



Image matters: Climate change imagery in US, UK and Australian newspapers



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ABSTRACT

Images act to draw in audiences through vivid and emotive portrayals, and in doing so, they facilitate both cognitive and affective processing. Yet images are not neutral – they can portray highly ideological messages, and act as normative statements portraying a particular way of viewing the world. Whilst climate imagery proliferates, media analysis of climate to date has focused almost exclusively on textual representations. Here, a two-part study was designed to explore climate change imagery in newspapers. First, a content analysis of visual images attached to online articles about climate change during 2010 from 13 US, UK and Australian newspapers, was undertaken. Analysis of the image concourse ($n = 1603$) shows broad patterns across all newspapers in the visualization of climate change, and sheds light on how multinational media ownership influences climate imagery portrayals. Second, a frame analysis was undertaken, by examining the composition and tone of particularly salient images in their cultural and political contexts. Together, these analyses indicate that two visual frames are prominent, a 'contested' visual frame and a 'distancing' visual frame; with Australian newspapers particularly relying on the 'contested' visual frame. These visual framings support particular interactions with the issue of climate change whilst marginalizing others, actively shaping the cultural politics of climate change in important ways.

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1. Introduction

'Everyday life in world politics is replete with images and policy makers are attuned to their power' (Campbell, 2007, p. 358). Indeed, everyday life is suffused with visual imagery – and it is not only policy makers who are attuned to their power. Media organizations are powerful institutions shaping, reproducing and consuming climate change meanings in the cultural political life of the climate change issue (Beck, 1992; Carvalho and Burgess, 2005); and a key tool for their meaning-making is the deployment of visual imagery. Geographers are increasingly interested in exploring the visual (Rose, 2003), and have much to say about the phenomena of climate change (Hulme, 2008). Yet, geographers find that the visual is little studied within climate research (Moser, 2010). This paper is part of a growing geographical interest into the visualization of climate change. It reports results from a two-part study exploring the visual framing of climate change. The study shows that there are dominant visual framings of climate change, which act to shape the cultural politics of climate change in important ways. The paper aims to show, as the title suggests, that climate imagery matters.

The paper first explores the changing media landscape, including a discussion of the growing prominence and importance of new media. The significance of the media for meaning-making is considered particularly in terms of climate change and public engagement. Second, the two-part study design is explained. Third, results are presented from the first study, a visual content analysis of climate change articles from 13 US, UK and Australian online newspapers. The visual imagery concourse was examined for trends in coverage across countries, time of year, newspaper type, newspaper ideology, and newspaper ownership. Fourth, results from the second study, a visual framing analysis of the image concourse, are described. The frame analysis examined the composition and tone of representative images, in terms of their cultural and political contexts. Fifth, the discussion links the results from the two studies to explore the similarities and differences in visual framing of climate change in terms of newspaper ownership and national climate politics. This section provides four preliminary hypotheses as to why a particular visual framing may be more dominant in some newspapers than others. Last, the conclusion suggests how these results may have implications for public engagement with climate change; and proposes several avenues of enquiry to further understanding of how visual imagery shapes the cultural politics of climate change.

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2. The media, meaning-making and power

The mass media covers a huge range of activities, from entertainment to news media. It comprises television, films, books, newspapers, magazines, radio and the internet. The mass media are constituted by a diverse and dynamic set of institutions, processes, and practices that serve as mediators between communities. The communications industry (including publishers, editors and journalists) produce and interpret images and imaginaries in order to engage people (O'Neill and Boykoff, 2011).

Two overarching changes in the media landscape are of interest to the newspaper research presented here. First, media institutions are increasingly part of aggressively market-led media conglomerates, who have access to global markets, allowing instantaneous integration of messages across multiple platforms and technologies (Gamson et al., 1992; Arsenault and Castells, 2008). This concentration of media ownership into the hands of a few global media corporations has raised concerns over the homogenization of images and imaginaries, which acts to concentrate and normalize existing power relationships (Gamson et al., 1992). Second, since the mid-1990s, the media landscape has been transformed, as traditional mass media channels, including newspapers, have lost ground to new media sources. Media organizations owning traditional mass media newspapers have therefore attempted to develop new media counterparts alongside traditional print newspapers. In terms of where people get news information, online media represents an increasingly important source of news, with 2010 the first year that more people accessed news online than through printed newspapers (Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, 2012). This makes the study of new media sources in and of themselves increasingly important.

The discourses arising from the media represent an important part of the process by which people construct meaning (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) about the issue of climate change. This is a negotiated process between media and audiences – it is not that audiences act as a passive receptor on whom the media 'work their magic' (Domke et al., 2002; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), but that the media offer audiences an array of interpretative packages (which include metaphors, images and moral appeals) to help conceptualize an issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). The media help to set the boundaries of debate, and to trigger (and perhaps widen) political discussion amongst citizens (Kim et al., 1999) – though the opposite is also true, in that the media can constrict the terms of an issue by influencing what is not discussed. Thus, media coverage of climate change does not determine how people engage with climate change, but it does shape the possibilities for engagement (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005).

2.1. Framing climate change

The concept of framing has been used by scholars in diverse fields to investigate how the media and audiences construct, shape and reinforce particular perceptions of news events (Fahmy, 2010), with several studies investigating media framing of climate change through texts (Boykoff, 2007; Brossard et al., 2004; Olausson, 2009; Shehata and Hopmann, 2012; Trumbo, 1996). Frames are defined as 'organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world' (Reese et al., 2003: 11). There are two overarching types of frames (Scheufele, 1999): those that shape how news is presented, 'media frames', and those that audiences use to interpret news, 'individual frames'. Following Scheufele's typology, this study investigates (visual) media frames as the dependent variable, by examining climate change imagery in newspapers.

The mass media actively set frames that viewers use to interpret events (Scheufele, 1999). Media frames suggest to viewers

what the very essence of an issue is (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Framing is not synonymous with 'spinning' an issue (Nisbet, 2009), but about understanding how the communications process necessitates some aspects of an issue being selected for inclusion, and made more salient (Entman, 1993), at the expense of others. Nevertheless, if particular frames become dominant and unchallenged, they can limit both the participation of other actors in a debate as well as the amount of media coverage an issue receives (as the terms of the debate are already fixed); with dominant frames even able to affect regulatory options (Nisbet and Huges, 2006). Scheufele (1999) suggests five factors which may influence how an issue is framed: social norms and values, organizational pressures (including securing advertising) and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientation of journalists.

Evidence for these influencing factors has been found in news media reporting on climate change, for example: through the influence of first- and second-order journalistic norms including personalization and balance (Boykoff, 2007), in the role newspaper ideology plays (Carvalho, 2007; Dirix and Gelders, 2010), the influence of dominant industries (Dispensa and Brulle, 2003) and in journalistic practices (Brossard et al., 2004).

2.2. Visual framing

Images have a number of qualities which help to communicate meaning. As Campbell (2007, p. 380) states in the context of war photography: 'the plethora of refugee photographs does not just tell us that there are millions displaced. They tell us how we should feel'. Images are often vivid and emotive (Joffe, 2008), engaging both the experiential (Leiserowitz, 2006) and cognitive processing system (Domke et al., 2002). Images help to draw viewers in, and to aid in remembering news (Graber, 1990). News images also appear to have a particularly powerful ability to trigger both conscious consideration of that news article, but also to prompt 'carry over' of these considerations to thinking about other related issues (Domke et al., 2002). Images can transcend linguistic and geographical barriers (Popp and Mendelson, 2010), provided readers share cultural references which allow them to interpret the image.

Visual framing begins because it is impossible to capture complex reality in one image (Messaris and Abraham, 2001) and continues through to the editorial process, when, normally, editors or section editors (rather than the journalist) select an image from a pool of possibilities (Fahmy, 2005). This may mean that the visual framing of an article can differ to that of offered by the textual information (DiFrancesco and Young, 2011). The whole process, from image creation to image selection, is highly ideological (Hall, 1973). Evidence for visual framing has been found in news stories about war (Popp and Mendelson, 2010) and health (Messaris and Abraham, 2001), where subtle visual clues have promoted ideological or racist views – themes that would 'never pass newsroom muster' in textual form (Coleman, 2010, p. 235). This is because images hold particular qualities which differ from text (Messaris and Abraham, 2001): first, images are analogical (they are based on similarity; whereas words rely on social convention). Second, they lack an explicit propositional syntax (causality has to be implied rather than stated, and causality relies on the reader making intuitive sense of implicit meanings). Third, photographs hold particular power in that they are indexical (they hold a certain authenticity that other man-made images cannot ever hold; as they are viewed as representing a direct connection to that which is signified, rather than viewed as a constructed representation of reality).

Images then, and especially photographs, come to be seen as 'speaking the truth', and are readily absorbed in an unmediated manner (Joffe, 2008). Visual framing studies (Coleman and Wasike, 2004; Fahmy, 2010; Messaris and Abraham, 2001; Popp and

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