10 articles), Israel (4%, 8 articles), New Zealand (3%, 6 articles), Australia (2%, 5 articles), and Ireland (2%, 4 articles). International outlets including *Euronews* and *Politico* accounted for 4% (9 articles). German sources contributed 3 articles (1%), while India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia each contributed 2 articles (1% each) and France, Brazil, South Korea, Luxembourg, Poland, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and China each contributed 1 article, collectively representing 4% (8 articles) of the dataset.

This geographic distribution reflects the general syndication and Anglicization of global media and specific circulation of “eco-terrorism,” which seems to have become a political tool beyond the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, in Azerbaijan, the state-news agency, Azer news, published ten articles between October 2020 and January 2023, following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. During that 44-day conflict, which pitted Azerbaijan against Armenia for the contested state of Nagorno Karabakh, officials began to contest Armenia’s “three-decade occupation of Azerbaijani territories” which led to “eco-terrorism” by purposefully burning forests, polluting rivers, and the illegal exploitation of mineral deposits (Trend News Agency, 2020). The claims against Armenia and Russian peacekeepers continued, with reports of “Azerbaijanis in

Hague protest against Armenia's eco-terror" (Murshud, 2022), and other multinational corporations included as potential actors – "Eco-terror' ignored?; Canadian mining companies among those accused of damaging environment in Azerbaijan" (Gordon, 2023).

Analysis of rhetorical stance toward "eco-terrorism" differs from Sumner and Weidman's (2013) findings, alongside stark ideological divides in contemporary coverage. Overall, 131 articles (64%) seemed to accept the "eco-terrorism" label, while 66 (32%) showed a contested attribution by using scare quotes or distancing the news narrative with further context. 4 articles (2%) showed an explicit debate, where an interviewer and interviewee debated the accuracy of the label (Meister, 2022) or showed clear pushback against its use with claims such as "[Authorities] dare to call peaceful protectors 'eco-terrorists,' for risking their freedom to halt the actual eco-terrorism by the fossil fueled establishment" (McCarthy, 2022).

Although acceptance of the eco-terror label remains the majority, patterns differ sharply by political ideology and article genre. State-aligned media, particularly from Azerbaijan, showed 100% acceptance (13 of 13). However, Azer news used "eco-terror" in the context of environmental damage and the illegal or reckless abuse of natural resources, which is more accurately referred to as "environmental terrorism." Right-bias outlets (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Caller*) demonstrated near-total adoption with 94.4% acceptance. Lean-right outlets (*Telegraph*, *National Post*, *Times of London*) followed at 66.7% acceptance. In contrast, center-bias outlets were almost evenly split (50% acceptance vs. 46.4% distancing), and left-bias publications (*The Guardian*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*) showed the strongest critical stance, with 75% indicating some kind of distance through their use of the term. Together, these results suggest that ideological positioning rather than professional neutrality may be the primary driver of "eco-terrorism" framing.

Source attribution suggests how "eco-terrorism" moves through media ecosystems. In accepting articles, government officials, law enforcement, or politicians served as primary sources in 73% (99/131). Journalists themselves reinforced the terminology in 31% (42/131). Industry actors appeared in 8% (11/131), framing property damage as an existential threat. Journalists who challenged the framing comprised 23% (14/66). Academic experts provided critical perspectives in 11% (7/66), activists in 10% (6/66), and IGOs like UN experts in 5% (3/66), typically warning against criminalizing peaceful protest.

Article type further dictates deployment of the term. Among 145 news articles, 57% accepted while 40% distanced themselves, indicating that, while journalists tended to default to some kind of critical distance, reliance on quotes from politicians, lawyers, or law enforcement often leads to acceptance of "eco-terror" labels. Aggressive framing was significantly reflected in opinion content, where 85.3% of editorials accepted the term versus only 14% showed distance from the term. Similarly, citizen-composed letters showed 76% acceptance, suggesting that editors allowed for somewhat uncritical and often angry rebukes of "eco-terrorists" who were blocking traffic, chaining themselves to fossil infrastructure, or throwing soup at paintings.

Headline analysis provides further evidence of how eco-terror rhetoric has penetrated media discourse. Among the 204 articles, 134 (64%) included terms like "terrorism," "terrorist," "eco-terror," or related variants directly in their headlines and 21 (12%) employed scare quotes around those terms (Table 1). This distancing or implicit questioning of the term appeared in headlines such as "Australian senator claims 'eco-terrorists' caused bushfires" (Agence France-Presse, 2020) and "Israel says Iran is behind 'eco-terrorism' oil spill" (Associated Press, 2021). The 21 headlines using scare quotes were distributed across the political spectrum: 11 right-leaning outlets (52%), 7 left-leaning outlets (33%), and 3 center-biased outlets (14%). The remaining 118 headlines (85% of the total corpus) that include "terrorism" framing appeared primarily in right-leaning media (67 articles, or 57% of headlines without scare quotes) and, of the 118 headlines indicating "terrorism" (without quotes), 54 were news articles (46%), 41 editorials (35%), 23 letters to the editor (19%).

These patterns suggest that, in recent years, the majority of uncritical "eco-terrorism" rhetoric may be channeled through a right-leaning pipeline – government officials and industry

**Table 1.** Articles from the dataset with headlines containing “eco-terrorism” in quotes ( $n = 21$ ).

Article title	Date	Publication	Author
Australian senator claims “eco-terrorists” caused bushfire	12/02/ 2020	<i>RTÉ</i> (IRE)	Agence France- Presse
One man’s battle against “eco-terrorists” destroying Papua New Guinea*	7/15/ 2020	<i>The Independent</i>	Kasumi Borczyk
Could Iran really be linked to “eco-terrorism” against Israel?	04/03/ 2021	<i>Jerusalem Post</i> (ISR)	Seth J. Frantzman
Israel says Iran is behind “eco-terrorism” oil spill in the Mediterranean	04/03/ 2021	<i>Daily Mail</i> (UK)	Associated Press
Obama’s Land Management Director Says Biden Nominee Should Be Disqualified for Her Involvement In 1989 “Eco-Terrorism” Case	06/19/ 2021	<i>Conservative Daily News</i> (USA)	Andrew Kerr
All 10 Republican members of Senate Energy Committee sign letter urging Biden to withdraw BLM nominee over “eco-terrorism” ties	07/14/ 2021	<i>Daily Caller</i> (USA)	Andrew Kerr
Republican Senator John Barrasso demands Biden’s new BLM director reveal her involvement in “domestic terrorism” following her 1989 tree-spiking plot	11/01/ 2021	<i>Daily Mail</i> (UK)	Morgan Phillips
“Eco-terrorist” who planted bomb in Edinburgh Park jailed	02/16/ 2022	<i>Guardian</i> (UK)	Severin Carrell
Eco-protesters accused of “terrorism” after emptying six million baguettes worth of wheat from wrong train	03/21/ 2022	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> (UK)	Henry Samuel
Lock them up! Just Stop Oil “eco-terrorism” sparks fury by “putting lives at risk”	06/07/ 2022	<i>Express Online</i> (UK)	Michael Curzon
TikTok user raising million-strong frog army accused of “eco-terrorism”	07/16/ 2022	<i>Jerusalem Post</i> (ISR)	Staff reporter
Anonymous “eco-terrorist” says they threw egg during Auckland mayoral debate	07/22/ 2022	<i>Stuff</i> (NZ)	James Halpin
French government condemns “eco-terrorism” at water protests	10/31/ 2022	<i>Le Monde</i> (FR)	Agence France- Presse
“Eco-terrorists” poison dozens of trees in Southland town	12/06/ 2022	<i>Southland Times</i> (NZ)	Evan Harding
“Eco-terror” ignored? Canadian mining companies among those accused of damaging environment in Azerbaijan	1/30/ 2023	<i>Toronto Sun</i>	Dave Gordon
French court annuls ban of climate movement over “eco-terrorism” claims	06/22/ 2023	<i>Politico.com</i> (EU)	Louise Guillot
The machine breaker: Inside the mind of an “eco-terrorist”	01/11/ 2023	<i>Harper’s</i>	Christopher Ketchum
Kim Kardashian is accused of “eco-terrorism” as it’s revealed her \$95 million private jet flew FIVE times in just ONE DAY	2/14/ 2024	<i>Daily Mail</i> (UK)	Staff reporter
Inside far-left “eco-terrorist” Volcano Group claiming Tesla factory arson attack	03/09/ 2024	<i>Mirror</i> (UK)	James Liddell
Musk attacks “dumb eco-terrorists” over Tesla fire	3/05/ 2024	<i>BBC</i>	AP
Russian ship’s toxic dump is “eco-terrorism” Reform MP criticizes “Government-sanctioned” discharge of 300 tons of fertilizer into North Sea	12/19/ 2024	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> (UK)	Steve Bird

\*In the NexusUni search, the headline for this article includes “eco-terrorists”; however, a search for the URL shows the headline was later updated to “One man’s battle against ‘environmental terrorists’ destroying Papua New Guinea,” which is more accurate in the context of his conflict with multinational extractive industries.

representatives echoed by conservative media sources – but opinion writers and citizens adopt and propagate it with implicit support from editors who publish their submissions. Therefore, centrist news pieces report on accusations of so-called “eco-terrorism,” but the real rhetoric weight seems to be carried by journalists writing editorials, such as the *Daily Mail*’s “Just Stop Oil are not Protestors – They’re a Deranged Criminal Eco-terrorist Cult” (Wooton, 2022) and letters by citizens like the one published in the *Edmonton Sun*, “Soft on Eco-Terrorists” (Young, 2021). Such editorials and letters display a more sensationalized approach akin to social media. They may reflect populist beliefs, but they also seem to allow news editors to retain the vestiges of the aughts, when, as shown by Sumner and Weidman (2013), environmental protest, obstruction, and ecotage were more systematically reframed as “terrorism” despite the actors’ explicit commitments to avoiding human harm.

## 5. Thematic analysis

To move beyond quantitative patterns of tone and attribution, we also read the 204 articles to determine patterns in the thematic content. Seven recurring frames emerged, each representing a different strategic deployment of “eco-terrorism.” These categories reveal how the term is deployed in distinct situations.

### 5.1. Ecotage, vandalism, and obstruction as eco-terrorism

The most legally consequential use of “eco-terrorism” targets radical protests and ecotage, although official framing or acceptance can be distinct from the distancing and context provided by journalists.

For example, in the *National Review*, Itxu Díaz called museum protests involving soup-throwing and glue-ins a “new, and patently ludicrous, strain of ecoterrorism” and blamed Interpol for supposedly excusing violent environmentalist actions and being too overly concerned with “far-right terrorist groups” engaging in eco-facism (Díaz, 2022). In France, after mass mobilizations against a mega-basin water retention project at Sainte-Soline in the Deux-Sèvres region in October 2022, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin characterized protesters’ actions as “écoterrorisme.” *Le Monde* employed scare quotes in their headline about the action – “French government condemns ‘eco-terrorism’ at water protests” – (Agence France Presse, 2022) and followed with a debate piece (in French) about the term “L’ ‘écoterrorisme,’ un terme flou qui continue de faire polémique” [“Ecoterrorism,’ a vague term that continues to stir controversy”] (Albertini and Ayad, 2022). The following year, after more violent clashes with police, Darmanin escalated his “eco-terrorism” attacks against the organization leading the protests, Les Soulèvements de la Terre (SLT), and took legal measures to dissolve and disband it (Jabkhiro, 2023). Months later, the ban of SLT was overturned by French courts, demonstrating judicial resistance to the terrorism designation even as government officials insisted upon it.

On 17 February 2022, an attack on the Coastal GasLink pipeline construction site in British Columbia, Canada, prompted similar political rebukes. Approximately 20 masked individuals wearing white jumpsuits attacked security vehicles with axes (no one was injured), fired flare guns, and caused millions of dollars in damage to pipeline equipment. The coordinated nature of the attack – arriving on foot at a remote construction site after midnight, throwing smoke bombs, setting booby traps, commandeering equipment to damage other machinery, cutting hydraulic and fuel lines, and disappearing into the forest – distinguished the action from other protests and blockades of pipeline development in Canada and the United States (Lowan-Trudeau, 2020). Articles about the ecotage quoted Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, who posted on X: “Will the Trudeau government now seize the bank accounts of the foreign-funded eco-terrorists responsible for this violence?” Kenney’s statement, posted during the trucker convoy protests in Ottawa, seems to have been an attack on Trudeau and what some viewed as the “liberal” bias of emergency measures taken against convoy participants, but not against pipeline attackers (Gunter, 2022).

One notable boundary case involved Nikolaos Karvounakis, a Greek national, who, in January of 2018, placed a homemade nail bomb in a public park in Edinburgh and later described his actions as an “eco-terror message” (Finlay, 2022). Karvounakis was arrested in 2021 and claimed he was a “lover of nihilist anti-political violence” and affiliated with the Mexican anarchist and eco-terrorist organization *Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje* (ITS), which has claimed attacks in Chile, Mexico, and Greece (Spadaro, 2020). The claimed affiliation was not substantiated, which may have led *The Guardian* to place the term in scare quotes in its headline – “‘Eco-terrorist’ who planted bomb in Edinburgh park jailed” and then begins the article describing Karvounakis as a “self-styled eco-terrorist” (Carrell, 2022). The Karvounakis case functions analytically as a boundary marker: if journalists employ scare quotes even when someone plants a bomb in a public park and calls himself an

eco-terrorist, it suggests that editors recognize that “eco-terrorism” functions more as contested political rhetoric than a stable descriptive category.

Another noteworthy eco-vandalism case surprisingly eschewed the label of eco-terrorism. On 6 August, 2024, when members of the Spanish group Futuro Vegetal vandalized Lionel Messi’s mansion in Ibiza, major news sources (in English and Spanish) emphasized the activists’ environmental messaging. The right-leaning *La Vanguardia* (Agencias 2024) described the perpetrators as “ecologists” and dedicated substantial coverage to their arguments about climate inequality. Even the more conservative *New York Post* (Jacob, 2024) characterized the group as “climate activists” rather than terrorists and, while mocking their message, their headline repeated their “Eat the rich” ideology rather than condemning the vandalism as extremist violence. Only one source, *The Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland), used the term: “The group responsible [for vandalizing the mansion], Futuro Vegetal, said two female activists and its eco-terrorist co-founder Bilbo Bassaterra have been held” (Simpson, 2024). Spanish police and the public prosecutors had, before the Ibiza action, classified Bassaterra and Futuro Vegetal as an “eco-terrorist” group (Tena, 2024). The legal retraction of the eco-terror label may explain why the term was not used in media stories about this action; however, that would be an anomaly, as many outlets, as we have seen, tend to apply “eco-terrorism” uncritically, and it would not be surprising for them to use sensationalist terms in the case of a group vandalizing a world-famous athlete’s home.

## 5.2. State and corporate violence: environmental terrorism as “eco-terrorism”

Numerous scholars have shown that what is often referred to as “eco-terrorism” is actually “environmental terrorism” (Chalecki, 2024; Sumner and Weidman, 2013; Wagner, 2008; Watson and Wyatt, 2014). Environmental terrorism refers to the degradation or weaponization of ecosystems or environmental resources by states, militaries, or industrial entities. Often, eco-terrorism directly opposes real and potential environmental terrorism and yet, media usage consistently conflates the two concepts.

In addition to the Azerbaijani examples of state-aligned media accusing Armenia and Russian peacekeepers of “eco-terrorism” against their rivers, forests, and mining resources, scattered examples reflect this terminological confusion. Ukrainian government officials described Russia’s June 2023 destruction of the Kakhovka Dam and potential for a nuclear disaster as both “ecocide” and “eco-terrorism,” although journalists framed this as part of the overall devastating environmental consequences following Russia’s 2022 invasion and ongoing assault (Francis, 2024). In another case, *The Telegraph* reported a Russian cargo ship’s dumping of 300 tons of ammonium nitrate into the North Sea of the UK coast as an “act of state-sanctioned ‘eco-terrorism’” and went on to quote politician Rupert Lowe, a Reform MP: “The fertiliser was dumped in its polypropylene double-skinned bags, which was an act of environmental terrorism ... As a farmer, if I dumped one such bag in a river, I would be prosecuted to kingdom come” (Bird, 2024).

In another shipping situation, a vessel allegedly smuggling Iranian oil spilled some of its cargo while approaching Israel’s Mediterranean coast and the *The Daily Mail* reported, “Israel says Iran is behind ‘eco-terrorism’ oil spill” (Associated Press, 2021). Although the scare quotes may signal the contested nature of the term, the piece quotes Israeli Environmental Protection Minister Gila Gamliel accusing Iran of conducting “terrorism by harming the environment” and naming the act “eco-terrorism” instead of “environmental terrorism.”

The term also circulated through activist appropriation. In Nigeria, environmental columnist Emeka Oduma characterized Shell’s gas flaring as “corporate eco-terrorism as the vegetation, lives and property of victims are under attack” (Oduma, 2024). Similarly, Brazil’s Environment Minister Marina Silva declared in media interviews that criminal networks deliberately setting wildfires for land clearance constituted “environmental terrorism” (Murakawa, 2024). One notable editorial correction illuminates growing awareness of the distinction: *The Independent* initially published “One man’s battle against ‘eco terrorists’ destroying Papua New Guinea” about a mining

corporation planning to extract resources along the Sepik River, “killing the ecosystem and culture of those who live there” (Borczyk, 2020). The headline was subsequently revised to “One man’s battle against ‘environmental terrorists’ destroying Papua New Guinea” – which is more precise as the piece is about corporations inflicting ecological destruction rather than activists opposing it.

### **5.3. Potential for eco-terrorism: speculative accusations and straw man politics**

In some cases, the label functioned as a speculative accusation to cast suspicion on environmentalists and political opponents. In the United States, three Republican representatives sent a formal letter in March 2024 requesting FBI briefings and an investigation for “potential for threats against critical infrastructure – especially physical energy infrastructure – as radical ecoterrorist calls to violence are increasingly promoted across the globe, including at American universities” (United States House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, 2024). The letter provided no evidence of such “calls to violence” at universities, but invoked the specter of eco-terrorism to justify federal monitoring of campus environmental activism.

In Australia, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells called for investigations into whether eco-terrorists were responsible for tens of thousands of bush fires that scorched the continent in 2019. Without any evidence to support her claim, she demanded answers about the imaginary arsonists: “Who are they? What was their motive and intent? Are they lone actors or part of a sinister collective conducting eco-terrorism?” (Lagan, 2020). While the headline in *The Times* (London) (2020), cites “Eco-terrorist group started Australia’s devastating bushfires, senator *claims*” (italics ours), the release in the Agence France-Presse put Fierravanti-Wells’ statement in scare quotes “Australian senator says ‘eco-terrorists’ caused fires” (ATP, 2020) and a local Australian paper ran an op-ed the next day challenging the “offensive slurs” and her “shameless scramble to use the fires as a political weapon” (Langford, 2020). While other conspiracy theories linking eco-terrorists to wildfires (and not climate change) also spread through Canada (Alam, 2023), the most alarming instances seemed to be about pending terrorist attacks and who, or what, might incite them.

Cultural portrayals also became sites where the potential for eco-terrorism was imagined, amplified, and politically mobilized. The 2023 film adaptation of Andreas Malm’s 2021 monograph, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (2021) exemplify how fictional narratives were treated not merely as representations or discussions but as prompts for real-world threats. The film shows eight activists planning sabotage on an oil pipeline and director Daniel Goldhaber acknowledged the film’s deliberately provocative framing, describing it as “Ocean’s 11 for ecoterrorism ... a bit of a Hollywood fantasy wish fulfillment” (Slayton, 2023). Whether intended as marketing or to reach audiences frustrated by climate inaction, the remark was seized upon by critics as evidence of a dangerous intent. Reviews and op-eds split along ideological lines. *Variety* noted that “whether their actions constitute ‘eco-terrorism’ depends on one’s definitions of morality and desperation” (Harvey, 2023), while another reviewer wrote, “If you even remotely care about the planet and don’t mind a little bit of eco-terrorism, watch this movie” (Mahler, 2023). Shortly after the film’s release, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz introduced the “Safe and Secure Transportation of American Energy Act,” claiming that legislation was necessary because “Hollywood radicals celebrate and encourage eco-terrorism through films like *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*” (U.S. Commerce Committee, 2024). Here, a fictional narrative was treated as evidence of a looming threat, reinforcing preexisting claims about radicalization and infrastructure vulnerability.

The same anticipatory logic appeared in cases where individuals were labeled eco-terrorists based on affiliations or rhetoric rather than action. Tracy Stone-Manning’s 2021 nomination to lead the U.S. Bureau of Land Management became a flashpoint when Republican senators resurrected her 1990s involvement with Earth First! and a tree-spiking incident she seemingly condoned. Though Stone-Manning was never charged and testified she sent an anonymous warning letter to authorities (thereby receiving immunity for the event), a letter signed by 75 Republican officials

denounced her “ties to ecoterrorism” and claimed she had “lied about her implication in an ecoterrorism criminal investigation” (Keene, 2021). Conservative outlets stated flatly: “Stone-Manning’s past involvement in ecoterrorism ... disqualifies her” (Kerr, 2021).

A similar dynamic emerged in Canada when environmentalist David Suzuki, speaking at a 2021 climate rally, warned: “there are going to be pipelines blown up if our leaders don’t pay attention to what’s going on” (Johnson, 2021). Alberta government house leader Jason Nixon immediately introduced a motion to denounce Suzuki and “any comments made calling for the intentional destruction of energy infrastructure” and “incitements of violent eco-terrorism.” The rhetorical equation between warning about potential radicalization (should governments fail to act on climate) and inciting violence deflects from substantive climate warnings and equates activists with insurrectionists.

#### 5.4. Critical journalism and public debate

Independent and left-leaning journalists, academics, and activists shed light on the humanistic aspects of so-called “ecoterrorists” and the greater issues at stake: the climate crisis. In France, when an interviewer suggested that labeling French environmentalists “ecoterrorists” may be “an exaggeration,” security expert Eric Delbecque pushed back, explaining:

When the so-called Zadists in France occupied fields and villages near Nantes for years to prevent the construction of an airport, they set up traps and laid homemade mines to keep law enforcement officers away. This is how terrorist groups operate ... Those who shy away from the word ecoterrorism do not dare to face the truth. (Meister, 2022)

Eva Kandoul’s Euronews coverage of a 2024 direct action against an Arkema chemical plant near Lyon also offers an alternative framing. Hundreds of activists stormed the facility to protest against the production of PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), also referred to as “forever chemicals.” Rather than leading with official condemnation, Kandoul accompanied protesters and centered their voices: “Civil disobedience doesn’t hurt anyone unlike acts of terrorism which claim hundreds of victims,” one activist explained. Kandoul acknowledged that “actions of climate activists have attracted strong criticism. Some describe them as ‘ecoterrorism’” but positioned this as contested political rhetoric rather than objective description, giving voice to activists to create paths for citizens striving for a safer future (Kandoul, 2024).

In *The Nation*, Darsen Hover (2023) critically analyzed the proliferation of terrorism comparisons, observing that “Equating climate activists with terrorists has become more common in the United States, among elected and law enforcement officials and in the media.” Hover interviewed NYU professor Maha Aziz, who warned that continued governmental inaction might lead to “citizen frustration and activism evolv[ing] into violence against both government and fossil fuel companies – perhaps a new and more violent wave of eco-terrorism as Earth becomes even less inhabitable” (qtd. in Hover, 2023). These journalistic interventions demonstrate how framing contests shape public understanding of climate activism.

The minority of distancing letters offered personal testimony countering terrorism framings. For example, in response to the Canadian pipeline attack, one reader challenged Kenney’s rhetoric: “How voicing one’s concerns on issues like water quality, landscape integrity, climate change ... makes one a ‘terrorist’ ... is mystifying. In the hierarchy of disagreement, name-calling is the lowest type of argument” (Fitch, 2022). Accepting letters frequently demanded harsh punishment and deployed inflammatory comparisons. One Calgary Sun letter stated: “I am fed-up with reading occasion after occasion where eco-terrorists attack some form of infrastructure in the name of ‘saving the planet’. Stop kowtowing to the celebrities and eco-terrorists” (Young, 2021). Another declared: “Those moronic eco protesters who invaded the grounds of Rishi Sunak’s North Yorkshire home ... are eco terrorists ... In Saudi they’d probably have had their legs chopped off so they couldn’t climb anything ever again” (Malone, 2023). The high acceptance rate among letters

(75%) compared to news articles (59%) suggests that opinion pieces were not spaces of “critical debate” but rather texts in which we see populist anti-activist sentiment that legitimizes harsh governmental responses.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

This study examined the contemporary circulation of “eco-terrorism” in English-language news media from 2020 to 2024, building directly on Sumner and Weidman’s (2013) foundational analysis of U.S. coverage from 1999 to 2009. Our findings reveal significant shifts in journalistic practice: while 64% of articles still accepted the label, this represents a notable decline from the 85.3% acceptance rate documented fifteen years earlier. More importantly, distancing practices, such as placing “eco-terrorism” in scare quotes and explicit contextualization, increased from approximately 15%–32%, suggesting editors from across the political spectrum may be more aware of the term’s contested political nature than in previous decades.

We focused specifically on “eco-terrorism” rather than adjacent delegitimizing labels like “eco-extremism” or “radical environmentalism” because, unlike these related terms, terrorism designations activate exceptional state powers including enhanced surveillance, counter-terrorism policing, and prosecutorial frameworks that can result in decades-long prison sentences. Eco-terrorism rhetoric has the capacity to foreclose democratic debate as protest becomes discursively transformed from political dissent into security threat. While there is more critical debate surrounding the term, it still operates through predictable ideological pipelines: government officials and industry representatives provide initial framings (sometimes via social media), which are then amplified primarily through right-leaning media (94.4% acceptance) and opinion content (85.3% acceptance in editorials, 76% in letters).

Limitations to the study include a dataset of only 204 articles and only in English, which represents only a fraction of global coverage and excludes broadcast media, podcasts, and social media platforms where eco-terrorism discourse may have distinct discourse effects. The restriction to news articles, editorials, and letters also omits other influential cultural forms. For example, a recent analysis of eco-tage and eco-terrorism portrayals in 32 commercially successful films from 1972 to 2023 reveals consistent narrative patterns linking the severity of violence to moral illegitimacy (Gould, 2025). Such an analysis could also be applied to understand how players of *Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade* view “eco-terrorism” after adopting the role of activists fighting corporate environmental destruction.

Sovacool and Dunlap (2022) pose the question underlying much radical climate activism: “What options are capable of stopping actors and institutions who already realize that their actions and behavior may harm millions, degrade the biosphere, and contaminate the climate, but continue to do so?” (p. 102416). This question illuminates why terrorism framings matter beyond terminology. When media default to terrorism framings, they short-circuit what Lederer et al. (2024) describe as the “productive tension between movements that build up social pressure and segments of the population that absorb it and channel it into institutional reform” (p. 9). Communication research on image events (DeLuca, 1999) and “saboteurial aesthetics” (Campbell and Carter, 2023) demonstrates how disruptive actions – road blockades, symbolic defacement, spectacle – force issues into public visibility when conventional channels fail. From this perspective, radical tactics can shift the Overton window, making previously unthinkable policy responses (like banning fossil fuels) discussable and increase moderate actors’ bargaining power. However, when these image events are framed as “terrorist” threats rather than as political or environmental communication, both radical and reformist strategies are undermined.

Finally, while contemporary environmental activists have thus far largely avoided violence against people, cultural imaginaries increasingly speculate about futures where ecological desperation produces lethal tactics. If non-violent ecotage and symbolic disruption are already framed as terrorism, the conceptual and moral vocabulary needed to address genuinely violent acts – should

they occur – will be severely limited. Clarifying these distinctions now is therefore essential not only for accurate journalism but for preserving democratic deliberation in an era of accelerating ecological crisis.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Daniel Wuebben**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Natalie Nasrawin**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Roman Meinhold**: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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