

Juulia Heikkinen (University of Helsinki), Taina Meriluoto (University of Helsinki) & Carla Malafaia (University of Porto)

### **The power of layering: Politicizing climate emergency on visual social media**

Within visually dominated social media platforms, novel ways to use images are invented every day. Combining, collaging, or 'layering' different elements such as photographs, text, frames or drawings on top of each other or side by side is a typical practice in visual social media, enabled by the affordances of the platforms. More than just a technical treat of social media images, however, layering can be seen as an everyday aesthetical practice (Niemelä-Nyrhinen & Uusitalo 2021), that helps us make sense of the world amidst an endless flow of stimuli (Markham 2013). By creating connections, positions, and scales between things, and by forcing the viewer to look at them in particular arrangements, layering should be also considered as a form of power understudied in the field of visual politics. In this paper, we use nearly 10,000 layered Instagram images related to climate emergency and activism to ask what kind of layers and layering can be found and what the layers are doing to politicize climate emergency. Visualization of climate change and the activism around it presents a particularly interesting case for studying visual politicization, as the phenomenon is gradual, complex, and in many ways "invisible" - at least in the Global North.

As a part of a wider research project on visual participation and politicization among young Europeans (Luhtakallio 2018), the initial data of over 20 000 climate-related images was first scraped from Instagram with hashtags originating from ethnographic fieldwork in France, Finland, Portugal, and Germany. Images with multiple layers or elements are filtered by using a novel, ethnography-informed machine learning scheme tailored to recognize and categorize political action in images (Maltezos, Luhtakallio & Meriluoto, in review), producing a dataset of 9708 layered images. In this regard, the study crosses boundaries between human and non-human action in different stages of knowledge production, forcing us to look at the data from the perspective of the computer.

Taking the result of computational categorization as a starting point, we analyze the layered images qualitatively, tracing different kinds of layerings that politicize climate change. These images are a result of virtual editing-e.g., assembling, meming, infographying, curatorial designing-and thus photographic elements in them are often appropriated and signified beyond their original visual arrangement and intent. In this sense, we explore the social media affordances in the re-creation of knowledge and meaning, by asking which aesthetic repertoires are prevalent in the online visual ecology and what it tells us about emerging modes of visual climate engagements.

Building on Anette Markham's (2013; 2017) development of remix theory, layering is understood as an open-ended and future-oriented practice, as a "creative combination of cultural units of information for the purposes of comedy, parody, art or critique" (2017). Following Markham's definition, we propose that three characteristics of remixing, sampling, hybridity and linkages, can be used to unpack the practice, form and meaning of layered images. First, sampling refers to the *practice* of "recombination of cultural meaning" through selecting, extracting, and re-combining cultural units, here referring to the different

layers of an image, a practice enabling a “dialogic exploration of meaning through connection”. Hybridity, in turn, refers to the *form* of a layered image; it is “a thing or process that is between or both; neither one thing nor another” (ibid.: 233). By this, we mean that the new meanings that a layered image produces cannot be reduced to the individual parts that it is composed of. Rather, the meaning emerges from particular arrangements, scaling, and positions that are always temporary, open-ended, and ripe for multiple interpretations. Lastly, the notion of different linkages allows us to zoom into the *kinds of connections* that are made through layering the elements.

By identifying different layers present in the data, we show the plurality of ways in which climate change can be politicized through building both commonalities and conflicts (Eranti & Meriluoto, 2023). Commonalities, “the different logics by which a ‘we’ can be formed, and action coordinated” are constructed *spatially* through e.g. layering images of climate demonstrations or the impact of climate change and loss of biodiversity around the world. These images highlight the global nature of climate change, but also the strength and ability of climate activists to coordinate a global movement. Other kinds of commonalities are built e.g. through *cultural* references and intertextuality that invite “insider audiences” who “get” the different cultural layers (Markham 2017: 236).

Conflicts, or, “ways to identify injustices and formulate and justify claims in public struggles” (Eranti & Meriluoto 2023: 9) are visible in images that produce contrast or challenge instead of similarities. These can be comparisons between “good” and “bad” actors or actions, images that politicize by passing a moral judgment. In the case of climate politicization, temporal layering, i.e. demonstrating how a landscape has changed between two points in time, is a widely used way to prove the change and invite the viewer to imagine the future that awaits if we continue on the same path.

Through our analysis we find that by assembling different elements, or “cultural units of information” (Markham 2017), images can be used effectively to set different tones and tensions; to generate internal contrast or dialogue, or to reinforce the desired message by combining elements that support each other. Layering also forces us to watch particular cultural units (actors, places, moments in time) side by side. As a result, different layers, and the actors they represent come to be seen as part of the same whole, as equal to each other, or through an evaluative arrangement (e.g. comparison, moral binary). While layered images can help us to grasp complex issues and to identify with collectives, they are by no means neutral or innocent, but rather political and argumentative. Layering creates new associations, positions, scaling, and arrangements between actors and things and should therefore be seen as a form of power typical to social media.