

Getting the Picture: Visuals for Climate Change Communication



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Masterclass for the Critical Decade for Climate Action Conference, Tyndall Centre, UEA, Norwich
Tuesday 9th September 2025, 16.15-17.15



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Overview

1. Why care about images? (activity)
2. What does climate change look like? (activity)
3. How do people engage with climate images? (activity)
4. Envisioning adaptation (activity)
5. What about GenAI for creating visuals? (activity)
6. Q&A

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Why care about images?

1. Activity



Image by brgfx on Freepik

Draw 'a scientist'...

Lab coats, glasses, facial hair and laboratory equipment featured in the drawings of the youngest children.

By year 4-5 of school, the standardised image of a scientist has fully emerged and is incredibly consistent between children (and adults, including scientists).

- Only the girls drew women scientists
- At least one child per class in older years (years 3-5) alluded to secrecy, with words like: 'sikrit stuff for sikrit evinshuns' Chambers (1983)

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Why care about images?

1. Activity



AP, in Briggs (2003)

Picture 'famine' in your mind...

The notion of 'Third World' poverty, hunger, or need conjures up certain conventionalised images – a rail-thin waif, maybe with an empty rice-bowl, or a mother holding a skeletal child, a secularised, traumatised Madonna and Child – her head maybe covered, gazing at the child or perhaps the camera, eyes sunken.

Briggs (2003)

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Why care about images?

1. Activity

Finally, imagine 'AI'...



Image by Unsplash on Freepik



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Why care about images?

1



Photo by Amy Humphries on Unsplash

- Images are a fundamental part of communication:
 - Historically: rock art 40k years old, predating written language
 - Now: 5 billion photos taken everyday
- Images are a key part of 'framing' information
- Images shape the sorts of information we see (e.g. in TV news)
- Images shape how we engage with information (e.g. whether we click on a news story)

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1

Why care about images? 1



I thus started to think about these photographs less as texts and more as objects, precisely because objects are things to which things are done.
Rose (2003)

Through looking, a certain type of reality is performed:

- truth, proof, evidence
- presence/absence
- time (past, present, future)

What work is an image (or a type of image) performing in the world?

Anne Nygård on Unsplash

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Why care about (climate) images? 1

Imagery is important because:

1. Imagery is ubiquitous. It plays a key role in communication
2. Images affect **news production** (from TV to social media)
3. Images affect **news reception** (draw viewers in, aid in remembering information, influence sharing behaviour)

Climate imagery is important because:


1. Climate imagery is a key part of setting the frame for climate and environment engagement (O'Neill et al. 2013)
2. Climate/env imagery affects our emotional response to the issue, and even our behavioural intentions (e.g. influencing climate voting intentions) (Leiserowitz, 2006)
3. Despite its key role, (climate/env) imagery studied for less than text (trickier methodologically; text is privileged; Rose, 2016)



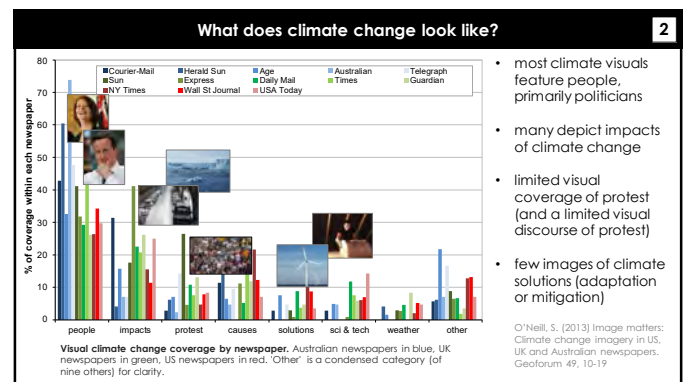
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What does climate change look like? 2. Activity

If you think of the term **climate change**, what is the first **image** that pops into your head?



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How do people engage with climate images? 3. Activity

➤ Rank the images for the statement: **"this picture makes me feel climate change is important"**

➤ Rank images from 1-6
1= most makes you feel that climate change is important
2
3
4
5
6= least makes you feel like climate change is important

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How do people engage with climate images? 3. Activity



➤ Rank the images for the statement **"this picture makes me feel climate change is important"**

➤ Rank images from 1-6 (1= most important to 6= least important)

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How do people engage with climate images? 3. Activity

➤ Rank the images for the statement:
"this picture makes me feel that I can do something about climate change"

➤ Rank images from 1-6
 1= most makes you feel you can do something
 2
 3
 4
 5
 6= least makes you feel like you can do something

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How do people engage with climate images? 3. Activity



➤ Now rank the images, for "this picture makes me feel that I can do something about climate change"
 ➤ Rank images from 1-6 (1= most to 6= least makes you feel like you can do something)

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How do people engage with climate images? 3



Sort A: 'This picture makes me feel climate change is important'
Sort B: 'This picture makes me feel that I can do something about climate change'

Q-method workshops in USA, UK, Australia

O'Neill et al. (2013) On the use of imagery for climate change engagement. *Global Environmental Change* 23, 413-421

- Results remarkably consistent both across and within country cohorts (UK, US, Aus)
- Indicates a dominant (mainstream) discourse around climate imagery: people think in similar ways about climate images
 - imagery of climate impacts promotes feelings of salience, but undermines self-efficacy
 - energy futures imagery promotes self-efficacy
 - images of politicians and celebrities strongly undermine saliency
- Images appear to either increase saliency, or promote efficacy – but not both

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Envisioning adaptation 4. Activity

➤ Two sets of images will follow

➤ For each set, note down the first few thoughts, words, or feelings which come to mind

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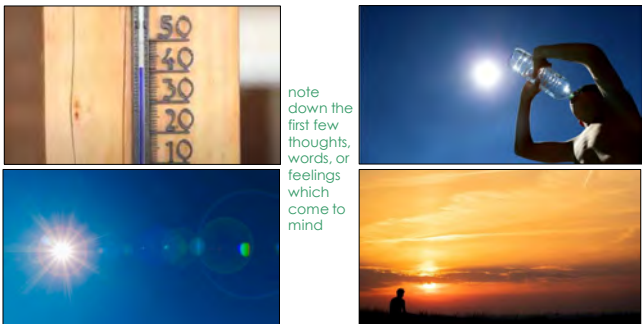
Envisioning adaptation 4. Activity



note down the first few thoughts, words, or feelings which come to mind

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Envisioning adaptation 4. Activity



note down the first few thoughts, words, or feelings which come to mind

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Envisioning adaptation 4



- Visuals play a key role in how we imagine climate change adaptation
- Study of CC + heatwave news in online news sites in the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands

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Envisioning adaptation 4



- Visuals play a key role in how we imagine climate change adaptation
- Study of CC + heatwave news in online news sites in the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands
 - Many visuals were + valenced
 - Text very rarely + valenced
 - Dissonance between text + images

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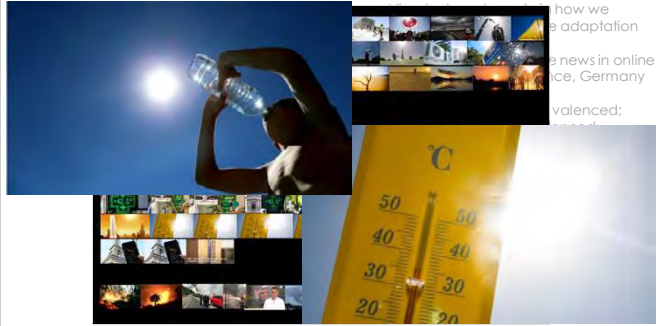
Envisioning adaptation 4



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Envisioning adaptation 4



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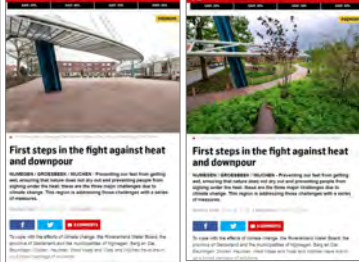
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 - Visual frame 1 = 'fun in the sun'
 - Visual frame 2 = 'idea of heat'
- 1. Displaces concerns of vulnerability - marginalises experiences of those vulnerable to heatwaves.

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Envisioning adaptation 4



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- 1. Displaces concerns of vulnerability - marginalises experiences of those vulnerable to heatwaves.
- 2. Excludes opportunities for imagining a more resilient future.

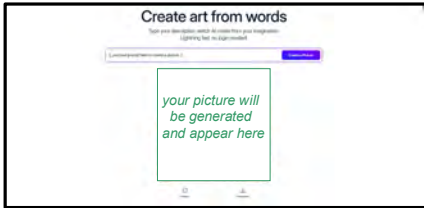
O'Neill, S., et al. (2022). Visual portrayals of fun in the sun misrepresent heatwave risks in European newspapers. *The Conversation: Science - 484*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conc.12487>

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Using GenAI tools to visualise climate change 5. Activity

➤ Open this link: <https://magicstudio.com/ai-art-generator/>

➤ Use the prompt box to create a climate change image




➤ Suggest you use "climate change" to start, but then play around with any climate-related prompt, with as much detail as you like

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Using GenAI tools to visualise climate change 5

- Potentially transformative role that generative AI (GenAI) could play in shaping climate and nature visuals.
 - practices in news-making and journalism (RISJ 2024)
 - technical, legal, ethical and moral dimensions of image-making and engagement (Johnstone 2024)
 - risk of reinforcing clichéd, stereotyped, biased, inaccurate, misleading or unethical visual content



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Using GenAI tools to visualise climate change 5

5 GenAI tools	7 news topics	3 prompt styles	105 images
Midjourney	climate change	STUDY 1 Simple prompt e.g. "climate change" heatwave	
ChatGPT	flooding	STUDY 2 Detailed prompt e.g. An award-winning newspaper photograph depicting a heatwave in the UK in 2024 due to climate change	
Generative AI by Getty Images	heatwave	STUDY 3 Story prompt e.g. Temperatures in parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire have hit all-time record highs, with some areas experiencing temperatures of more than 40C (104F) ...	
Stable Diffusion	migration		
Microsoft Copilot	Nel Zero		
	COP26		
	nature		

O'Neill, S. et al. (under review) How does GenAI "see" climate change: Exploring the challenges and opportunities of GenAI for climate visual journalism

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Using GenAI tools to visualise climate change 5

Five GenAI tools prompted with seven climate news topics, via three different prompt styles:

simple prompt (study 1) just used keywords (e.g. "climate change")

detailed prompt (study 2) also requested a style of image, and added geographic and time-based locators ("an award-winning newspaper photograph depicting flooding in the UK in 2024 due to climate change")

story prompt (study 3) used the first five paragraphs from a representative BBC news article on the topic



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Using GenAI tools to visualise climate change 5

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Conclusion 6

Climate change has something of an 'image problem'

But, visuals can represent climate change in more diverse, equitable, inclusive and responsible ways

...a nudge to start to notice (and critique) the climate images that surround us; and to reinvigorate the visuals we use to imagine climate change

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Conclusion 6



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**Getting the Picture:
Understanding Visual Framing for Media Analysis**



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