

Visualizing climate science: the poster between science and politics

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The geosciences play a role outside of the natural, research sciences as agents responding to geopolitical crises like climate change and corporate and military interests that seek strategic advantage in planetary repair and control. The notion of the neutrality of science has increasingly eroded with researchers more frequently becoming embroiled in public deliberation and policy. Geoscientists are being asked to project the future of physical earth systems as well as evaluate the performance of policies (Beck and Mahony 2018) contributing to solutions and providing metrics for “climate services” (Daly and Dilling 2019). *How* the story of the earth, its climate and ecology, are told, is developed in specific ways, evoking different kinds of value and purpose for different communities.

Climate denial think tanks exploit the authority of science by intentionally using the languages and forms of scientific communication to sow confusion by presenting contradictory conclusions and arguing against climate action (Oreskes & Conway 2011). Pointing to colonial and extractive histories of geology and climate science, there are communities who urge scientific communities to acknowledge and counter the apolitical stance of neutrality. Scientists are more explicitly engaging on the representational, ethical and political dimensions of their science, pulling into question the dominant ideology of scientific neutrality which still structures much of its institutions’ protocols.

Research into the ways that discourse can change behaviour is central to the dilemma of the commons, and how the mobilization of nomenclature and information are best transferred to actionable knowledge (Nerlich 2010). In addition to language, the visualization of data, the distribution of images and iconography, and the rendering of time-based media (audio and video) all impact the ways in which we treat ecosystems and imagine their modulation and adjustment. There are even those who pronounce a “spectacle of nature” that has been created through the circulation of overabundant images of destroyed and protected ecologies (Igoe 2010).

Climatology & Climatography of Care, a project by University of Bern’s mLab + Critical Media Lab is interested in histories and futures of climatology and climatography, not only as scientific trajectories and disciplines, but as means of producing and *practicing* knowledge that are always and increasingly entrenched in economic, political and necessarily public debates. An objective of this project is a critical rethinking of data visualization and communication through the creation of a public poster campaign that references and questions the visual forms that both *scientific* and *political* posters take. The overall aim is to further investigate the future of climate change communication.

For the Swiss 18th Geosciences Meeting (2020), we will present a critical history and contemporary analysis of geosciences relevant communications, outlining how such visualization explicitly renders information as both scientific, public and therefore political. Showing examples of histories, stories and impacts of how both scientific and public campaign aesthetics are mobilized in contexts of scientific publication, conferences, public events and debate, we aim to articulate discussion as to the ways in which communications can of this kind can help to make explicit the goals and intentions of the geosciences *vis a vis* urgent topics like anthropogenic climate change, environmental racism, ecological justice, extractive industries. As an interdisciplinary group we hope to encourage discussion, questions, inconsistencies and unquestioned assumptions at the intersections of exchange within interdisciplinary communities, and with publics.



Image: Left: Lester Beall posters promoting the Rural Electrification Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture (1930) Right: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's office's posters promoting the Green New Deal (2019).

References

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