

2. Image research and platform vernaculars

A large news photograph of a migrant boat packed with people is overlaid with a heat map visualizing the aggregated results of eye-tracking research. The heat map visualizes the distribution of attention by showing in bright red zones where the test persons have looked the most; green and yellow show those areas where the eyes have travelled only briefly. Other parts of the image remained entirely unseen by the test persons, and they are, therefore, now clearly visible. Next to the large photograph is what looks like a contact sheet, small-size news photographs that have been meticulously annotated to indicate compositional lines and fixation points (pinpointing particular parts of the image that have actually been looked at). This installation, titled *Gaze Plots*, was presented by the Dutch artist Coralie Vogelaar as part of the Impakt Festival 2018 (see Figure 6), and is part of her larger series of art works addressing spread of news imagery. In this series, Vogelaar asks why certain news images are featured time and time again, while others simply “vanish into oblivion” (Vogelaar, 2018:1). Her work demonstrates visual methodologies, digitally, in a variety of ways that include visual research and experimentation with new technologies (in this particular case, the use of eye tracking software) as well as annotation and visualization for further research and discussion.



Figure 6: The installation, *Gaze Plots*, by Coralie Vogelaar, as presented at the Impakt Festival in 2018. Photos: Coralie Vogelaar.

The urgency of Vogelaar’s work is heightened by her choice of subject, namely, affective images of refugees and protests, overlaid with ‘dry’ software output. They are hard to watch and make us question the place and status these Artificial Intelligence technologies have on our daily lives, and the decisions we make on the basis of their outputs. Then there is the means that the artist used to collect her images. Vogelaar chose the hands-on approach of querying Google for news images she had found in news databases. Many such researchers working with digital materials similarly collect their materials online, either by saving one

image at a time manually or (batch-) querying the search engines or Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) or by using custom-built scrapers, specifically designed and developed to help create such collections of images. The images are saved in folders and range from a small set to large sets of images, often captured along with their metadata. In addition to researching special collections on a particular issue or theme, research can also address how platforms as a whole may have a particular *visual language*. In line with “platform vernaculars” (Gibbs et al., 2015), which refers to the different narrative patterns that shape content and information flows across platforms, we can speak of *visual vernaculars* as having distinct visual patterns and practices for different platforms.

Platform vernaculars

Visual vernaculars research contrasts images from different platforms are contrasted as offering different “windows” on a particular topic or issue. This approach offers researchers who critically think about the limitations of studying social media content, and rightly so, a productive way forward by asking: What is this topic according to Twitter? What is it according to Instagram? Do they provide identical, similar, or distinct views and descriptions of the same topic? Such questions will help create an understanding of both the textual and visual vernaculars as well as the cultures of use for each platform.

The example I want to offer here is also part of the aforementioned study on the visual representation of climate change. In this subproject, we looked particularly at the visual platform vernaculars on the issue of climate change on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Google Images, and Reddit (2017). Building on the notion of ‘platform vernaculars’ (Gibbs et al., 2015) and extending that notion to the visual realm of climate communication on different social media platforms, we set out to study climate change visual communication on six platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, and Google Images. The challenge of such a cross-platform analysis was to account for the platforms’ different technicalities and adapt our means of content collection and analysis accordingly.⁴ For the project, we devised platform-specific engagement and ranking metrics to filter and create subsets of the ‘most engaged with’ images (see the research protocol diagram in Figure 7). The reason for focusing on the most-engaged with content, rather than the diversity in visuals or the more marginal images, was that we were interested in the different dominant visual vernaculars as they demonstrate both the posting

4 See also Niederer et al., 2015.