



Original research article

America's first climate change refugees: Victimization, distancing, and disempowerment in journalistic storytelling



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Climate change
Relocation
United States
Narratives

ABSTRACT

The article to follow aims to delve deeper into the underexplored but critical role visual representations play in constructing a public narrative of climate change relocation in the United States. Through a visual discourse analysis of American news sources that portray 'America's first climate change refugees,' the article explores how media outlets are using images to construct perceptions of meaning, purpose, and power in stories of climate relocation. It argues that journalistic storytelling of sea level rise and relocation has employed a formula of crisis, 'othering,' and victimization in representing the nexus of environmental change and culture in communities across the United States. Through this, the article shows that images and aesthetic codes have constructed and conditioned perceptions of agency in America's climate discourse that distance and disempower at-risk coastal communities from the reader.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Guardian discovered America's first climate refugees in Newtok, a riverside village off the Bearing Sea in Alaska [1]. In December of last year, Scientific American identified America's first climate change refugees off the coast of Virginia on a small Chesapeake island called Tangier [2]. Four months later, the New York Times published a front page article featuring America's first climate refugees on the Ile de Jean Charles in Louisiana, where a community had made the impossible decision to leave their lives, livelihoods, and history behind in search of higher land [3]. Finding the front lines of climate change in America isn't difficult. Media coverage of the country's first climate refugees has extended across national and international geographies of publishing over the past five years. And yet, while accounts of climate relocation in the United States are written and printed recurrently, most readers will never physically visit America's eroding edges. Rather, they come to know the story of relocation through visual media narratives.

Photographs, maps, and newspaper illustrations serve as referents for readers to make meaningful judgments and legitimate knowledge claims about coastal communities in need of retreat. Images of eroding shorelines and sea level rise found in news articles like those mentioned above enable both the general public and policymakers to examine, order, and evaluate the plight of relocation. But visual storytelling is not an objective reflection of reality or truthfulness. Like art itself, journalistic images are engendered by their creators' biases and patrons' desires [4]. They present a subjective, curated narrative produced to

buttress broader strategic political initiatives and themes. Each selective compositional or contextual element evokes a specific perspective about sea level rise and relocation dependent on particular visibilities and invisibilities. In consequence, by choosing what to represent, and how, journalists allow a limited and specific kind of understanding of climate relocation in America, with very real political and ethical consequences [5–7].

The article to follow aims to delve deeper into the underexplored but critical role visual representations play in constructing a public narrative of climate change relocation in the United States. Through a visual discourse analysis of American news sources that portray 'America's first climate change refugees,' the article explores how media outlets are using images to construct perceptions of meaning, purpose, and power in stories of climate relocation. It will argue that journalistic storytelling of sea level rise and relocation has employed a formula of crisis, 'othering,' and victimization in representing the nexus of environmental change and culture in communities across the United States. Through this, the article will show that images and aesthetic codes have constructed and conditioned perceptions of agency in America's climate discourse that distance and disempower at-risk coastal communities from the reader.

The article is rooted in the intersection of political perception and visual representation taken from the fusion of several post-structuralist postulations on the utility of aesthetics, chief among them born from the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, and the History of Art itself. Of particular importance is the work of Edward Said and Johannes Fabian in the geographical, cultural, and temporal

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.033>

Received 11 November 2016; Received in revised form 23 May 2017; Accepted 30 May 2017

Available online 21 July 2017

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distancing of ‘others’ in imagined geographies [8,9]. Each of these fields provides a layer of understanding on how images govern the seeing and believing of both the individual and society. Overall, the article aims to fill a gap in current scholarship on the importance of visual imagery and storytelling in climate change relocation in the United States in order to better understand the interaction of narrative, perception, and agency in domestic climate mobility discourses.

2. Deconstructing the narrative: a theoretical lens for visual storytelling analysis

Visual discourse analysis allows for an investigation into how normative perspectives are built towards effecting agency through the power of media relocation storytelling. As a form of knowledge, the visual plays an essential role in the framing of reality by producing persuasive accounts about the structure and organization of the natural and social worlds [10]. In this way, visual discourses of American climate-induced relocations are the means by which value judgments are made, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible in the overarching climate debate. This is because discourse theory assumes that society’s ways of visualizing do not neutrally reflect our world, identities, and social relations, but instead play an active role in creating and changing them [5,6]. Reality, in this sense, can be scripted, twisted, and framed based on imagery to show (or obstruct) what is known and accepted. Aesthetics, in their entirety, are part of the overall social milieu that engenders valuation of geographies and perception of politicized events, such as climate-induced relocation. As argued in Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power, images supply a menu of models from which political entities and politically engaged publics make their choices [11]. The beliefs and observations on which those decisions are based are not objective, but rather colored by the ideology or values imbued into every photograph that is then multiplied, extended, and reinforced by all visual experiences [12].

It is those ideologies and values instilled in the contours of media photographs that demand further consideration so as to understand how journalistic storytelling has constructed perceptions of meaning, purpose, and power in stories of climate relocation over the past two years. In the visual analysis to follow, the underlying ideology at play is one of binary human natures – an “us” as reader and “them” as subject – and is best understood in reference to post-colonial studies. In much the same way as Edward Said expounds the binary relationship between the Orient and the Occident in *Orientalism*, here too visual and textual tropes are used to construct and manage the story of climate-induced relocation as a story of the imagined, powerless “other” [8]. The Western culture and dominating viewpoint that produced the “Orient” as feminized, open, virgin, and in need of domination can be also used to understand the relationship between reader and subject in climate relocation journalism. Said’s writing on the dependency and disenfranchising of non-white, non-Western individuals by Europeans through aesthetics extends beyond his own focus on Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies and cultures. It also exists within the West itself, as is the case of the American climate relocation story. Indigenous communities, of which Kivalina, the Ile de Jean Charles, and Shishmaref all are, garnered a similar disenfranchisement and heavy burden of colonialism as seen in *Orientalism*. Rather than being seen as equal human beings, Native Americans and Alaska Natives are labeled primitives, savages, and uncivilized. This is not only the case legally and politically with devastating policy decisions like the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and American Indian boarding schools, but I will argue it is also the case in the visual imaging of these communities as a disempowered other. Such detrimental legacies of colonial power dynamics of looking, perceiving, and evaluating indigenous, peripheral communities as a disempowered “other” underscore the journalistic storytelling of climate-induced relocation today.

As the identity of the “other” is created through normative

representations, whoever is holding the camera constructs the public’s knowledge about Native communities at risk to climate changes, and in turn how they value and whom they deem powerful in the story of relocation. Through journalist’s framing of the field of visibility, producers and distributors of relocation imagery around the chosen iconic moments determine who and what is important. In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the French System* [8], Foucault discusses the function of fields of visibility as an apparatus of power. In his explanation of the panopticon, the visibility of the inmate by the anonymous watcher imbues the observer with power. This power is not only derived from creating the field of visibility, but also in constructing how to make sense of the inmate’s actions through prison rules and regulations that act as interpretation guidelines. Take, for example, an inmate trying to escape a cell in Foucault’s panopticon prison paradigm. Here, the watcher is inscribed with power in both her seeing the prisoner’s attempted escape and her active decision of its illegality [13]. Seeing, thus, is an instrument of power deployed as both a way of controlling and a way of knowing.

Taking Foucault’s work on the panopticon as a baseline, the relationship between fields of visibility and power can serve as a tool to understand the construction of the other and analyze the visuals used in this work. The discursive formation of the field of visibility conditions the seeing and imaging of American communities in need of relocation. It determines what is seen, and what goes unseen. Much like Foucault’s postulations on the connection between visibility and power, images of Kivalina, the Ile de Jean Charles, and Shishmaref that allow only a limited and specific kind of seeing through inclusion and exclusion result in different perceptions of legitimate political agency and valuation. In the analysis to follow, Foucault’s theoretical understandings of agency and fields of visibility inform how the particular visibilities of journalistic storytelling of America’s front lines of climate change are analyzed. Foucault’s theory of visibility and his considerations of power, in tandem with Said’s notions on the construction of the “other”, guide the analysis of the iconic moments to follow. Specifically, it offers a framework for understanding how the inclusion or exclusion of certain aspects of the relocation story and visibilities of indigenous agency in the dominant media narratives relate to questions of agency and political consequences on indigenous rights.

3. Three iconic moments for American relocation storytelling

Newspaper and magazine articles about relocation and climate change refugees in America have been published near-monthly over the past two years. This magnitude makes it possible to approach the research within a diverse set of external parameters. However, using every ad-hoc article published with no temporal framework can also be unwieldy and lead to a missed opportunity to delve in depth into particularly salient recurrent visual themes of relocation storytelling. Because of this, rather than analyze all relocation media publications over the past two years, the analysis instead uses three iconic moments from 2015 and 2016 to unpack the themes of crisis, othering, and victimization. This decision follows the work of Denis Gosgrove, who similarly uses visual storytelling to open up environmental issues and power dynamics in “Images and Imagination in 20th Century Environmentalism: From the Sierras to the Poles,” in *Environment and Planning* [14]. Gosgrove’s objective is to examine images that have shaped and promoted modern environmentalism. Comparable to the analysis to follow, Gosgrove uses a study of iconic images of key 20th Century environmental crisis – wilderness preservation, soil erosion, urban sprawl, nuclear testing, and global environmental change at the poles – to demonstrate his thesis. He historically contextualizes this analysis by placing each set of images within a larger frame of attitudes of American society, policy, and events of the time. In analyzing the media storytelling of American climate-induced relocation, the article will use Gosgrove’s framework of iconic images and events while placing key news articles and images within a broader historical and

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