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# Where Are We in the Climate Crisis? : Analyzing Human Representation/Involvement in UK Multimodal News on IPCC AR6

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how British newspapers represent human involvement in climate change through multimodal analysis, focusing on coverage of the latest IPCC AR6 report. By analyzing images and texts, it reveals that mainstream media often portray climate issues with distant, decontextualized visuals that do not directly engage the public. However, captions and headlines are observed to compensate by adding explicit human agency and urgency to the narrative. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics and News Values Analysis, this study identifies representational patterns that can either detach or engage readers with the climate crisis. Ultimately, findings suggest a need for media to prioritize visuals that foster immediate relevance and involvement, addressing climate change not only as a distant threat but as a present, human-centered challenge.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how four British newspapers represent human involvement in climate change through multimodal analysis, focusing on coverage of the latest IPCC AR6 report. By analyzing images and texts, it reveals that mainstream press portrays climate issues with distant, decontextualized visuals that do not directly engage the public. However, captions and headlines are observed to compensate by adding explicit human agency and urgency to the narrative. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics and News Values Analysis, this study identifies representational patterns that can either detach or engage readers with the climate crisis. Ultimately, findings suggest a need for media to prioritize visuals that foster immediate relevance and involvement, addressing climate change not only as a distant threat but as a present, human-centered challenge.

KEYWORDS: climate change, multimodal news, Systemic Functional Linguistics, News Values Analysis

## 1. Introduction

As a slow-moving and complex global issue, climate change is difficult to capture tangibly and vividly for news audiences. Despite the increase in extreme weather events, which offer the media dramatic hooks, many of the underlying processes are invisible (Schäfer 2015, 853; Hulme, 2009, 227) and the largest impacts are displaced into the distant future. The press, as a result, finds itself continuously covering a threat without the catastrophe occurring in real time. This may in turn lead to "editorial fatigue", which means that the press struggles to maintain focus on climate change amidst faster-developing topics (Carvalho and Burgess 2005,1464; Boykoff 2007,11; Dahl and Fløttum 2017, 125).

Perhaps, however, the hardest challenge is to represent climate change visually. If the words of a newspaper article may struggle to project the reader into a dangerous future, images are even less apt for the task. The visualization of localized impacts is undoubtedly emotionally resonant, however, on its own, the picture of a forest fire fails to grasp the breadth of the phenomenon. Various disciplines, ranging from geography to social semiotics and media studies, have scrutinized visuals in climate change reporting, approaching the matter in terms of content i.e. what is being used to depict climate change visually. A relevant tendency seems to be the choice of abstract, decontextualized images that tip over into symbolism e.g. smokestacks or polar bears (Hansen and Machin 2008, 784, 2015,6; Doyle 2007,133). In the news, this is attributable to a large extent to the current role of visuals. Caple (2017, 232) notes that the creation of the news article "multimodal package", is left today entirely to the journalist. As a result, photojournalism has partially lost its documenting function, and the increasing reliance on image banks, which as Hansen and Machin argue, offer a marketable 'visual language', has led to a flattened yet paradoxically dynamic potential for meaning making. Although, in barthesian terms, the function of photojournalism may not be simply denotative, image banks offer malleable, generic, pictures that can be easily adapted to convey specific narratives aligned with the sender's viewpoints (Hansen and Machin 2013, 14) but do little to locate climate change, or make it less aloof. Although the matter deserves extensive discussion, it may be sufficient at this point to underline its outcomes, and summarize the macro-tendencies of visual climate change in the news contributing to this issue, with three features: metonymy (Seppänen and Väliverronen 2003,63; O'Neill et al. 2013,11; Manzo 2010, 198), stillness, and aesthetic pleasure. In this sense, the prototypical image is an isolated fragment, frozen in time – for instance a

picture of an iceberg or a flood – packaged in an awe-inspiring photographical composition. The problem with these pictures is not only that they simplify the complexity of climate change and obfuscate its slow on-going nature, but that they also conceal the gravity of the situation behind an appeal to the eye. On the last point, Stibbe (2020,93) argues that the risk is of completely glossing over the very idea of a crisis.  This is the case, he notes, of heatwaves being visually represented by children playing in water fountains.  A representation that, amongst other things, builds on our cultural positive evaluation of sunny weather. In essence, the press usually chooses visuals that work well in capturing attention (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001, 22; Sontag 2004, 63) but undermine the mediation of climate change as real, progressing, and threatening.

Another relevant, embedded issue with such decontextualized 'sketches' is the distancing effect they have on the viewers, which is the main focus of the present study. It could be argued that a distance is created by the simple fact that people do not appear often as active subjects in pictures. Viewers are not invited to 'see' themselves as materially involved in the management of the climate crisis. Dahl and Fløttum (2017,124-131) have commented on the selection of pictures for a corpus of British news articles published on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) fifth assessment cycle, noting that "decontextualized image bank pictures, often devoid of human presence, carry far less potential to create engagement with the story than pictures of acting or impacted individuals in specific locations". This comment rightly highlights the shortcomings in the current climate change visual landscape, but it also elicits a more delicate investigation on the matter. Articles can be looked at more specifically to understand the place people occupy in climate change remediation, and this is relevant, because the press needs to bring this phenomenon closer to home, rather than paint it as a distant threat. The need to involve the reader/viewer becomes paramount.

In this respect it is also important to reflect further on the IPCC as a subject in news coverage, as its reports may present both an opportunity and an additional challenge for the representation of climate change and the 'human' in it. The UN's IPCC is "the authoritative voice on climate change knowledge" (Hulme 2022, 1). Its reports offer the most comprehensive view on this global issue, with contents that range from food security to equity in climate action, and projections that extend as far as 2100. The potential for visual depiction in the news is thus vast – which may improve or exacerbate current shortcomings. The reports can also be crucial for the general public's understanding of, and

engagement with, climate change. Tranter et al. (2023, 707) have shown that, in Australia, trust in IPCC projections is positively correlated with acceptance of human-caused climate change. Moreover, following the history of IPCC reports means ascertaining how familiar the phenomenon has become to humanity, and how it has evolved from a preeminently scientific issue to one that is known to be deeply intertwined with human activity (Hulme 2007, 213). While the reports provide scientific authority and range, as scientific and policy-neutral texts they are not – on their own – affectively cogent, which as Mc Loughlin (2021, 1) maintains, may hinder our "behavioural and societal transitions to manage climate risk". In other words, although the IPCC makes the case for increasingly urgent climate action, the statement is often put too feebly to generate adequate personal response (Hollin and Pearce 2015,2-3). The dry scientific style employed by the authors tends, moreover, to dilute human presence, ultimately making the risks of climate change seem more abstract than they actually are (Fløttum 2014,81, 2016, 24)

News discourse, which may be seen as a *trait d'union* between science and the public, has the potential to fill in these gaps by amplifying the call for action and human involvement (both visually and verbally), either by remediating the contents of the reports in starker tones or by reporting the emotionally-loaded commentary of the most influential figures in the panel (e.g. collaborating scientists, the IPCC chair or the UN secretary).

The IPCC may then be the ideal channel to mobilize people, but it also poses new challenges for popularization. To achieve this goal, newspapers have to find ways to insert people as animated participants in well-grounded contexts, and at the same time to overcome the communicative passivity of the reports. In this respect then, it is useful to look at how the press is currently dealing with these challenges across the verbal/visual plane.

## 2. Methodology and object of study

This paper poses research questions on human representation, involvement and action in the latest coverage of the IPCC report in British news outlets, as well as on the broader challenges of the visual depiction of climate change in the media. The goal is to answer the following questions:

How does the British press involve the public, and how does it represent

people as participants both visually and verbally? In other words, what is the overall role of people in news coverage of the latest report?

and in particular

Which representational choices may build a sense of engagement and foster climate action?

Four online news articles from as many British newspapers (the *Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror, The Independent* and *The Times*), covering the release of the latest IPCC report, have been selected for inspection. The material has been divided into four corresponding sections, followed by a final discussion. Images featuring graphs from the report have been excluded; the focus is kept on photographs, which are better indications of each newspaper's choices for visual representation, irrespective of reports. Due to space constraints, the linguistic analysis cannot be extended to the whole article, headlines and captions have been chosen as indicative of verbal rhetorical strategies.

This selection is made on various grounds. Headlines are a key element that condenses the whole piece on the semantic plane; they provide ideological framing and epitomize newsworthiness (Bell 1991, 185; Van Dijk 1988, 36). Especially in online contexts (e.g. newsbites; Knox 2007,298) they can intersect with images to build autonomous items. Captions have been chosen for their immediate ideational connection to images (in systemic functional terms). In particular, building on Caple (2008, 118), captions are examined according to the two semantic categories of Contextual Expansion and Experiential Orientation[1]. With reference to Halliday's ideational function, images and text can be compared for the way they construe the world and its events; captions can either verbally restate the content of the image (i.e. present a similar construal) or they can extend beyond it (i.e. present a different construal). As Caple argues: Contextual Expansion goes "beyond what is needed experientially to understand the image", Experiential Orientation "clarifies and sharpens our understanding of the image". These concepts – in conjunction with the tools listed below – are used to assess whether image and text move in different directions.

For the analysis, a blend of tools from two main areas is employed: (visual) News Values Analysis (NVA) (Bednarek and Caple 2012,46; 2020,15), and Multimodal Analysis/Systemic Functional Linguistics(SFL) (Kress and Van

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[1] The first extends 'beyond what is needed experientially to understand the image', the second 'clarifies and sharpens our understanding of the image' (Caple 2008,118).

Leeuwen 1996,1-228, 2001, 1-160; Halliday 2004, 211-346).

In doing this, the study builds on Dahl and Fløttum (2017,124-131), mentioned in 1., who have applied (visual)NVA themselves to determine whether verbal/visual meaning-making resources were building a "harmonious story" – which they found to be the case. On a similar wake here the two modes are compared, but a departure is made in the goal, which is made narrower, as deeper attention is paid to the 'human': its representation and its engagement as a viewer/reader on a rhetorical plane. In doing so, the study contributes a more focused analysis of how visual and verbal resources work together to humanize climate discourse – a dimension of visual climate change that remains so far underexplored, and as previously argued, fundamental for its mediation. While (visual)NVA is considered a fitting tool for the study, it is also found necessary to further specialize its employment and consider how news values can heighten/ diminish the perceived integration of readers, and how they can intersect with the visual representation of people. A special focus is on the observation of the visual news value Aesthetic Appeal. Bednarek and Caple (2020,15) argue that an event can be made newsworthy by being presented as aesthetically pleasing. The 'aesthetic' quality delimits this value to the visual mode, specifically, to visual resources that include the depiction of people, places, objects, landscapes which are universally recognized for their beauty, paired with dynamic symmetrical/ asymmetrical composition.

Considering the widespread employment of pictures from image banks and the aestheticization of climate change, this news value offers a valuable interpretive key which is extended here to include Jennifer Peeples' notion of the 'toxic sublime' (2011, 5). Based on a reflection on contemporary landscape photography and its rendition of pollution, the 'toxic sublime' is described by Peeples as an effect created by compositional choices that elicit a sublime response, i.e. a negative pleasure, in those who watch. Dissonance is the dominant feature, and it is produced by showing simultaneously beauty and ugliness, the magnitude of represented elements vs the insignificance of humans, power vs powerlessness, risk vs security. If a step is taken immediately outside of the realm of pollution, the same concept can be easily transferred to climate change imagery, for instance, a beautifully edited but terrifying picture of a drought. To obtain a more comprehensive tool for our goals, it thus seemed useful and much needed to attempt a localized integration of the traits of toxic sublime and Aesthetic Appeal. In the analysis then, images of negative subjects beautified via compositional choices that would normally lie outside the category of Aesthetic

Appeal are instead classified as such, and labelled as Aesthetic Appeal(sublime).

Finally, Systemic functional grammar is applied multimodally, following Kress and Van Leuween's classic framework to inspect the presence and role of humans in verbal/visual terms. In this case the three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal and textual – map the area of investigation. While all metafunctions (and related resources, e.g. vectors, gaze, angle, modality/validity) are held to be useful for the argumentation, special attention is devoted here to the ideational function, and to the Transitivity system in particular. Transitivity categorizes the world in terms of processes and the entities that initiate/experience them. That is, either actions/events, which, briefly summarizing, may be external (material processes) internal (mental processes), or in between (behavioural, verbal). Or, as states of being, if the need is to interpret the bare existence of something; in this case processes may be either existential or relational. More details about the categories are provided in table 1. Additionally, processes may be transactional/ non transactional. Transactional processes extend beyond the subject to involve another participant. This means that there is an exchange, effect, or transfer – whether physical, mental, verbal, or relational. In contrast, non-transactional processes are 'intransitive': they involve only one key participant, and the process does not extend to affect anything else directly. Considering the aim of the study, special attention (in positive interpretative terms) is dedicated to material transactional processes, which indicate that tangible action is taking place in the outside world, and that it is initiated by an animate entity (human or non) thus possibly counteracting the immobility and decontextualization of climate change imagery.

| Process Type | Participants |
|---|---|
| Material(verbal)/Action(visual)→<br>– transactional:<br>Interaction between participants<br>– non-transactional: no interaction<br>between participants | Actor (the person performing the<br>action),<br>Goal, Recipient or Beneficiary<br>(the person or thing that is affected) |
| Mental | Senser (the person/thing that<br>perceives)<br>Phenomenon (what is perceived). |
| Relational | (expressing relations between entities)<br>Attributive: Carrier, Attribute;<br>Identifying: Token, Value. |
| Behavioral | Behaver/Phenomenon<br>(the person behaving). |
| Verbal | Sayer (the person who speaks), Recei-<br>ver (the person who is addressed),<br>Verbiage (the content of speech),<br>sometimes Target (subject of the<br>speech). |
| Existential | Existent (the entity that exists). |

Table 1 Process types/Participants in multimodal analysis.

## 3. Analysis

The analysis is conducted discursively, with the aim of looking in depth at how processes and news values intersect, and at their effects on the active representation/engagement of people.

### 3.1. *The Daily Mail*

| Pictures | Headline | Captions |
|---|---|---|
| *Picture 1*  | Greenhouse gas emissions need to be slashed by 65% by 2035 to avoid global temperatures exceeding the 1.5C "tipping point", report warns | Caption 1 Time is running out for humanity to curb dangerous global warming that will plunge the planet into disastrous flooding, heatwaves and famines, a major UN report warns |
| *Picture 2*  | | Caption 2 One hopeful note in the report is that health benefits from reducing the use of fossil fuels to stop global warming will provide economic returns greater than the cost of cutting emissions |

Analysis

Pictures

Both (almost identical) images are provided by Associated Press and contain non-transactional processes. Vectorial lines[2] formed by the smokestacks can be taken to signal action, but no human Actors and no Goals are visually represented. The luminous setting Sun, due to its centrality in Picture 2 and its exaggerated dimension in the first, can be argued to be a salient participant in an ancillary process. But its primary function can be seen, in this case, as that of constructing the news value: Aesthetic Appeal (sublime). In fact, the contrast between the diffuse orange sunlight and the dark silhouettes of the other elements, as well as the dynamic composition with very long shots, make the two pictures aesthetically pleasing but distancing for the viewer.

Caption 1 "Time is running out for humanity to curb dangerous global warming that will plunge the planet into disastrous flooding, heatwaves and famines, a major UN report warns".

Caption one provides Contextual Expansion, which is probably related to the highly decontextualized image. The only loose connection with the picture can be found in the match between the expression "Time is running out" and the setting Sun – if the latter is interpreted as a symbolic participant. Contrary to the picture, the caption includes a high degree of action: in purely linguistic terms, a verbal process with "Major UN report" as Sayer encloses two material processes, "curb" and "plunge". Humanity appears as the Actor in the first process.

Caption 2: "One hopeful note in the report is that health benefits from reducing the use of fossil fuels to stop global warming will provide economic returns greater than the cost of cutting emissions".

Caption two also provides Contextual Expansion, but in this case no connection is made to the image. The sentence structure is complex, with multiple processes intersecting. The main one is relational, signaled by the finite, and the Actor in the first embedded material process "health benefits" is an abstract entity. The other material processes, "reducing" "stop" and "cutting", are linked to this Actor. Humans are no longer explicitly treated as active participants.

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[2] In the visual mode vectors are imaginary lines that meaning through the directionality and movement within an image. They establish relationships between elements in a visual composition, such as who is doing what to whom.

Headline: "Greenhouse gas emissions need to be slashed by 65% by 2035 to avoid global temperatures exceeding the 1.5C "tipping point", report warns".

There are two interconnected material processes signaled by the verbs "slashed" and "avoid exceeding", in the secondary clause. The whole is embedded as the Verbiage of a verbal process "report warns", and modified interpersonally by the deontic modal finite "need". In terms of participants, it is important to note that the passive construction eliminates the Actor, and that the Sayer in the verbal process is an inanimate object "report".

## 3.2. *The Daily Mirror*

| Pictures | Headline | Captions |
|---|---|---|
| *Picture 1a*  | Climate scientists issue "final warning" in IPCC's grim prediction for humanity | Caption 1 Scientists still say there is a chance of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5C above pre–industrial levels |
| *Picture 2a*  | | Caption 2 Temperatures are now about 1.1.C above pre–industrial levels, the IPCC found |

Analysis

Pictures

As was the case with the *Daily Mail*, the *Mirror* employs photographs provided by an image bank, which makes for a similar result in terms of represented action/inclusion of the viewer. This is especially true for Picture 1a, which is positioned before the headline. In the image, a similar non-transactional process is defined by the smokestacks which invade the whole frame; the very long shot seems to be combined with a higher angle, which positions the viewer – unnaturally – in mid-air. The awe-inspiring, soft interplay of dark and light shades of the smoke emitted by the chimney can again be identified as Aesthetic Appeal (sublime), further distancing the viewer. The mast and menu bar, in the top left corner, are two additional features that have a distancing effect. The contrast between the naturalistic quality of the image and the plain red rectangle of the mast, ultimately, has a foregrounding effect on the latter, which means at the very least that the viewer's focus is partially diverted from the image.

Picture 2a heightens the level of involvement. While the process type – if the front-right paw of the bear is taken as forming a vector – is again non-transactional, the salient participant is not an inanimate object. Contrary to previous cases, there is no way to infer some form of human-initiated action (the chimneys are, after all, a product of human activity); but the presence of the polar bear is crucial in interpersonal terms. The gaze of the bear forms yet another vector addressed at the viewer performing an act (demand) which sets up the relationship. The frontal angle further indicates that the observer is placed within "the world" of the bear. Here as well, the dominant news value of the picture appears to be Aesthetic Appeal (sublime) the landscape is conventionally beautiful; the bear looks emaciated and is standing on thinning ice (however, a separation may be operated and the bear may also be interpreted as a hook for Negativity)

Another thought-provoking feature of this image is its possible indirect interplay with Guterres' speech at the press conference for the 6th Synthesis Report (SYR). "We are on thin ice and that ice is melting fast" is a resonant expression which has often been quoted in the press. As Caple (2008,207) has noted, headlines can feature (humorous) metaphorical expressions that are rendered literally and in aesthetically pleasing or eye-catching ways in the images. While the tie here is not as immediate, the interplay is still inferable and may in fact elicit greater interest in the public.

Caption 1: "Scientists still say there is a chance of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5C above pre–industrial levels".

The caption makes no reference to the content of the image, which locates it within the category of Contextual Expansion. With respect to human participation, the only detectable hook is "Scientists", who are, however, the Sayers in a verbal process. The potential material process contained in the Verbiage "limiting", which would allow for a human Actor, is thus left to modify the Existant "chance" in an embedded Existential process.

Caption 2: "Temperatures are now about 1.1.C above pre–industrial levels, the IPCC found".

Another example of Contextual Expansion; the text contains a material process "found" whose Actor is the IPCC. While the process type itself does not feature people undertaking concrete action, to have a UN institution, i.e. a large body of influential people in the context of the climate change debate, as the initiating participant may still constitute a positive push for the representation of humans as acting efficaciously.

Headline: "Climate scientists issue "final warning" in IPCC's grim prediction for humanity".

The headline presents a good level of representation and human engagement. As in the previous caption, "Climate Scientists" are the Actors in the material process "issue". In addition to this, the mention of "humanity" as the relevant audience of the warning places our race in a Target-like position. This entails people both acting and interacting, which may produce a positive involving effect on readers.

## 3.3. *The Independent*

| Pictures | Headline | Captions |
|---|---|---|
| *Picture 1b*<br><br> | How to defuse a climate time–bomb: World's scientists say 1.5C still achievable but "humanity on thin ice" | **Caption 1**<br>From top left, clockwise: An oil refinery and coal plant in front of wind turbines in Germany; drought–ravaged Lake Serre–Poncon, southern France; crews battle a wildfire in California in September 2022; people walk through floodwaters after heavy rainfall in Hadejia, Nigeria, September 2022 |
| *Picture 2b*<br><br> | | **Caption 2**<br>People walk through floodwaters after heavy rainfall in Hadejia, Nigeria in September 2022 |
| *Picture 3*<br><br> | | **Caption 3**<br>The remains of dead livestock at a camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Dollow, Somalia, in September 2022. The intensity of extreme drought and rainfall has "sharply" increased over the past 20 years. |

Analysis

Pictures
Picture 1b is a composition of four images that have to be analyzed both separately and in overall conjunction to provide a balanced assessment. The two top pictures in the polyptych are quite similar to the previous images. The one on the left shows the familiar sight of chimneys emitting smoke. This image is captured from a frontal angle and with a very long shot, creating a sense of distance for the viewer. It features a non-transactional process and possibly carries an element of Aesthetic Appeal (sublime) and Negativity.

The image on the top right, close to its neighbor for its dark tones, is arguably more disengaging. It is impossible to identify any type of action process; not even the dry riverbed crossing the landscape can be interpreted as a vector, in that it lacks direction. The image, however, by virtue of its estranging, monochromatic differentiation, can be argued to provide Aesthetic Appeal (sublime), but also Negativity and Impact. In this sense, the dreary aerial view of the lake captures the power, ugliness and magnitude of the drought, thus inspiring a distancing sense of powerlessness in the viewer.

Moving to the lower half of the image, one notices a representational shift in that, in both pictures, people appear as participants (Actors). In the one on the left, a large group of walking people forms a series of vectors that mark non-transactional processes[3]. In the picture on the right, a group of firefighters appears in a reactional process, the arm of the front firefighter forming a visible vector towards the fire, i.e. the Phenomenon. Differentiating the two images, in terms of viewers' involvement, is the angle. In the one on the left it is very high, with a symmetrical and dynamic composition that, again, exalts magnitude and provides Aesthetic Appeal (sublime), Impact and Negativity. In interpersonal terms, viewers are excluded from that "world", and are instead invited to admire the "spectacular disaster" of the flood.

On the contrary, the firefighter image has a lower, more immersive angle with a frontal perspective that forces the viewer to look up, like the other participants. Therefore, despite the lack of eye contact, the framing makes the spectator feel more absorbed in the scene.

Picture 3 is completely static. The largest dead animal, while certainly a salient participant, cannot be seen as an interpersonal hook calling for the viewer's interaction. However, the predominant news values of the picture may fill in

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[3] This analysis applies also to *Picture 2,* which is a larger reproduction of the one in consideration.

the affective gap. Differently from other examples, where Aesthetic Appeal was the driving value, here it is Impact and Negativity that clearly set the tone. The unfiltered portrayal of death may thus elicit a stronger emotional response, which can possibly draw audiences nearer (or push them away).

Caption 1: "From top left, clockwise: An oil refinery and coal plant in front of wind turbines in Germany; drought–ravaged Lake Serre–Poncon, southern France; crews battle a wildfire in California in September 2022; people walk through floodwaters after heavy rainfall in Hadejia, Nigeria, September 2022".

The caption is the first case of Experiential Orientation in this corpus: the content of the pictures is restated in verbal terms. This allows us to comment on how language and visuals align – or diverge – ideationally. From this perspective, it can be noted that the two top pictures are rendered linguistically via relational processes which match the ideational content of the images – minus the non-transactional process in the first. The same goes for the other two, mirrored by material processes with clearly stated Actors. Also important to note for the relationship between captions and images, is that the verbal here provides 'coordinates' to locate what is being portrayed in the real world – Germany, France, California, and Nigeria. Thus, the reader/viewer is enabled to better internalize the multifaceted variety of phenomena related to climate change

Caption 3[4] : "The remains of dead livestock at a camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Dollow, Somalia, in September 2022. The intensity of extreme drought and rainfall has "sharply" increased over the past 20 years".

The third caption is rather complex, offering both Experiential Orientation and Contextual Expansion. The first phrase – setting up a relational process – partially matches the picture on the ideational level, except for the prepositional phrase "for displaced people". Importantly, the caption provides relevant information that expands the ideational function of the image. After reading it, in fact, the viewer may look at the setting not as completely static and foreign, but as hosting humans in the role of embedded participants. Conceivably, this hook also amplifies the potential emotional effect of the image discussed above.

Headline: "How to defuse a climate time–bomb: World's scientists say 1.5C still achievable but "humanity on thin ice".

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[4] Caption 2 is embedded in caption 1 (see above for the analysis).

The beginning of this headline may offer another example of the wordplay described by Caple. "How to defuse the climate time-bomb" can in fact be interpreted as a playful mix of intertextual references which combines the format of online tutorials and Guterres' explosive metaphor. While the phrase has attention-grabbing potential, it also places people in an active position, as the presupposed Actors in a material process "defuse". The second part of the headline is also representationally strong: a verbal process with "World's Scientists" as Sayers embeds an intensive relational process where Humanity is the Carrier.

## 3.4. *The Times*

| | Headline | Captions |
|---|---|---|
| Picture 1c<br><br>The Flatbreen glacier in Norway is melting at an accelerated pace due to global warming | Humanity "on thin ice" in race to curb emissions, warns IPCC climate change report | Caption 1<br><br>The Flatbreen glacier in Norway is melting at an accelerated pace due to global warming |
| Picture 2c<br><br>The river bed of the Gardon in France after a heatwave last summer – experts have warned fossil fuels puts a "liveable" future at risk | | Caption 2<br><br>The river bed of the Gardon in France after a heatwave last summer –experts have warned fossil fuels puts a "liveable" future at risk |

Analysis

Pictures

The images can be juxtaposed in terms of processes. Both feature a frontal angle, long distance shot of vast landscapes, where only Classification Structures can be identified. The second image, however, may be argued to be slightly more immersive by virtue of its camera angle, which places the viewer at ground level. Aesthetic Appeal is the dominant news value in both cases – but particularly in the second, where the arches of the bridge add symmetry to the composition.

Caption 1: "The Flatbreen glacier in Norway is melting at an accelerated pace due to global warming".

The first caption interestingly provides Experiential Orientation in one sentence by means of the gerund. The first two phrases, in particular "Flatbreen Glacier" and "in Norway", serve to contextualize the picture, but the rest offers information that does not add to the verbal representation/involvement of people; even the causal "due to global warming" is offered as a generic statement, seemingly unconnected with human impact on the environment.

Caption 2: "The river bed of the Gardon in France after a heatwave last summer –experts have warned fossil fuels puts a "liveable" future at risk".

In this caption, Contextual Expansion and Experiential Orientation are typographically separated by means of the hyphen. And as noted in other cases, Contextual Expansion compensates for the lack of human participants in the picture. Specifically, People are added as the "experts", i.e. as Sayers in a Verbal process.

Headline: "Humanity "on thin ice" in race to curb emissions, warns IPCC climate change report".

The headline, with its explicit mention of "Humanity" as Actor in a material process, is arguably the most representationally charged verbal element of the three. Although the intermediation by the verbal process possibly diminishes the sense of action of the Verbiage, the lexical choice "race" and the quotation "on thin ice" position people, figuratively speaking, in competitive contexts which call for quick action.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

In total people appear as:
Actors: 8 times
Sayers: 3 times
Target: 1 time
Carrier: 1 time

In purely visual terms, the results of this analysis generally align with the tendencies presented in the introduction particularly in relation to the predominance of decontextualized and metonymic representations. The images accompanying the news reports on the IPCC findings overwhelmingly rely on symbolic conventions – most notably, photographs of chimneys emitting smoke, which serve as visual cues for industrial pollution and environmental degradation. Most images also construe newsworthiness as Aesthetic Appeal (sublime) which, as argued, may tend to distance the viewer. This distancing occurs either through distraction (by highlighting the visual spectacle of the image) or through amplification (by casting the issue in overwhelming, even paralyzing, terms that strip the viewer of agency).

Among the newspapers, only *The Independent* includes photographs that incorporate human participants engaged in both transactional and non-transactional processes. Its use of the polyptych adds performative quality to the representation of climate action, by presenting a well-rounded view which mixes symbolic and more localized, emotional images. This format enables the presentation of a broader, more emotionally resonant perspective, one that balances symbolic abstraction with more localized and humanized frames of reference. This multimodal layering is akin to the structure of the IPCC reports themselves, which attempt to synthesize complex global phenomena into digestible and varied communicative forms. In visual grammatical terms, particular compositional choices are found to enhance engagement. Images taken from a low angle with a frontal perspective – such as the photograph of firefighters (Picture 1b) or the parched riverbed (Picture 2c) – are especially effective in "inserting" the viewer into the scene, thereby increasing identification. Similarly, images featuring direct gaze, such as the polar bear in Picture 2a, establish a visual address and convey attitude, although one might argue, that a human projector of the gaze could facilitate a more nuanced and empathetic connection.

Overall, then, the best visual grammatical resources for our purposes include the depiction of people as participants in transactional processes (e.g. the firefighter picture in Picture 1b), with a low/frontal camera position, and with participants looking at the viewer (e.g. Picture 2a). This combination allows for a blend of action and interaction, thus maximizing the resonance of the report and popularizing it for the lay reader.

By contrast, the linguistic elements of the news texts, particularly headlines and captions, tend to be more effective in constructing immediacy and engagement. The headlines feature three material processes embedded within Verbiage, which, as said above, diminish the immediacy of the link to human action. Still, some lexical choices "race", "final warning", "tipping point" contribute greatly to a general exhortative effect. Headlines, in this sense, are largely exempt from the aloofness of pictures. It is captions, however, that emerge as particularly important multimodal connectors; they take up the exhortative nature of headlines and counterbalances the abstraction of images. *The Times* and *The Independent*, for instance, by employing a combination of Contextual Expansion and Experiential Orientation, manage to locate the images, which makes them more tangible and expands them in ideational terms. Importantly, this makes room for other processes where people can appear as participants. In contrast, *The Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, though they also employ Contextual Expansion, tend to isolate the image in a symbolic register, thus reinforcing rather than overcoming its abstraction.

In sum, this analysis confirms that the visuals are less effective than language and need words for the description of climate change and the findings of the IPCC reports to be humanized. Although more compelling choices are possible, the press still appears to prefer more 'traditional' decontextualized and symbolic depictions. All the articles in this study feature images provided by image banks such as Getty and AP, which, as argued by Hansen and Machin (2008, 778), offer a "branded" vision of the environment that hinders the realistic potential of photojournalism. However, there is a very layered spectrum of possible choices. Projects like Climate Outreach, which feel the need to resonate with the audience and shorten the "psychological distance" of climate change, offer an image library that combines impacts and solutions (McLoughlin et al 2020) by showing people as committed, interacting and efficacious. Given the probable scenarios for the future (IPCC, 2023), it is essential that the press – and more generally mainstream media –  which remains the prevalent source of information on climate change (Schäfer 2020, 2) – begin using images as visual

exhortations, rather than as mere ornamental appendages.

While this study is necessarily limited in scope, which makes it hard to generalize its findings, it still suggests fruitful directions for further research. Future studies might employ corpus-assisted methodologies to examine larger samples or extend the analysis to other media platforms, which may exhibit different visual and narrative priorities. For instance, Niceforo (2022, 73) highlights how the remediation of the IPCC reports on social media introduces new multimodal strategies, including the use of emojis, hyperlinks, and interactive visuals. Exploring the affordances of these tools could enhance our understanding of how participation and affect are structured in digital climate discourse.

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