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595 shades of grey: “The big picture” of nature loss in Norway

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The ecological crisis has often been labeled a “crisis of imagination” (Bartosch 2013:9). As pointed out by O’Neill (2026), images can play a key role in climate communication, but climate change imagery often come across as formulaic and narrow in perspective. Yet, as part of conscious bi-modal storytelling, images can engage viewers in powerful ways and enable them to connect different issues.

One recent work that has had a number of ripple effects in Norway is the visually driven NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) news report "Norway in red, white and grey", which in 2024 documented the massive but fragmented land transformation in Norwegian municipalities. By collecting satellite images and combining them with journalistic stories from selected local communities, this story has generated a number of spin-offs, which delve into various aspects of nature degradation and political governance. The reportage immediately became one of NRK's most-read stories ever, with over a million views.

The reportage is extensive. It consists of 2607 words, six videos, 30 photojournalistic reportage pictures and more than 600 aerial photos. In this paper we will focus mainly on the introduction. It starts as a seemingly regular scrollytelling reportage, with an image of a construction site. Superimposed is a short text explaining that this used to be an oak forest. As the reader scrolls down, we first move vertically from one aerial photo to another, providing five examples of forests, bogs and reindeer grazing sites that have recently been destroyed. From the fifth image, however, the story zooms out and becomes a mosaic of first 9, then 45 and finally 595 images. All the pictures are mainly grey, showing sand, gravel and concrete. Then the title appears: "Norway in red, white and grey". The point outlined in the design is also formulated in the text: “... nature degradation is taking place, bit by bit, without anyone seeing the big picture.”

In this paper, we explore how the story’s bi-modal design, as well as its specific visual framing of nature degradation, interacted to create a new spatial imagination of political consequence. Through a close reading, where we scrutinize how place and territory are performed in the story, we aim to understand its profound impact on the Norwegian public debate. This research is part of the project *The powers of visual representations in shaping and mediating land-use conflicts in Norway (VISUALS)* funded by the Norwegian Research Council 2026-2029.

News media is an important arena for often tacit understandings of territory (Alnæs 2020), as they are also place makers. The media shape perceptions of location, and they shape

people's connections to both physical and digital spaces. Gutsche & Hess (2019) argue that journalism plays a vital role as custodians of more or less clearly demarcated social and political spaces that they have labelled "geographies of journalism". Such geographies are often more conceptual than concrete, but in this case, the journalistic story provides a multilayered indexical link to specific and identifiable places, as well as a synthesized political-emotional statement about the precarious state of Norwegian nature. Some of the places depicted have expressed value in people's life worlds (e.g. a strip of forest where interviewees used to play when they were children), while other may be considered non-places (Augé 2008), defined as spaces which are not anthropological places, in the sense that a place is relational, historical, or concerned with identity. Several of the transformations depicted show nature being turned into industrial plots and thus incorporated into the peri-urban zones surrounding cities, villages or hamlets. One of the interesting aspects of the visualizations in "Norway in red, white and grey" is therefore the imagery's ability to imbue these (political) non-places with social meaning and generative emotions. Journalistically identified as places, they become what Pilav et al describes as "a relational product of social actions and material transformation [that] provides a common ground, or shared problematic, across a broad range of disciplinary fields and practices, which would otherwise remain distant" (2020, 18).

We will also scrutinize the concept the journalists present as "The Big Picture". What is it that is being built down bit by bit, what is performed by the pictures, stories and descriptions? And how can the mosaic of grey aerial photos be read? We argue that this is connected to a notion of nation and territory. This is expressed, among other things, in the title, which alludes to a well-known patriotic song called "Norway in red, white and blue". The song describes how the colors of the Norwegian flag are visible throughout the Norwegian landscape. When "blue" is substituted by grey, (which in Norwegian rhyme with blue) it is not just a description of a visual impression changing, but a statement about how a part of the Norwegian identity is about to disappear.

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