

Media coverage of lepidolite and lithium carbonate in the Peruvian press

Cobertura mediática de la lepidolita y el carbonato de litio en la prensa peruana

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Abstract

This study examines how the Peruvian press covered lithium-related topics between 2018 and 2025, focusing on the symbolic construction of extractive technologies, particularly the processing of lepidolite for lithium carbonate production, within news discourse. Through a content analysis of 1,244 news items from four leading outlets—El Comercio, La República, Gestión, and RPP—the study identifies the dominant frames, source attribution patterns, and tone valences associated with media coverage. Five interpretive frames were coded: economic opportunity, geopolitical strategy, environmental concern, social conflict, and technological innovation. The findings reveal a marked predominance of the economic-opportunity frame (40.9%), particularly in business-oriented outlets, followed by the geopolitical-strategy frame (21.2%). Source attribution analysis shows that government officials (38.4%) and industry representatives (27.6%) dominated the news discourse, while indigenous communities accounted for only 4.1% of citations. Tone analysis confirms that economic and innovation frames carried positive valences, whereas environmental and social-conflict frames showed consistently negative tones. The study contributes to research on the mediatization of extractive industries in Latin America and highlights the limited representation of communities directly affected by lithium development in Andean territories.

Keywords: media coverage, lithium, lepidolite, peruvian press.

Resumen

Este estudio examina cómo la prensa peruana cubrió los temas relacionados con el litio entre 2018 y 2025, centrándose en la construcción simbólica de las tecnologías extractivas, en particular el procesamiento de lepidolita para la producción de carbonato de litio, dentro del discurso noticioso. Mediante un análisis de contenido de 1244 notas periodísticas de cuatro medios líderes —El Comercio, La República, Gestión y RPP— el estudio identifica los marcos dominantes, los patrones de atribución de fuentes y las valencias de tono asociadas a la cobertura mediática. Se codificaron cinco marcos interpretativos: oportunidad

económica, estrategia geopolítica, preocupación ambiental, conflicto social e innovación tecnológica. Los hallazgos revelan un marcado predominio del marco de oportunidad económica (40,9 %), particularmente en los medios de orientación empresarial, seguido del marco de estrategia geopolítica (21,2 %). El análisis de atribución de fuentes muestra que los funcionarios gubernamentales (38,4 %) y los representantes de la industria (27,6 %) dominaron el discurso noticioso, mientras que las comunidades indígenas representaron apenas el 4,1 % de las citas. El análisis de tono confirma que los marcos económicos y de innovación presentaron valencias positivas, mientras que los marcos ambientales y de conflicto social mostraron tonos consistentemente negativos. El estudio contribuye a la investigación sobre la mediatización de las industrias extractivas en América Latina y pone de relieve la limitada representación de las comunidades directamente afectadas por el desarrollo del litio en los territorios andinos.

Palabras clave: cobertura mediática, litio, lepidolita, prensa peruana.

Introduction

The global transition toward renewable energy has placed lithium at the center of contemporary economic and political debates. As a key component of batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage systems, lithium has been described as the «white gold» of the 21st century (Riofrancos, 2020; Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022). South America particularly the so-called Lithium Triangle formed by Argentina, Bolivia and Chile holds more than half of the world's identified lithium resources, a circumstance that has positioned the region at the heart of geopolitical disputes around critical minerals (Barandiarán, 2019; Sanchez-Lopez, 2023). Although Peru has historically been excluded from this geographic configuration, recent reports on lepidolite deposits in the Puno region particularly in the Falchani and Macusani districts have begun to draw attention to the country's potential as a future producer of lithium carbonate (Macroconsult, 2023; Gamio, 2022). This shift has triggered an unprecedented interest from international investors, multilateral agencies and Peruvian policy-makers, who increasingly frame lithium and its associated extractive technologies as a strategic asset for national development.

How this strategic asset is publicly understood, however, depends not only on its material or geopolitical value, but also on how it is represented in the news. The media play a fundamental role in shaping how the public, decision-makers, and affected communities perceive natural-resource issues. Through processes of framing, selection of sources, and assignment of tone, journalists construct interpretive maps that guide collective understanding (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). In the context of extractive industries, scholarly work has shown that media coverage tends to reproduce dominant economic and political discourses while marginalizing voices from local and indigenous communities (Bebbington et al., 2018; Conde & Le Billon, 2017). This dynamic is particularly relevant in Latin America, where extractive activities have historically generated social conflicts and environmental controversies that have shaped the public agenda for decades (Svampa, 2019; Damonte & Glave, 2016). The way news outlets construct the narrative around a new mineral therefore acquires considerable political significance, since these representations precede and condition the formation of public opinion.

Despite the growing importance of lithium in the global agenda, empirical research on how the Peruvian press covers this issue remains scarce. Existing studies have addressed the media coverage of mining conflicts more generally (Arellano-Yanguas, 2019; De Echave, 2020), but few have focused specifically on lithium and its symbolic construction in the press (Gárate, 2024). This empirical gap is significant because the discursive framing of a critical mineral influences not only public opinion but also the orientation of public policies, the patterns of foreign investment and the legitimacy of community demands (Hajer, 2005; Carvalho, 2007).

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how four leading Peruvian media outlets. El Comercio, La República, Gestión and RPP covered lithium-related topics between 2018 and 2025, with particular

attention to the symbolic construction of the extractive technologies associated with lepidolite processing and lithium carbonate production. The choice of this period is justified by two converging dynamics: on the one hand, the global acceleration of electric vehicle production and the resulting pressure on lithium supply chains (IEA, 2024); on the other, the emergence of Peruvian lepidolite discoveries in the Falchani and Macusani districts that placed the country on the radar of potential lithium carbonate producers (Macroconsult, 2023). The research is guided by three questions: (i) which interpretive frames have predominated in news coverage of lithium and its extractive technologies? (ii) which voices and institutional actors have been privileged as sources? and (iii) what tonal valences have been associated with the different frames identified?

This study makes three main contributions. First, it provides systematic empirical evidence on the construction of media discourse about a critical mineral in a country that aspires to become a future producer. Second, it adds to the regional literature on the mediatization of extractive industries by incorporating the Peruvian case, often overshadowed by the more studied Chilean, Bolivian, and Argentine examples. Third, it offers a replicable methodological framework that combines frame analysis, source attribution, and tone analysis to study coverage of critical-mineral topics in other Latin American contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research is grounded in three analytical traditions. The first is framing theory, which posits that the media not only transmit information but actively construct interpretive frameworks that emphasize certain aspects of reality while occluding others (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). The second is the literature on source attribution in news production, which has shown that the selection of voices determines whose perspectives gain public visibility and whose remain silenced (Gans, 1979; Wolfsfeld, 2011). The third is research on environmental and risk communication, particularly applied to extractive industries, where authors such as Boykoff (2012) and Hansen (2019) have shown that the framing of natural-resource issues conditions both public opinion and the orientation of regulatory policies.

Methodology

Research design

The study adopts a mixed-method content-analysis approach, combining quantitative coding of frames, sources and tone with a qualitative examination of representative news items (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This design allows for systematic measurement of patterns of media coverage while preserving sensitivity to the discursive nuances that characterize the construction of meaning around critical-mineral issues (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Sample selection

Four media outlets were selected on the basis of their reach, editorial diversity and indexation in Peruvian digital news archives: El Comercio, La República, Gestión and RPP. The selection criterion sought to represent different types of journalism a general-interest newspaper of conservative tradition (El Comercio), a general-interest newspaper of progressive orientation (La República), a specialized business outlet (Gestión) and a multi-platform medium combining radio and digital coverage (RPP). Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. *Media outlets included in the sample.*

Outlet	Type	Audience profile	News items (n)
El Comercio	Digital newspaper	General, urban, middle-upper class	327
La República	Digital newspaper	General, progressive readership	284
Gestión	Business newspaper	Business, investors, decision-makers	395

RPP	Radio + digital platform	General, broad demographic	238
Total	—	—	1,244

Corpus construction

News items were retrieved from the digital archives of each outlet through Boolean searches combining the term «litio» (lithium) with the following keywords: «Perú», «Puno», «lepidolita», «carbonato de litio», «extracción», «minería», «batería», «vehículo eléctrico», «exportación» and «Triángulo del Litio» (Peru, Puno, lepidolite, lithium carbonate, extraction, mining, battery, electric vehicle, export and Lithium Triangle). The temporal range covered the period from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2025. After removing duplicates and texts that did not address lithium as a primary topic, the final corpus consisted of 1,244 news items distributed across the four outlets.

Coding scheme

The codebook was developed through a deductive-inductive process. Initially, five interpretive frames were defined on the basis of prior literature on media coverage of extractive industries (Bebbington et al., 2018; Boykoff, 2012): (1) economic opportunity, (2) geopolitical strategy, (3) environmental concern, (4) social conflict and (5) technological innovation. The frame categories were validated through an inductive pilot reading of 50 news items, which allowed the operational definitions to be refined. The unit of analysis was the news item as a whole; each was assigned a predominant frame on the basis of its headline, lead paragraph and overall narrative orientation (Matthes, 2009).

Source attribution and tone

For each news item, all sources cited were recorded and classified into six categories: government officials, industry representatives, academic experts, NGOs and civil-society organizations, indigenous communities and international agencies. Tone was coded on a three-level scale (negative = -1, neutral = 0, positive = 1) following the procedure proposed by Lengauer et al. (2012). Tone scores were aggregated to obtain averages by outlet and by frame.

Intercoder reliability

Two trained coders independently analyzed 15 % of the corpus (n = 187 news items) to assess intercoder agreement. Krippendorff's alpha coefficients reached 0.84 for frames, 0.91 for source categorization and 0.79 for tone, all within the thresholds recommended by (Krippendorff, 2018). Discrepancies were resolved through joint discussion before proceeding with full corpus coding.

Results and discussion

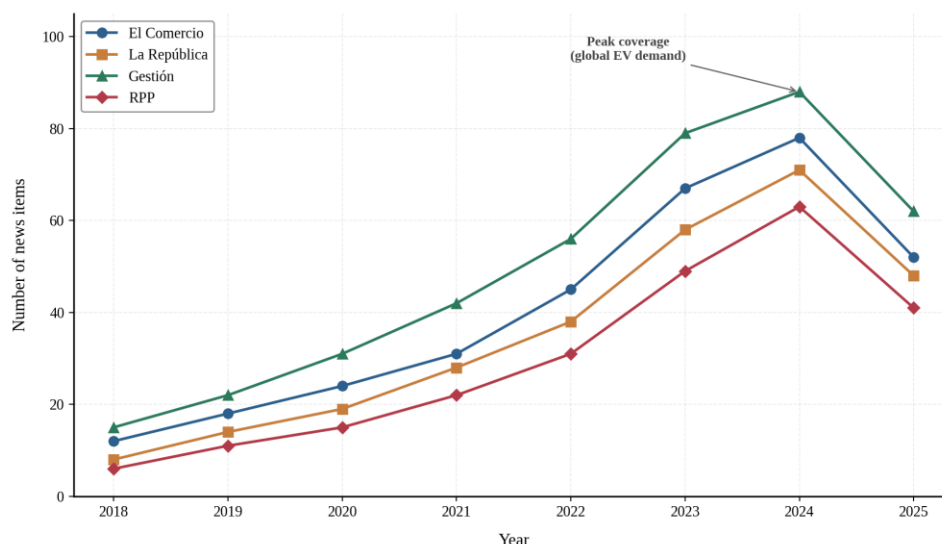
This section presents the results of the content analysis and discusses them in light of the study's research questions. The findings are organized into four dimensions: the evolution of lithium coverage over the period analyzed, the distribution of interpretive frames, the patterns of source attribution, and the tone valences associated with each frame. Together, these dimensions allow us to characterize not only the volume and rhythm of media attention to lithium, but also the symbolic construction of this critical mineral and the actors authorized to speak about it in the public sphere.

Evolution of lithium coverage

Figure 1 presents the annual evolution of news items dedicated to lithium across the four outlets. The data reveal a sustained growth from 2018 to 2024, with a particularly marked acceleration between 2022 and 2024. This trajectory coincides with key milestones in the global energy transition, including the announcement of ambitious electrification targets by the European Union and the entry into force of incentives for electric vehicle production in the United States (IEA, 2024; Riofrancos, 2020). The slight decline observed in 2025 may be associated with a relative price stabilization in international lithium

markets and a partial saturation of coverage following the initial novelty cycle (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022).

Figure 1. Annual evolution of news items on lithium in four Peruvian media outlets (2018–2025).



The specialized business outlet, *Gestión*, led the volume of publications throughout the period analyzed, reaching 88 news items in 2024. This pattern is consistent with the literature on business-press specialization, which tends to amplify the coverage of issues with high investment relevance (Picard, 2014; Curran et al., 2016). *El Comercio* occupied the second position, while *La República* and *RPP* displayed similar but lower trajectories, reflecting their editorial focus on broader audiences rather than business-oriented coverage.

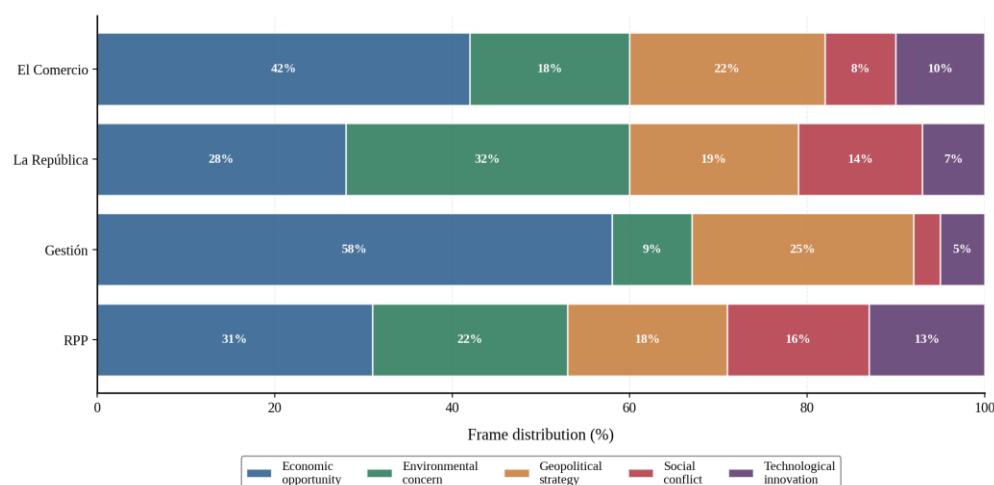
Dominant interpretive frames

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the distribution of interpretive frames across the four outlets. The economic-opportunity frame dominated the coverage overall (40.9 %), followed by geopolitical strategy (21.2 %), environmental concern (18.2 %), social conflict (10.4 %) and technological innovation (9.3 %). These results are consistent with previous findings on the framing of extractive industries in Latin America, where the productivist and developmentalist narrative tends to prevail over alternative interpretations (Svampa, 2019; Damonte & Glave, 2016).

Table 2. Distribution of interpretive frames in the total corpus ($n = 1,244$).

Frame category	Description	Frequency	%
Economic opportunity	Lithium as growth, investment, exports	509	40.9
Geopolitical strategy	South American Lithium Triangle, foreign investment	264	21.2
Environmental concern	Ecological impact, water resources, biodiversity	226	18.2
Social conflict	Indigenous communities, protests, mining disputes	129	10.4
Technological innovation	Batteries, electric vehicles, processing methods	116	9.3
Total	—	1,244	100.0

Figure 2. *Distribution of interpretive frames by media outlet (relative percentages).*



The frame distribution reveals substantial variation across outlets. Gestión concentrated 58 % of its coverage on the economic-opportunity frame, with only 9 % devoted to environmental concern—a configuration consistent with its business orientation. La República, by contrast, displayed a more balanced distribution, with 32 % devoted to environmental concern and 14 % to social conflict, reflecting an editorial line more attentive to the social dimensions of extractive activities (De Echave, 2020; Arellano-Yanguas, 2019). El Comercio exhibited an intermediate pattern, with the economic frame (42 %) accompanied by significant attention to geopolitical strategy (22 %). RPP, finally, presented a relatively even distribution that may reflect its multi-platform character and its broader audience demographics.

Source attribution patterns

Table 3 and Figure 3a present the distribution of sources cited across the corpus. Government officials accounted for 38.4 % of total citations, followed by industry representatives (27.6 %) and academic experts (14.2 %). NGOs and civil-society organizations contributed 9.8 %, international agencies 5.9 %, and indigenous communities only 4.1 %.

Table 3. *Distribution of cited sources in the total corpus (n = 2,937 citations).*

Source	Citations (n)	%
Government officials	1,128	38.4
Industry representatives	811	27.6
Academic experts	417	14.2
NGOs / Civil society	288	9.8
International agencies	173	5.9
Indigenous communities	120	4.1
Total	2,937	100.0

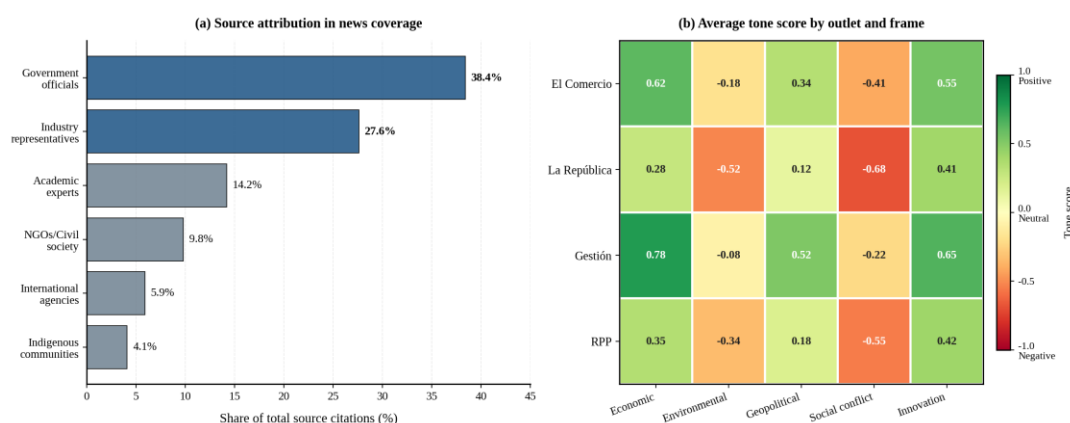
This source-attribution pattern reproduces well-known dynamics in journalism on extractive issues, where institutional and corporate voices tend to obtain preferential access to media space (Gans, 1979; Wolfsfeld, 2011). The marginal representation of indigenous communities just 4.1 % of citations is

particularly noteworthy considering that the territories with the greatest lithium potential in Peru are located in regions with a significant presence of Quechua- and Aymara-speaking communities (Damonte & Glave, 2016; Gárate, 2024). This finding aligns with the so-called «representational asymmetry» described by Bebbington et al. (2018) in the context of extractive conflicts in the Andean region.

Tone analysis by frame and outlet

Figure 3b presents the average tone scores by outlet and frame. The patterns reveal three consistent trends. First, the economic-opportunity and technological-innovation frames carried clearly positive tones across all outlets, with averages ranging from 0.28 to 0.78. Second, the environmental-concern and social-conflict frames exhibited consistently negative valences, particularly pronounced in La República (-0.52 and -0.68 respectively) and RPP (-0.34 and -0.55). Third, the geopolitical-strategy frame displayed mixed but predominantly positive tones, suggesting that the framing of Peru as a potential player in the global lithium market generated optimistic narratives about national positioning (Sanchez-Lopez, 2023; Macroconsult, 2023).

Figure 3. Source attribution and tone valence: (a) distribution of cited sources, (b) average tone score by outlet and frame.



The tone-frame correlation reveals an underlying logic of media construction: economic discourses are presented as positive opportunities, while environmental and social-conflict discourses receive treatment that emphasizes their problematic dimensions. This polarization between «positive economy» and «problematic environment-society» is characteristic of media coverage of extractive industries and has been documented in other Latin American contexts (Boykoff, 2012; Carvalho, 2007). As Hajer (2005) points out, this discursive configuration tends to depoliticize economic decisions and politicize community concerns, generating an asymmetry in the legitimacy of the different voices in the debate.

The findings of this research place Peruvian media coverage of lithium within broader patterns identified in the regional literature on the mediatization of extractive industries (Svampa, 2019; Bebbington et al., 2018). Three points deserve specific attention. First, the predominance of the economic-opportunity frame (40.9 %) reflects what Riofrancos (2023) calls the «green extractivism» discourse, in which natural-resource exploitation is legitimized through its association with the global energy transition. This narrative tends to obscure the environmental and social tensions historically linked to extractive activities (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022; Barandiarán, 2019).

Second, the marginal representation of indigenous communities (4.1 %) raises significant questions about democratic deliberation around critical-mineral policies. As Conde and Le Billon (2017) observe, the absence of community voices in the media debate not only limits the diversity of perspectives but also

affects the social legitimacy of extractive projects and the quality of public consultation processes mandated by ILO Convention 169 (De Echave, 2020).

Third, the editorial variation observed between outlets confirms that the Peruvian media landscape is not monolithic. La República's stronger attention to environmental and social-conflict frames opens spaces for alternative narratives, although these remain quantitatively subordinate to the dominant economic discourse. This editorial differentiation reflects what Curran et al. (2016) describe as productive pluralism in democratic media systems and represents a resource for the diversification of the public debate. Yet pluralism in framing does not necessarily translate into pluralism in sources: even outlets that adopt critical frames continue to draw predominantly on official and corporate voices, suggesting that the structural patterns of news production exert a stronger influence than editorial orientation alone.

A complementary reading of the findings emerges when the temporal evolution of frames is considered. The acceleration of lithium coverage between 2022 and 2024 coincided with significant policy announcements and the entry of new actors into the Peruvian lithium scene. During this period, the economic-opportunity frame intensified across all outlets, while the social-conflict frame exhibited only modest growth despite the persistence of unresolved tensions in mining regions. This asymmetry in the responsiveness of frames to the news cycle suggests that the construction of meaning around critical minerals follows a logic in which economic announcements generate cascading coverage, whereas social tensions require sustained mobilization to gain comparable attention (Wolfsfeld, 2011; Hajer, 2005). This finding aligns with the so-called «indexing hypothesis» in journalism studies, which holds that media attention tends to track the level of activity among elite institutional actors more than the intensity of grassroots concerns.

From a comparative perspective, the patterns observed in the Peruvian press differ in degree but not in kind from those documented in the press of other Andean countries. Barandiarán (2019) has shown that the framing of lithium in Chile, Argentina and Bolivia also revolves around an economic-developmental axis, with variable but persistently subordinated attention to environmental and community dimensions. The Peruvian case adds a distinctive element: the country is positioned in the discourse as an emerging player whose potential entry into the lithium market is framed primarily as an opportunity to «catch up» with its neighbors, a narrative that further reinforces the predominance of economic and geopolitical frames over alternative interpretations (Sanchez-Lopez, 2023; Gárate, 2024).

Conclusions

This study has provided a systematic analysis of how four leading Peruvian media outlets covered the issue of lithium between 2018 and 2025. The content analysis of 1,244 news items reveals consistent patterns in the framing of this critical mineral and in the construction of the actors who can legitimately speak about it in the public sphere.

Three main findings stand out. First, the economic-opportunity frame dominated the coverage (40.9 %), particularly in business-oriented outlets such as Gestión, where it reached 58 % of news items. This pattern places Peruvian media coverage within the broader «green extractivism» narrative that characterizes regional discourses on critical minerals for the energy transition (Riofrancos, 2020; Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022). Second, source attribution displayed a clear concentration on institutional voices (government officials at 38.4 % and industry representatives at 27.6 %), while indigenous communities accounted for only 4.1 % of total citations. This representational asymmetry reproduces patterns documented in previous research on extractive conflicts in the Andean region (Bebbington et al., 2018; Damonte & Glave, 2016). Third, tone analysis confirmed that economic and innovation frames carried positive valences, while environmental and social-conflict frames exhibited consistently negative tones.

These findings have implications for the practice of journalism and for public policies on critical minerals. From a journalistic standpoint, the results invite reflection on the importance of diversifying

sources and expanding the discursive frames through which extractive issues are covered. From a public-policy perspective, they raise questions about the quality of the public debate that informs critical-mineral decisions in territories with a significant presence of indigenous communities (Arellano-Yanguas, 2019; Gárate, 2024).

The methodological limitations of this study also point toward future lines of research. The exclusive focus on digital outlets leaves aside the radio and television media that retain considerable influence over rural and indigenous audiences in the Andean regions; extending the analysis to these traditional outlets would therefore offer a more complete picture of the mediatization of lithium. Likewise, the content analysis, although systematic, does not capture the reception or appropriation of media discourses by different audiences; incorporating audience-reception studies could complement the production analysis offered here, examining how different social actors appropriate and resignify media discourses on lithium (Hall, 1980; Hansen, 2019). Beyond these, comparative analyses with the press of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina would allow Peruvian media coverage to be situated within the regional configuration of the Lithium Triangle. Finally, the development of longitudinal analyses covering a longer temporal window will be necessary to evaluate how media discourse on lithium consolidates or transforms as Peru advances along its trajectory toward becoming a producer of this strategic mineral.

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