

Blaming nature, erasing structural accountability: how Indonesian media framed the 2025- Sumatran floods

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Abstract This study examined how major Indonesian online media framed the causes, responsibility, and governance of the 2025 Sumatra flood disaster. Using qualitative content analysis based on Entman's (1993) problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, the study analysed 56 news articles published between 1 and 10 December 2025 from major Indonesian online outlets, including Kompas.com, Tempo.co, Detik.com, CNN Indonesia, CNBC Indonesia, Tribunnews.com, and Liputan6.Com. This study examined the dominant narratives of causation, actor representation, responsibility attribution, and proposed solutions in flood reporting. The findings show that news coverage predominantly framed the floods as extreme weather. At the same time, structural factors such as deforestation, extractive industries, and spatial planning failures appeared less consistently and were often presented as secondary explanations. Government actors were largely represented as responders within a rescue-spectacle narrative, reflecting the political economy of disaster journalism, in which reliance on official sources and state-centred narratives displaces scrutiny of governance failures and extractive interests that produce flood vulnerability. These framing patterns contribute to the normalisation of floods as natural disasters and limit public attention to the need for structural accountability. This study contributes to disaster journalism and environmental communication research by highlighting how media framing shapes the understanding of responsibility for climate-related disasters.

Keywords: disaster journalism; environmental communication; flood governance; media framing

INTRODUCTION

The major floods and landslides that struck Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra from late November to early December 2025 created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in recent decades. The National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) recorded at least 914 deaths, and 389 people were still missing, with hundreds of thousands displaced to temporary shelters (Chatarine, 2025). In various regions, road access was cut off, public facilities were damaged, and basic services were disrupted. Field reports describe villages buried in mud, bridges swept away, and thousands of houses being submerged or destroyed. In this situation, the national and local media made the Sumatra floods the main topic of news coverage and online public discussion.

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As the impact of the disaster widened, media coverage and narratives circulating on social media presented not only the numbers of victims and damage but also heartbreaking stories from survivors. Human interest reports highlighted the experiences of families surviving on limited food supplies, such as the story of residents of Aceh Tamiang who could only eat one spoonful of rice per person while in evacuation (Sukardi, 2025). In international media, the Sumatra floods have been depicted as one of the deadliest disasters in Indonesia in recent years, with dramatic visuals of villages flattened by mud flows and residents isolated for days (BBC News Indonesia, 2025a). This report strengthened the image of floods as humanitarian crises requiring rapid and massive responses.

However, behind this narrative of emergency and humanitarianism, a growing public question emerged: were these floods solely the result of extreme weather, or were they also a reflection of failures in environmental and spatial governance? Although advances in extreme event attribution increasingly demonstrate links between heavy rainfall and anthropogenic climate change, such scientific attribution does not eliminate the role of land-use governance and regulatory decisions in shaping disaster impacts (Otto, 2023). Recent debates in attribution science caution that isolating climate signals without socio-political contextualisation risks oversimplifying causality and narrowing accountability discussions in public discourse (Clarke et al., 2023). International research on climate communication shows that disaster reporting often goes beyond simplification: it shifts attention toward rainfall and 'natural causes' while downplaying the structural drivers of disaster such as deforestation, extractive industries, and long-term governance failures, thereby weakening public demands for accountability (Boykoff, 2011). Several reports have provided strong evidence that structural factors worsen the impact of disasters. One of the most striking scenes in Aceh was the massive accumulation of timber logs clogging rivers and sweeping into settlements, exposing the material footprint of timber extraction upstream. However, this was not treated as a central story of accountability. Instead, the presence of timber entered news coverage only as a belated 'suspicion', illustrating how media narratives often acknowledge structural causes like logging and land exploitation only after catastrophe, while earlier reporting continues to shelter disasters under the safer language of 'extreme weather' (CNBC Indonesia, 2025b). These conditions raise more urgent questions of responsibility: which institutions, corporate actors, and governance decisions have enabled environmental degradation upstream, and how does media coverage either foreground or obscure their accountability in the making of disaster.

At the policy level, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) responded by temporarily halting the operations of mining companies, oil palm plantations, and hydropower facilities in the upstream areas of the Batang Toru and Garoga watersheds while mandating environmental audits for those companies (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup, 2025). This step explicitly acknowledges that business activities in upstream areas can increase the risk of flash floods and landslides. Simultaneously, advocacy reports such as those by Sawit Watch, cited by the media, emphasised that the extent of palm oil plantations in Sumatra exceeded the ecological carrying capacity and overlapped with disaster-prone areas (Satria, 2025). These conditions suggest that the disaster should not be understood solely as a 'natural calamity', but as an outcome of extractive land-use expansion and regulatory failures, structural drivers that media coverage often treats as secondary context rather than as central questions of accountability. This interpretation aligns with critical scholarship on extractivism, which argues that disaster risk is embedded in political-economic systems that normalise resource exploitation while externalising environmental vulnerability (Bradshaw, 2024).

International and national media coverage has also highlighted the relationship between deforestation, palm oil plantation expansion, and resource exploitation permits with the rising frequency and intensity of floods in Sumatra. In investigative reports, journalists described how the combination of extreme rainfall and the loss of forest cover caused the landscape to lose its 'sponge' function that absorbs water, resulting in sharply increased surface runoff and triggering flash floods (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup, 2025; Satria, 2025). However, several reports indicated that residents blamed forest clearing and major upstream projects, while official authorities tended to emphasise weather factors and emergency response efforts (BBC News Indonesia, 2025b).

Simultaneously, coverage that centred on victim suffering, aid distribution, and visits by high-level officials shaped a media logic that cast the state as a saviour during crises. Rather than

interrogating the political and regulatory conditions that produced vulnerability upstream, news narratives repeatedly staged the government's 'presence' as a spectacle of rescue and responsiveness. The familiar trope of 'government is present' appeared prominently in reports on field visits, logistical assistance, and post-disaster declarations, while questions of longstanding permit regimes, environmental supervision, and spatial governance failures prior to the floods remained marginal or absent. In this way, media framing did not simply document emergency response but actively redirected public attention away from structural accountability, allowing governance failures and extractive decision-making to recede into the background. This pattern aligns with previous research showing that flood coverage in Indonesia often privileges humanitarian immediacy and event-oriented storytelling over sustained structural critique of power relations and policy responsibility (Harnia et al., 2021; Pinontoan & Wahid, 2020).

Within environmental communication and disaster journalism scholarship, disasters are understood not merely as natural events but also as social constructions produced through language, images, and journalistic routines (Yulianti et al., 2025). Framing studies further show that the media do not simply organise meaning but also structure the visibility of policy alternatives and shape which governance responses appear legitimate or urgent within public debate (Guenther et al., 2024). Research on environmental journalism in Indonesian online media demonstrates that the choice of news frames, whether emphasising ecological degradation, policy conflicts, or humanitarian impacts, significantly shapes public understanding of responsibility and the scope for policy intervention. In the context of the South Kalimantan floods, framing analyses revealed sharp contrasts between media outlets that highlighted spatial planning failures and environmental degradation and those that attributed the disaster primarily to extreme weather or technical drainage issues (Harnia et al., 2021).

Similarly, a framing study of the 2020 Jakarta floods in *Kompas.com* and *Jawapos.com* showed that the media are not neutral in constructing actors and causes. While one outlet adopted a more critical stance toward local government by foregrounding policy weaknesses and infrastructure failures, the other tended to emphasise government response efforts and crisis management, thereby producing a more favourable image of state action (Pinontoan & Wahid, 2020). In South Kalimantan, local environmental journalism in *teras7.com* further illustrated how media can integrate problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation, and solution recommendations, presenting floods not as isolated events but as recurring manifestations of unresolved structural problems (Yulianti et al., 2025).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that media framing plays a crucial role in shaping the public's interpretation of flood causality, responsibility, and disaster governance. Framing research further indicates that the articulation of moral responsibility within environmental disasters significantly influences whether public discourse moves toward protest, reform, or passive acceptance (Matejova, 2023). However, existing research remains limited in its engagement with recent large-scale disasters and comparative perspectives between national and international media. Comparative analyses of recent flood disasters demonstrate that divergences between domestic and international media can generate substantially different interpretations of accountability and vulnerability (Khawaja et al., 2025). To date, there has been no systematic framing study grounded in Entman's (1993) analytical functions that interrogates how Indonesian online media normalised the 2025 Sumatra floods as 'natural' while marginalising structural accountability and governance responsibility.

This gap is particularly significant given that the 2025 Sumatra floods generated strong public narratives linking deforestation, oil palm expansion, and extractive industries to disaster risk, as reflected in media reports and advocacy sources that highlight upstream logging and plantation pressures (CNBC Indonesia, 2025b; Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup, 2025; Satria, 2025). Simultaneously, official discourse often foregrounds extreme weather and emergency responses (BBC News Indonesia, 2025b). It remains unclear how the media balanced narratives that blamed nature, such as rainfall intensity and climatic anomalies, with those that raised structural and policy-related issues, including mining and plantation permits, spatial planning, and environmental supervision. It is also unknown how the government was positioned within these narratives: as a causal actor, crisis manager, or victim of uncontrollable natural forces.

Based on this context, this study focuses on framing practices in Indonesian online media coverage, rather than international reporting, to examine how flood causality and accountability were constructed during the 2025 Sumatra disaster, using the 2025 Sumatra floods as a case study. This study examines how major Indonesian online news media explain flood causation, identify responsible actors, and represent the roles of government, corporations, and local communities in disaster narratives by addressing four research questions: (1) How do major Indonesian online news media frame the causes of floods? (2) Which actors are highlighted as being responsible? (3) How is the government represented in disaster news coverage? (4) To what extent does coverage emphasise natural factors compared to structural and policy-related explanations? Through a framing analysis of news coverage of the 2025 Sumatra floods, this study contributes to scholarship on disaster journalism, environmental communication, and media studies in Indonesia by examining whether media coverage normalise floods as unavoidable 'acts of nature' or opens space for understanding disasters as outcomes of political, economic, and environmental governance decisions, thereby shaping collective memory and public accountability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis with a framing analysis approach to examine how Indonesian online news media presented the causes, responsibilities, and governance of the 2025 Sumatra floods. A qualitative design was selected because the study does not aim to measure media effects on audiences but rather to analyse how meaning is produced through language, issue emphasis, and the representation of actors within news texts. Framing analysis is particularly appropriate for this purpose, as it enables the systematic identification of how the media define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and propose remedies in disaster coverage (Entman, 1993).

The dataset consists of 56 news articles published between 1 and 10 December 2025, a period identified as the peak of media attention following the floods. This timeframe was chosen to capture the dominant narratives during the emergency phase, when framing effects are most salient and news production is most intensive. Articles were collected from seven major Indonesian online news outlets with national reach and consistent disaster reporting during the study period. To ensure the transparency of corpus construction, the distribution of articles across these outlets is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of news articles by outlet (n = 56)

News outlet	Number of articles (n)
CNBC Indonesia	10
CNN Indonesia	11
Tempo.co	11
Detik.com	10
Kompas.com	8
Tribunnews.com	3
Liputan6.com	3
Total	56

Source: Author (2025)

As shown in Table 1, the dataset is drawn primarily from high-readership portals such as CNBC Indonesia, CNN Indonesia, Tempo.co, Detik.com, and Kompas.com, complemented by Tribunnews.com and Liputan6.com to capture broader mainstream coverage. This composition reflects the agenda-setting influence of major national outlets while allowing for variations in reporting styles and framing emphasis across Indonesian online news media.

These outlets were selected purposively based on three criteria: national reach and agenda-setting influence, regular coverage of environmental and disaster-related issues, and the accessibility of full text online archives. International media reports were used contextually in the discussion for comparative interpretation but were not included in the dataset subjected to coding or frequency analysis. News articles were retrieved through keyword-based searches using search engines and internal search functions of each media outlet. Articles were primarily retrieved using neutral flood-related keywords such as 'Sumatra floods', 'Aceh', 'North Sumatra', and 'West Sumatra'. Additional terms, including 'extreme rainfall', 'evacuation', and 'disaster response' were used to capture the breadth of emergency reporting. Keywords such as 'palm

oil', 'mining', and 'logging' were applied only as supplementary checks to ensure that structurally oriented reports were not missed, rather than as the main basis for the corpus construction.

The articles were included if they reported directly on the Sumatra floods which contained information related to causes, impacts, actors, responsibility, or policy responses, and were written as news reports. However, the articles are excluded if they were opinion pieces, editorials, reader comments, photo-only publications, or duplicated syndicated content without substantive textual variation. When multiple articles reported the same event, each was treated as a separate unit of analysis if the framing emphasis or narrative structure differed. The unit of analysis was the individual news article, with the analysis focusing on the full textual content, including headlines, leads, and body text, as these elements collectively contribute to framing effects. Visual elements such as photographs or videos were not coded because the study concentrated on textual framing and narrative construction.

Coding followed a directed approach, informed by framing theory and previous studies on disaster and environmental journalism. In line with Entman's emphasis on salience, frames were coded based on their narrative prominence: explanations foregrounded in headlines, leads, and repeated emphasis across the article were treated as the dominant frames. When multiple frames appeared within a single text, the primary frame was identified as the one most strongly organising the problem definition and responsibility attribution, while secondary frames were recorded when mentioned only briefly or positioned as background context.

Prior to the analysis, four analytical categories were defined to guide systematic coding: framing of causes, actors represented, attribution of blame or responsibility, and proposed or normalised solutions. In addition, narrative tone was noted as a descriptive attribute of these frames rather than a framing category. These categories and their operational definitions are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Framing analysis categories

Category	Description
Framing cause	Shows the causes of the flood that are highlighted in the text, for example, extreme weather, high rainfall, deforestation, oil palm expansion, spatial planning failure, or combined factors. It focuses on what is mentioned as the reason for the flood.
Actor	Identifies the actors that appear in the article, such as central/local government, communities, victims, experts, volunteers, companies, and organisations. The data were recorded in terms of who was mentioned and in what role (victim, rescuer, cause, witness).
Blame/responsibility	It shows who is blamed or exempted from responsibility for the disaster. This can be explicit (directly accused) or implicit (through narratives). Includes attribution analysis: nature, government, industrial sector, or a combination thereof.
Solution	What solutions/actions are recommended or normalised in the coverage, such as evacuation, logistical aid, suspension of mining/oil palm activities, environmental audits, ecosystem recovery, or spatial planning policies? It focuses on the types of actions that are considered necessary.

Source: Author (2025)

Note: Narrative tone (e.g. empathetic, heroic, critical) was noted as a supporting stylistic attribute accompanying dominant frames rather than as a standalone framing category. All data analysed in this study were obtained from publicly accessible news articles. No human subjects were involved, and no personal or sensitive data were collected. Therefore, formal ethical clearance was not required for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 56 Indonesian online news articles revealed consistent patterns in how the 2025 Sumatra floods were framed across causal explanations, actor visibility, responsibility attribution, and proposed responses. Rather than treating disaster coverage as a neutral record of events, these results highlight which interpretations were most salient in mainstream reporting during the emergency phase. The distribution of key categories is summarised in Table 3 to provide an overview of these dominant framing tendencies.

Table 3. Summary of framing categories in 56 news articles

Category	Dominant finding	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Framing cause	Extreme weather / heavy rain	19	33.9
	Deforestation / timber logs	16	28.6
	Oil palm expansion / mining	10	17.9
	Spatial planning / permits	7	12.5
	Combination of natural + structural	4	7.1
Dominant actors	Central government (President, Ministers, BNPB)	22	39.3
	Communities/victims	11	19.6
	Local government	9	16.1
	Oil palm/mining companies	6	10.7
	Others (NGOs/volunteers)	8	14.3
Blame / responsibility	Nature/extreme weather	21	37.5
	Oil palm/mining companies	12	21.4
	Policy/spatial planning	14	25
	Others	9	16.1
	Emergency aid/evacuation	23	41.1
Displayed solutions	Suspension of operations/permit audits	12	21.4
	Reconstruction/recovery	9	16.1
	Environmental rehabilitation	7	12.5
	Spatial planning policy	5	8.9

Source: Author (2025)

As shown in Table 3, the most frequently foregrounded causal explanation was extreme weather and heavy rainfall (33.9%), positioning floods primarily as a natural event. Structural drivers, such as deforestation and timber accumulation (28.6%), oil palm and mining expansion (17.9%), and spatial planning or permit failures (12.5%), appeared less prominently and were more often treated as secondary context rather than dominant frames.

The actor representation followed a similar pattern. Central government institutions emerged as the most visible actors (39.3%), largely through narratives of emergency coordination, field visits, and logistical responses, while affected communities appeared mainly within humanitarian storytelling (19.6%). Responsibility attribution was most frequently directed toward nature or extreme weather (37.5%), whereas industrial actors and governance-related explanations remained comparatively less salient.

The solutions normalised in coverage further reinforced the framing structure. Emergency-oriented measures, such as evacuation and aid distribution, dominated the reporting (41.1%), whereas longer-term structural interventions, including environmental rehabilitation (12.5%) and spatial planning policy reform (8.9%), received limited emphasis. Studies of post-disaster communication reveal that resilience-oriented framing frequently privileges response capacity while marginalising preventative governance reform and long-term structural transformation (Buelow et al., 2025). Taken together, these results indicate that flood reporting was organised around a dominant natural-humanitarian narrative, within which structural accountability frames were less consistently foregrounded. These distributions indicate that causality and responsibility were anchored more strongly in naturalised explanations than in governance-related critiques. To visualise the concentration of causal and responsibility frames across the dataset, Figure 1 presents the distribution of the most salient dimensions shaping the meaning of floods in news coverage.

Figure 1 illustrates that meteorological explanations and nature-based responsibility attribution were the most prominent interpretive anchors in the reporting, whereas structural and governance-related frames appeared less dominant. These empirical patterns provide the

foundation for the following discussion section, which critically examines how such framing practices normalise floods as unavoidable events and marginalises questions of structural accountability in Indonesian disaster journalism.

Overall, the results indicate that peak flood reporting was organised around a natural-humanitarian narrative centred on extreme weather and state-led emergency response. Although structural factors such as deforestation, extractive expansion, and governance failures appeared in the dataset, they were less consistently foregrounded as dominant explanatory frames. Therefore, the discussion builds on these findings to interrogate how media framing shapes public understanding of responsibility, state authority, and the limits of accountability in recurring climate-related disasters.

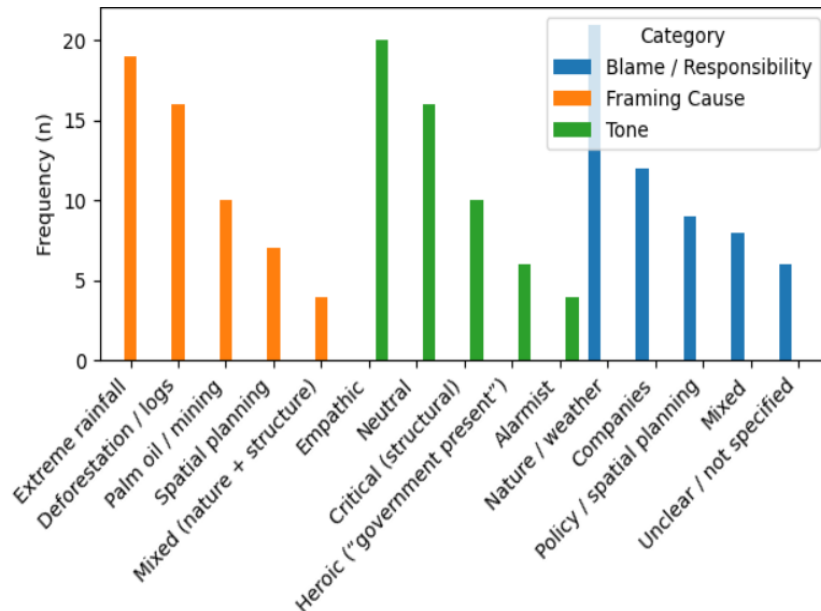


Figure 1. Distribution of causal framing and responsibility attribution in news coverage of the 2025 Sumatra floods.
 Source: Author (2025)

Weather as meteorological alibi and discursive erasure

Flood coverage of the 2025 Sumatra disaster was overwhelmingly organised around meteorological explanations, with extreme rainfall being repeatedly positioned as the primary cause of catastrophe. As indicated in Table 3 and Figure 1, the most dominant causal frame treated the floods as a natural event triggered by adverse weather, rendering the disaster intelligible through the language of climate anomaly rather than through the politics of land use and governance. In this way, 'extreme weather' functioned less as a neutral description than as a meteorological alibi: a discursive shortcut that displaced attention from the structural drivers of vulnerability.

Although deforestation, oil palm expansion, mining activities, and spatial planning failures appeared across the dataset, these explanations were rarely sustained as organising narratives. Instead, they entered coverage as secondary context, briefly acknowledged but not foregrounded as causal responsibility. Structural destruction upstream was thus made visible only intermittently, whereas rainfall remained the dominant interpretive anchor. Even when reports touched on land-use permits and disaster risk, these issues were typically positioned as contextual remarks rather than frames that demanded public accountability (Gerald, 2025). This framing practice narrows the horizon of explanation, producing floods as sudden environmental accidents rather than as outcomes of extractive development and regulatory failures.

This erasure becomes especially clear in reports of the massive accumulation of timber logs clogging rivers and sweeping into settlements in Aceh. The material traces of upstream extraction were undeniable, yet media narratives largely treated them as belated 'suspicions' rather than as evidence demanding accountability (CNBC Indonesia, 2025a). Such coverage illustrates how structural causes like logging and land exploitation are often acknowledged only

after a catastrophe has already unfolded, while earlier reporting continues to shelter disaster under the safer and less politically threatening language of weather.

The repeated privileging of meteorological causality reflects a broader tendency in disaster journalism to normalise crises through naturalisation. By foregrounding rainfall and backgrounding governance, media coverage directs moral judgement away from institutions, permits, and corporate interests that shape flood risk. In Entman's (1993) terms, the problem is defined as an emergency of nature, the cause is diagnosed as climate extremity, and structural accountability is rendered less salient. Consequently, disasters are framed as unavoidable events rather than politically produced conditions of risk.

Moreover, this weather-centred narrative is reinforced through crisis reporting routines that prioritise emergency response and state visibility. Coverage of evacuation logistics and aid distribution such as reports highlighting the Ministry of Social Affairs' assistance often foregrounded humanitarian mobilisation while leaving upstream governance failures unexamined (Tempo, 2025). International scholarship shows that such 'response narratives' strengthen the image of the state as an effective crisis manager, even as they blur questions of long-term responsibility and institutional culpability (Boin et al., 2016).

Rather than simply privileging rainfall as a convenient explanation, this meteorological framing operates as a discursive strategy that shields institutions, permits, and extractive actors from scrutiny. By repeatedly anchoring disaster causality in weather, mainstream reporting erases structural accountability, transforming governance failure into a natural misfortune. This is not an innocent imbalance of emphasis but a narrative displacement through which floods are made politically untouchable. Within this representational environment, the media does not merely describe catastrophe; it clears the ground for the next move: staging the state not as an implicated actor, but as a heroic rescuer. Floods are thus narrated not as evidence of regulatory violence upstream but as an emergency spectacle downstream, where instant aid, official visits, and humanitarian imagery bury the forensic traces of extractive permits beneath blankets, rice sacks, and media-ready compassion.

Blame attribution and the rescue spectacle in mainstream flood reporting

Rather than operating as a neutral arena for tracing responsibility, mainstream coverage of the 2025 Sumatra floods actively managed blame by steering causal attention away from governance and toward nature itself. Across the dataset, extreme weather was the primary explanatory anchor, whereas oil palm expansion, mining activities, and spatial planning failures were consistently relegated to secondary or background frames. When structural factors appeared, they were rarely articulated as outcomes of concrete regulatory decisions, licensing regimes or enforcement failures. Instead, responsibility is diffused into abstract environmental processes, rendering accountability politically opaque.

This pattern is evident in reports that acknowledge environmental damage without sustaining it as a dominant explanatory frame. For example, the coverage of timber log-clogging rivers in Aceh referred to suspected illegal logging and mining activities; however, these accounts were routinely paired with official statements emphasising extreme rainfall as the principal trigger of flooding (CNBC Indonesia, 2025a). Although environmental degradation was not denied, media narratives stopped short of interrogating permit systems, regulatory oversight, or institutional decision-making that enabled such land-use practices. Thus, structural responsibility surfaced intermittently without being assembled into a coherent causal narrative capable of demanding public scrutiny. Research on online disaster impact reporting further suggests that fragmented narratives can weaken coherent accountability chains and diffuse policy-oriented interpretations (Bailon et al., 2025).

This displacement of responsibility was further reinforced by the sentimental and affirmative framing of state actors in the mainstream national media. Headlines such as '*Anies Mobilises Aid for Sumatra Flood Victims, Rp1.8 Billion in Donations Collected and Distributed*' (Tribunnews), '*Gibran: Distribution of Aid for Sumatra Flood Victims Accelerated*' (Kompas.com), '*Prabowo Instructs Health Minister to Deploy Medical Interns to Assist Sumatra Disaster Victims*' (Detik.com), and '*Pekanbaru City Government Distributes Humanitarian Aid to Sumatra Flood Victims*' (Tempo.co) foregrounded the government's presence through narratives of care, decisiveness, and moral responsibility. The dominant sentiment in these reports was overtly positive, constructing the state as responsive and compassionate while leaving the institutional origins of

flood vulnerability unexamined. Comparative research on flood coverage in other national contexts likewise demonstrates how positive news cultures may foreground governmental responsiveness while minimising systemic critique (N. Li & Ting, 2025). These headlines turn relief gestures into media-ready performances that recurrently displace accountability and redirect attention toward the spectacle, transforming governance presence into a moral substitute for structural explanation. Across outlets, the performance was stylistically varied but narratively convergent. Tribunnews tended to personalise rescue through named political figures and donation metrics, Kompas.com and Detik.com emphasised managerial authority and acceleration commands, while CNBC Indonesia foregrounded elite visibility (*apology/turun langsung*) and CNN Indonesia often staged accountability as a future-facing policy gesture (*evaluasi izin*). However, these different registers still centred on state presence as the primary story and left structural causality in the background.

Even when potentially critical issues were introduced, they were framed in a way that deferred accountability. Reports such as *'Bahil to Evaluate Mining Permits Following Major Sumatra Flood Disaster'* (CNN Indonesia) positioned extractive permits as future matters for review rather than as causal factors requiring retrospective scrutiny. Similarly, coverage like *'Vice President Gibran Visits Sumatra Flood Victims, Issues Public Apology'* (CNBC Indonesia) framed apologies and physical presence as sufficient moral responses. In these narratives, governance responsibility was absorbed into gestures of concern and promises of evaluation rather than articulated as institutional failure.

Within this framing logic, 'blaming nature' operates as a discursive mechanism through which responsibility is managed rather than confronted. Critical claims that floods constituted a 'policy disaster rather than a natural disaster' appeared mainly through quotations from experts or activists, but these statements rarely shaped the overall narrative. Recent analyses of flood reporting similarly show how resilience rhetoric and state-centred narratives can dilute sustained political and economic accountability in mainstream media (Raza et al., 2025). Instead, responsibility was softened through vague references to 'environmental damage' which failed to trace a clear chain of accountability linking land-use decisions, regulatory failures, and disaster risk. Thus, communities were not portrayed as suffering solely because of nature. However, media coverage stopped short of explicitly connecting vulnerability to governance choices, consistent with the argument that disasters emerge from socially produced risk (Kelman, 2022). Similar patterns have been identified beyond Indonesia, where disaster reporting normalises crises through event-centred and humanitarian narratives, while the political and economic drivers of vulnerability remain weakly articulated (Bailón et al., 2021).

From a framing perspective, repeated emphasis on natural triggers while marginalising policy-related causes directs moral judgment away from institutions and toward environmental inevitability. By foregrounding extreme weather and backgrounding governance processes, media coverage renders certain interpretations more salient than others, guiding audiences toward explanations that normalise disasters as unavoidable events (Entman, 1993). International research shows that when structural causes remain secondary, opportunities to question spatial planning policies and governmental accountability are significantly reduced (Olsson Gardell et al., 2015). Sociological scholarship further emphasises that disasters are expressions of governance failure, as risk distribution is shaped by decisions regarding land use, regulation, and economic priorities (Tierney, 2014). When these connections fail to coalesce into dominant frames, disasters are more likely to be understood as spontaneous phenomena rather than as consequences of political and economic choices (Schäfer & Painter, 2020). While some articles acknowledged structural factors more explicitly, these instances did not constitute dominant or sustained frames across the overall coverage. Here, 'structural factors' refer to governance and political-economic conditions shaping flood risk, including land-use permits, extractive industries, regulatory oversight, and spatial planning decisions, rather than abstract social structures or power relations.

Epistemological consequences and international contrast

Rather than merely reflecting events, domestic disaster journalism surrounding the 2025 Sumatra floods actively shaped the conditions under which the disaster was understandable. Indonesian online media did not simply prioritise certain angles; they produced an epistemic closure in which floods were rendered understandable primarily as natural emergencies requiring immediate humanitarian response. Within this framing environment, extreme weather and rescue operations emerged as the dominant interpretive anchors, while questions of governance, permits, and extractive responsibility were pushed to the margins of public knowledge.

This epistemic closure was produced through media logic that privileges emotional proximity, visual dramatisation, and production speed (Altheide, 2016). In such high-velocity information environments, research on disaster-related misinformation further demonstrates that accelerated crisis reporting environments can amplify simplified narratives while crowding out complex structural explanations (Hilberts et al., 2025). News values favouring drama, personalisation, and immediacy made scenes of destroyed houses, displaced residents, and evacuation efforts more visible than explanations of regulatory processes or spatial planning policies. Media scholarship on climate-related disasters highlights how storytelling conventions privilege immediacy and emotional resonance over sustained structural investigations (Buoncompagni, 2024). Such coverage reflects what has been described as an 'emergency imaginary', in which immediacy, rescue, and short-term response dominate crisis reporting at the expense of sustained attention to structural causes and long-term governance failures (Wright et al., 2025). Structural issues such as land-use permits, environmental supervision, and corporate accountability demand investigative time and institutional scrutiny, making them poorly aligned with fast-paced journalistic routines (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). Consequently, disaster coverage gravitated toward events and responses that could be quickly visualised and emotionally consumed.

Visual framing plays a central role in consolidating this epistemic pattern. Images of flooded settlements, collapsed bridges, and officials inspecting disaster sites generate what disaster journalism scholarship describes as 'spectacular suffering', prioritising emotional impact over structural accountability (Allan, 2014; Pantti et al., 2012). Such visual narratives transform floods into consumable humanitarian events, where human tragedy and state presence become the focal points of meaning. Comparable framing tendencies have been observed in the coverage of volcanic and climate-related disasters, where dramatic imagery and official briefings frequently overshadow deeper causal analysis (Moncada et al., 2024). Thus, emotional framing did not merely accompany reporting but actively structured how causality was understood, shifting attention away from slow-moving governance processes toward dramatic moments of loss and rescue.

The emotional appeal of coverage further displaces causal enquiry. Human-interest narratives of families surviving with limited resources, isolated villages, and dramatic evacuations mobilised empathy while discouraging deeper interrogation of why such vulnerability existed in the first place. When attention shifted from planning and regulation to images of suffering and aid distribution, floods were framed as humanitarian emergencies rather than as outcomes of political and economic decisions. Crisis communication research demonstrates that response-oriented framing narrows public attention to immediate care while weakening engagement with prevention, policy reform, and accountability (Houston et al., 2014). This pattern is consistent with the findings that collective mobilisation narratives in disaster communication can privilege cohesion and response performance while diverting attention from upstream risk production and long-term preparedness reform (Das et al., 2025).

Crucially, this epistemic narrowing cannot be explained by journalistic routines or production constraints alone. The contrast with international media coverage demonstrates that alternative framings were possible and actively practiced. International reporting more frequently situated the Sumatra floods within the broader contexts of climate change, production systems, and environmental governance, explicitly linking extreme weather to global warming, extractive industries, and regulatory failure (Nangoy & Widiyanto, 2025; Nirnanjan, 2025; Rowlands, 2025). Reports foregrounded alleged mining permit violations and industrial pressures on ecosystems, framing casualties and damage as inseparable from political and economic decisions rather than as isolated natural events.

This international contrast functions as an epistemic control group. This reveals that the domestic media reliance on weather-based and humanitarian frames reflects not unavoidable production limits but a patterned form of narrative selection that shields governance and extractive actors from scrutiny. While international audiences were invited to understand floods through the lenses of climate governance and industrial responsibility, domestic audiences were largely confined to a reality structured around empathy, immediacy, and state-led rescue (Khawaja et al., 2025).

The divergence between national and international framing is therefore not merely stylistic but epistemological. Domestic reporting framed floods as humanitarian and meteorological events, while international coverage situated them within systems of production, policy, and environmental governance. Through this selective framing, Indonesian disaster journalism did not simply 'focus' on weather; it functioned as part of a framing process that recurrently stabilised a reality in which nature appeared as the primary cause and the state as the only conceivable agent of response. In Entman's (1993) terms, problem definition and causal diagnosis were repeatedly oriented toward nature and emergency, rendering governance responsibility less salient and difficult to articulate.

Within this epistemic environment, questions regarding prevention, permit regimes, and regulatory reform remain peripheral. Comparative analyses of media coverage of urban flood mitigation policies similarly indicate that spatial planning and infrastructural governance debates tend to receive limited discursive space in fast-paced news cycles (L. Li et al., 2026). Media framing thus operated as a discursive enclosure that delimited what could be publicly known, debated, and contested in relation to the floods. By foregrounding weather and response while marginalising governance and accountability, disaster journalism shaped not only how the floods were reported but also how responsibility, risk, and future possibilities were imagined within public discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Indonesian online news coverage of the 2025 Sumatra floods did not merely operate as a neutral arena for reporting disaster impacts but functioned as a powerful discursive apparatus through which responsibility, causality, and governance were selectively made visible or obscured. Through a qualitative framing analysis of 56 news articles from major mainstream outlets, including CNBC Indonesia, CNN Indonesia, Tempo.co, Detik.com, Kompas.com, Tribunnews.com, and Liputan6.com, the findings reveal a consistent pattern across platforms in which floods were predominantly rendered intelligible as natural and humanitarian emergencies rather than as outcomes of political-economic and regulatory decisions. This cross-platform consistency did not mean identical coverage: Tribunnews leaned toward personalised figure-centred mobilisation, Kompas.com and Detik.com privileged administrative speed and command narratives, CNBC Indonesia amplified elite presence and affective gestures, and CNN Indonesia frequently framed accountability as prospective review (*evaluasi*) rather than retrospective responsibility. Despite these stylistic differences, the shared narrative centre remained meteorological causality plus state-led rescue, with structural drivers being recurrently relegated to context. In other words, variation occurred at the level of narrative style and actor emphasis, not at the level of problem definition or causal diagnosis, which remained structurally aligned across the outlets.

Despite differences in journalistic style and political tone, flood reporting was consistently organised around meteorological causality and emergency response. Extreme rainfall was the dominant explanatory anchor, while structural factors related to deforestation, extractive industries, land-use permits, and spatial governance were recurrently marginalised or relegated to contextual remarks. Rather than being developed as organising frames of accountability, these structural conditions appeared intermittently and without sustained causal articulation. This pattern did not merely limit visibility; it enclosed public understanding within a naturalised horizon of disaster explanation.

Within this framing environment, the state was consistently positioned not as an implicated actor in the production of risk but as a moral and logistical responder to the crisis. Media narratives foregrounded the official presence, aid distribution, and emergency coordination, transforming governance into a spectacle of responsiveness. This 'saviour' framing did not simply highlight state action; it functioned to displace attention away from regulatory failure,

permit regimes, and extractive governance upstream. The government appeared most visible now of rescue while remaining structurally absent from the narratives of causation. In this sense, disaster coverage enacts a form of performative governance in which visibility substitutes for accountability.

The study further shows that these patterns were reinforced by dominant media logics prioritising emotional proximity, visual dramatisation, and immediacy. Human-interest storytelling and spectacular imagery of suffering and rescue systematically crowd out sustained scrutiny of policy decisions and governance arrangements that shape flood vulnerability. As a result, disaster journalism did not simply 'shape' public understanding but narrowed the epistemic space within which responsibility could be debated. This framing environment contributed to what can be described as a discursive enclosure, in which extreme weather remained inside the narrative frame, while permits, regulations, and political-economic interests were kept outside.

Crucially, a comparison with international media demonstrates that these framing choices cannot be explained solely by production constraints or journalistic routines. International coverage of the same disaster actively linked flooding to climate change, extractive expansion, and governance failure, illustrating that alternative explanatory frames were available and operational in real time. This contrast reveals that the dominance of meteorological and humanitarian frames in Indonesian mainstream media reflects a patterned narrative selection that functions as a mainstream information shield rather than an inevitable limitation of disaster reporting.

Taken together, these findings indicate that Indonesian disaster journalism during the 2025 Sumatra floods operated less as a watchdog of public interest and more as a discursive infrastructure that framed floods as unavoidable natural events and staged the state as the primary agent of response. By systematically marginalising structural accountability and foregrounding rescue spectacle, media coverage contributed to a patterned production of non-attention to the political and regulatory conditions that generate disaster risk. This study thus underscores the need to critically interrogate disaster framing not only as a matter of representation but also as a site where public accountability, collective memory, and the possibilities for prevention and governance reform are actively shaped and constrained.

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