

Journal of Environmental Media
Volume 3 Number 1

© 2022 Intellect Ltd Introduction. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/jem_00069_2

INTRODUCTION

ZHENG CUI

The Pennsylvania State University

ROBERT E. GUTSCHE, JR

Lancaster University and Vytautas Magnus University

JULIET PINTO

The Pennsylvania State University

Seeing the (in)justice of sustainability: Visualizing inequality at the centre of climate change communication

ABSTRACT

This Special Issue focuses on issues of sustainability and its (potential) effect(s) on widening inequalities. It does so through discussions on visual and digital communication, including documentary filmmaking, photojournalism, cartography and citizen multimedia journalism, with a broad geographic span. The issue is comprised of two sets of scholarly approaches. The first set includes perhaps more

KEYWORDS

climate change
environmental
journalism
environmental justice
inequality

sustainability
visual media

conventionally arranged articles that align with the Special Issue theme, while the second set is steeped in intersections of theory and practice as short essays, revolving around visualizations that articulate veiled senses of inequalities in sustainability discourses.

We know that environmental change due to global warming disproportionately affects the world's poorest and most-marginalized, as do the corporate and collective actions themselves that drive greenhouse gas emissions (Butler 2008). With greater urgency, media scholarship – and practice – must now turn to the wicked problems associated with forms of human inequality that are increasingly linked to efforts to develop local and global sustainability. Marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples, are often the last to be considered in policy discussions around sustainability and climate change, and may even be considered at times as antagonists in environmental politics (Pinto et al. 2017; Spiegel 2021). Classist, racist, gendered and geographic divides propagate approaches to how sustainability is applied in ways that are, on the surface, bettering the environment as these divides are deepened. Consider these aspects: racialized gentrification of urban areas to form wetlands creates a forced migration of residents (Shumow and Gutsche 2016), while such development of environmentally sound (and expensive) housing pushes out the poor. Scientists – and science communicators – advocate for further environmental literacy, often ignoring social conditions, classification and fallout of garnering support to fight climate change (Beasy 2020; Meisner and Takahashi 2013; Pinto et al. 2020).

And while mainstreamed media narratives of climate change activists elevate particular people and parts of the world over others – such as in the case of tree-planting (O'Sullivan and Poon 2021) and architecture (Buttler 2021) – on-the-ground effects of 'sustainability' are often invisible or missing from discursive arenas. To be sure, and as this Special Issue notes, as notions of sustainability become more normalized as key to our shared social futures, long-standing issues of racialized, sexist and geographically-centred environmentalism continue to shape government and corporate decisions, as well as individual and collective interpretations of curbing climate change. As environmental activist Elizabeth Yeampierre said in 2020, '[c]limate change is the result of a legacy of extraction, of colonialism, of slavery' (Gardiner 2020: n.pag.). Yeampierre expanded on that idea when she said, '[t]he truth is that the climate justice movement, people of color, indigenous people, have always worked multi-dimensionally because we have to be able to fight on so many different planes'. We share in this concern as it represents a basis for concerns related to inequality, diversity and inclusivity in collective – including global – efforts that should be about both the hardships to Earth and its peoples.

Visual – especially digital – media remain spaces for communicating dominant culture and ideologies, for seeing and expressing contestation and for resistance. Mainstream avenues for media messaging tend to promote interpretations of our changing landscapes through a myriad of narratives that often pit humans against interests of the intangible and constructed – the economic, political, biological – rather than cultural (e.g. Jacobson et al. 2019). Within these realms, media institutions can perpetuate inequalities that are bound up within power dynamics of collectives and societies – including within communication infrastructures and industries, themselves (Gutsche and Pinto 2022)

that have long contributed to environmental decline; or they can speculate as to the future of solutions-based approaches, such as ‘sustainability’. Yet, visualizations, science organizations and diverse, global citizen collectives complicate these narratives, such as in terms of data visualizations (MacKenzie and Stenport 2020), cartographies of socioecological disaster (Lowan-Trudeau 2021), the ‘effectiveness’ of visuals in terms of interactions between individuals’ and communities’ ideologies and action (Duan et al. 2021) and the role of visuals in environmental advocacy (Fernández 2019).

Role(s) of the visual have been articulated within environmental media studies (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020), particularly in how the conflicts related to climate change impacts are approached. Notions of responsibility and respect, and perhaps reciprocity and reflexivity, should be considered key in approaching today’s ‘period of accelerated climate change, mass extinction and human-induced ecological instability whose causes and consequences are unevenly distributed both within and between nations’ (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020: 4). By taking a broad view of ‘visual media’ and implications for how notions of sustainability are being reframed and understood, we ask how the role(s) of visual media within this category of media studies involve the digital and interdisciplinary and the critical/cultural to interpret layers of the historical and futuristic in media and environments (and media environments). Through this vein, we view today’s general and popular notions of ‘sustainability’ to be wrapped-up in discourses framed by westernized, neo-liberal and capitalistic means by which to address global warming (Gottschlich and Bellina 2017). Moreover, we further adopt the idea that inequalities are inherent in large and recognized social movements, including those around climate change and global warming, that have been influenced by and for the benefit of the powerful (for more, see Gutsche and Rafikova 2016; Herdin et al. 2020).

This Special Issue, therefore, surrounds issues of sustainability and its (potential) effect(s) on widening inequalities and does so through discussions on visual and digital communication, including documentary, photojournalism and citizen multimedia journalism, with a broad geographic span. The issue is comprised of two sets of scholarly approaches. The first set includes perhaps more conventionally arranged articles that align with the Special Issue theme, while the second set is steeped in intersections of theory and practice as short essays, revolving around visualizations that articulate veiled senses of inequalities in sustainability discourses.

From Central Africa where political, economic and societal factors hinder efforts to combat climate change, the work by Denis J. Sonwa, Emmanuel Mbede, Youssoufa Bele, Edith Abilogo and Precilia Ngaunkam, ‘Mainstreaming communication of adaptation to climate change: Some initiatives from Central Africa’, chronicles how interventions on local news media and NGO communications can work as part of forest adaptation efforts in the Congo Basin region. This pilot project identifies deficiencies caused by underdevelopment in these countries and ways of generalizing knowledge and priming the issues related to climate change, specifically forestation and climate adaptation. The article presents the efforts of journalistic capacity building projects for communicators and communication curriculum in higher education and provides a start to what the authors hope will be a significant conversation of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, including through media, to promote climate adaptation.

The next article is a collective effort in India to document and influence the country’s ‘media-dark’ portions where marginalized communities suffer

severe impact from both climate change and negligence. Pooja Ichplani's work, 'Agroenvironmental narratives of transformative resistance: How participatory videos frame climate change in India', examines 'Video Volunteers', a participatory video collective project aiming to promote Indigenous voices and to challenge macro-level narratives in sustainable development. This article highlights how such climate discourses are embedded in and intertwined with justice concerns such as severe underdevelopment and gender inequality. The authors also discuss how visualizing rural and Indigenous communities can work to highlight community and regional voices and perspectives by decentralizing social movements.

The following piece turns to Almería, Spain, a prominent vegetable production site known as a 'greenhouse' of Europe. To contrast the region's dominating industrialized agricultural practices, Paloma Yáñez Serrano conducted documentary work and ethnographic observation for her work, *'It Is What It Is: Visualizing sustainability collaboratively in Western Almería'*. She records local people's efforts in environmental justice through alternative sustainable agricultural production, as well as their commitment to political justice by promoting rights of seasonal migrant workers. By visualizing the nexus of sustainable agriculture production with environmental justice, the documentarians explore how communities engage with the process of reworking towards new modes of production such as agroecology, and how local knowledge and practices are key to attaining 'meaningful sustainability'.

Through a lens examining the temporalities involved in mainstream media's climate reporting, Hanna E. Morris examines the journalistic imperatives in US media to witness and depict 'slow' and 'fast' violence related to climate change. In this article, 'Purgatory islands and climate death-worlds: Interrogating the journalistic imperative to witness the climate crisis through the lens of war', she analyses how prominent news magazines featured Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane María as a 'death-world', a pattern of depicting decay and death in 'other' worlds while alluding to US elitism in both textual and visual stories. The commodification of suffering brought on and exacerbated by climate change within media industries can occlude grassroots resistance and efforts to build community resilience.

How and why visual reproductions of geographic regions are communicated from the mapmaker to the map reader presents opportunities to better understand these enhanced visual experiences brought by multimodal media and digitized content. In 'Climate change communication beyond the digital divide: Exploring cartography's role and privilege in climate action', David Retchless, Carolyn Fish and Jim Thatcher highlight the issues in accessibility and equity of technologies associated with the visual reproduction of land. Through reviewing two case studies where tools like narrative storytelling in maps and augmented reality were utilized to engage audiences in perceiving impacts of climate change with a critical engagement, the authors suggest that climate change communication cartography not only prioritizes technology but also approaches it as 'relational' to improve engagement based on audiences' daily life experiences.

The second set of articles highlights visually engaging essays from global scholars that address issues of inequality often overlooked by the aims and rhetorics of sustainability. Catalina de Onís and Hilda Llorens open this set of essays with their piece, 'Visualizing green capitalist renewable energy: Development and grassroots solar community alternatives in Puerto Rico'. Together, they interrogate industrial-scale solar energy development in Puerto

Rico and visually juxtapose dangers of industrial-scale solar ‘farms’ with grass-root rooftop solar projects in the territory’s Jobos Bay region. At the core of their discussion are issues of race, ethnicity, class and development of what developers and others refer to as ‘blank slates’, rife for capitalistic subjugation in the name of sustainability.

In her piece, ‘The future in our hands: A sustainable stock photo reading’, Anne Hege Simonsen, in Norway, examines similar aspects of ethnicity and class in today’s digital visual media related to environment. Specifically, she conducts a reading of stock images related to ‘the environment’ to underpin the complexities of media messages and ideologies that emerge and are reproduced by ever-popular, spreadable images captured by search to supplement online discourse. Next, moving from the globe’s Nordic region to the Global South, Boaz Dvir takes the reader/viewer through images produced by non-fiction storytellers surrounding human-made natural disaster in his essay, ‘Seeking the raw truth at Guatemala’s largest landfill’. Here, Dvir, a filmmaker, reflects upon the documenting of children gathering goods from a landfill surrounded by the Sierra de las Minas mountains to argue that the documentary genre may be able to capture some aspects of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ in discussions of global warming. Still, he discusses the struggles in revealing its full impacts without reference of the ‘olfactory and tactile aspects’.

Sarah E. Walker, Karen Bailey and Elizabeth C. Smith write about – and visually express – how policy-makers and professional communicators, along with community members, can express aspects of adaptation that take into account inequalities that are caused by current forms of sustainability. In ‘Seeing climate adaptation through an equity lens: Lessons learned from community adaptation to flood risk’, the trio articulate problematic policies in the United States to counter massive flooding. Ryan Wallace and León Staines-Díaz use photographs to express complications in sustainable discourse via a juxtaposition of informal settlements in Monterrey, Mexico and sprawling urban environments. They write in their essay, ‘Sustaining practices and “progress” over people: Identifying the potential consequences of communicating sustainability to the Global South’, that ‘[p]rogressionist narratives often obscure the human element because issues of forced displacement, inequity, violence, or starvation do not align with their framing’.

From Miami, in the United States, Xavier Cortada, Adam Roberti and Ryan Deering showcase multiple images from Cortada’s socially engaged art project designed to generate social action and awareness related to sea level rise – and its effects on home values. More than that, however, their piece, ‘Underwater Homeowners Association: Using socially engaged art to problem-solve in an imperiled, polarized and imperfect world’, articulates a rationale for highlighting housing values among the privileged to further express the role of tax dollars and sustainable development that has widespread effects throughout communities and geographies.

Another documentary filmmaker, Lisa Lin, highlights her work on ‘transitional injustice during China’s phase out coal strategy in the case study of Liupanshui, the largest coal mine in southern China since the 1950s’. Through her piece, ‘Transitional (in)justice in phasing out coal in China: Documentary as visual evidence to unveil the local experiences of coal transitions’, Lin also articulates the depth of multidisciplinary and participatory approaches to creating visual media on ‘sustainable’ practices.

Dani Ploeger and Greenman Muleh next provide a sense of returning to self and place during discourse on our changing environments. Their piece,

‘Üiiti: A treatment for ecological experience in mobile network culture’, by exploring their own high-tech iteration of the *nzevu*, a ritual instrument of the Kenyan Akamba tribe that has been reproduced into a digital application. The app transforms a smartphone into a ‘technology of transcendence’ in ways that ‘evoke a heightened experience of the user’s immediate lifeworld’. Such a cross-cultural and technological innovation returns the user – us or you – to a sense of place within the digital and physical that is monetized, objectified and obfuscated to the degree we are separated from ourselves and our surroundings.

Rounding out this issue and set of essays, Toby Miller critiques visual campaigns in the United States run by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in his piece, ‘PETA-porn: Do controversy and consumerism aid animal rights?’ Here, Miller analyses specific images that showcase sexist representations of women’s bodies in the name of protecting animals, questioning the benefits to living environments through what he suggests are ‘reformist, consumerist politics’ embedded in ‘plutocratic activism’. He further asks whether ‘a love of troping centerfolds and violence, and frottage with dubious corporate social responsibility [is] a good look for a social movement?’

Interrogation highlighted throughout this issue’s intersections of inequalities complicate efforts and the very definitions of sustainability, while building theory that problematizes roles of visual narratives – and narrating – in the digital age. This effort is particularly important as mainstream media focus on only specific aspects of sustainable future(s). Indeed, we argue from our readings of these combined works that the term ‘sustainability’ itself suggests a maintaining of modern-day living conforms, consumption and lived experiences and breeds, therefore, questions about the peculiarities of sustainability and how we ‘see’ them.

REFERENCES

- Agyeman, J. (2010), ‘Toward a “just” sustainability?’, *Continuum*, 22:6, pp. 751–56.
- Beasy, K. (2020), ‘Interpretations of sustainability beyond the middle class’, *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 36:3, pp. 246–63.
- Butler, C. D. (2008), ‘Environmental change, injustice and sustainability’, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 5, pp. 11–19.
- Buttler, M. (2021), ‘Hedonism and ski slopes are a Danish architect’s climate fix’, Bloomberg, 21 March, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-21/hedonism-and-ski-slopes-are-a-danish-architect-s-climate-fix>. Accessed 2 August 2022.
- Duan, R., Takahashi, B. and Zwickle, A. (2021), ‘How effective are concrete and abstract climate change images? The moderating role of construal level in climate change visual communication’, *Science Communication*, 43:3, pp. 358–87.
- Fernández, L. (2019), ‘Using images of farmed animals in environmental advocacy: An antispeciesist, strategic visual communication proposal’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63:8, pp. 1137–55.
- Gardiner, B. (2020), ‘Unequal impact: The deep links between racism and climate change’, *Yale Environment* 306, 9 June, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/unequal-impact-the-deep-links-between-inequality-and-climate-change>. Accessed 23 June 2022.

- Gottschlich, D. and Bellina, L. (2017), 'Environmental justice and care: Critical emancipatory contributions to sustainability discourse', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 34:4, pp. 941–53.
- Gutsche, Jr, R. E. and Pinto, J. (2022), 'Covering synergistic effects of climate change: Global challenges for journalism', *Journalism Practice*, 16:2&3, pp. 237–43.
- Gutsche Jr, R. E. and Rafikova, A. (2016), *Visual Culture for a Global Audience*, San Diego, CA: Cognella.
- Herdin, T., Faust, M. and Chen, G.-M. (2020), 'On the need for de-westernization of visual communication and culture in the Global South', in T. Herdin, M. Faust and G.-M. Chen (eds), *De-Westernizing Visual Communication and Cultures: Perspectives from the Global South*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 7–34.
- Jacobson, S., Pinto, J., Gutsche, Jr, R. E. and Wilson, A. (2019), 'Goodbye, Miami? Reporting climate change as a local story', in J. Pinto, R. E. Gutsche, Jr and P. Prado (eds), *Climate Change, Media & Culture: Critical Issues in Environmental Communication*, Bingley: Emerald, pp. 53–71.
- Lowan-Trudeau, G. (2021), 'Mapping (as) resistance: Decolonizing Indigenizing journalistic cartography', *Media+ Environment*, 3:1, <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.19057>. Accessed 31 August 2022.
- MacKenzie, S. and Stenport, A. W. (2020), 'Visualizing climate change in the Arctic and beyond: Participatory media and the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP), and interactive Indigenous Arctic media', *Journal of Environmental Media*, 1:1, pp. 79–99.
- Meisner, M. S. and Takahashi, B. (2013), 'The nature of time: How the covers of the world's most widely read weekly news magazine visualize environmental affairs', *Environmental Communication*, 7:2, pp. 255–76.
- Mistry, A. and Spocter, M. (2022), 'Just sustainabilities: The case of eco-estates in South Africa', *Local Environment*, 27:2, pp. 215–28.
- O'Sullivan, F. and Poon, L. (2021), 'The darker side of tree-planting pledges', Bloomberg, 30 July, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-07-30/what-happens-after-pledges-to-plant-millions-of-trees>. Accessed 15 September 2022.
- Pinto, J., Myrick, J. and Xie, L. (2020), 'Constructing hurricane Florence's flooding: Comparing local and national news', *Journalism Practice*, 16:6, pp. 1057–77.
- Pinto, J., Prado, P. and Tirado, J. A. (2017), *Environmental News in South America: Conflict, Crisis and Contestation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shriver-Rice, M. and Vaughan, H. (2020), 'What is environmental media studies?', *Journal of Environmental Media*, 1:1, pp. 3–13.
- Shumow, M. and Gutsche, Jr, R. E. (2016), *News, Neoliberalism, and Miami's Fragmented Urban Space*, Lanham, MA: Lexington.
- Spiegel, S. J. (2021), 'Fossil fuel violence and visual practices on Indigenous land: Watching, witnessing and resisting settler-colonial injustices', *Energy Research & Social Science*, 79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102189>. Accessed 11 August 2022.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Zheng Cui is a Ph.D. student in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University, in the United States. Her research interests lie at the intersection of science communication and news media.

Contact: Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, 9 Carnegie Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA.
E-mail: zkc5130@psu.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0719-7876>

Robert E. Gutsche, Jr is senior lecturer in critical digital media practice at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom and visiting professor in the faculty of Informatics at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania. His research surrounds issues of power in journalism, as well as critical analyses of climate change communication.

Contact: Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YW, UK.
E-mail: r.gutschejr@lancaster.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6132-3493>

Juliet Pinto is an associate professor in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at the Pennsylvania State University, in the United States. She studies comparative environmental news production and is a member of the Bellisario College's science communication programme.

Contact: Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, 210 Carnegie Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA.
E-mail: jzp726@psu.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7217-7505>

Zheng Cui, Robert E. Gutsche, Jr. and Juliet Pinto have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
