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A picture worth a thousand words?

Visuals in public deliberation

WORKING DRAFT. COMMENTS WELCOME

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of visuals such as images, colour, symbols and videos in shaping and influencing public deliberation on controversial policy issues. To date, scholars and practitioners have focused mainly on the role of speech and text in deliberative democracy, as opposed to various non-speech acts. Yet visuals are a powerful medium for communication in contemporary democracies, especially for projecting political meanings and mobilising citizens. This is especially so in a communicative era where political debates have become increasingly multi-sensual. This paper examines visuals in the enactment of democracy understood in deliberative terms. More specifically it considers the roles that visuals perform in deliberative systems that form around political controversies. Drawing on an in-depth case study of the public debate surrounding a controversial coal seam gas project in Australia, the paper identifies how visuals shape the discursive boundaries of debates, depict who is affected by the controversy, and both clarify and confuse arguments. The paper considers how these different roles of visuals can enhance (but at times also undermine) public deliberation especially in polarised controversies.

INTRODUCTION

The visual dimension of contemporary political debates is ubiquitous. Images, videos, symbols and photos are a central feature of modern day political expression and activity, and are used extensively by various institutions and actors to shape the terms and content of political debate (e.g. Grabe and Bucy 2009; Doerr 2010, Bleiker et al. 2013). Visuals also play a large role in modern political advocacy and mobilisation. Protest movements increasingly use images and videos to challenge and reconfigure meanings, and to mobilise citizens around the globe (DeLuca and Peebles 2002; Juris 2008; Uldam and Askanius 2013). Some groups stage ‘image events’ in order to attract media coverage so their specific protest concerns can be disseminated to wider audiences (Delicath and DeLuca 2003). Individual citizens also use visuals to share information, promote concerns that they care about, and to express political opinions (e.g. van Zoonen et al. 2010; Shifman 2013). Indeed the digital era has made it possible for everyday people to develop and circulate images instantaneously to most places in the world (Shifman 2014).

Empirical research has sought to keep up with the increasingly visual form of contemporary politics. Emerging studies, for example, demonstrate how images can influence the framing of political issues (and policy solutions) (e.g. Bleiker et al. 2013). Others have studied how provocative images, films, photos and videos can trigger community outrage, public debate and action (e.g. Müller and Özcan 2007; Shifman 2013). Empirical research on activists and social movements reveals the capacity for visuals to mobilise and build solidarity (e.g. DeLuca 2005; Juris 2008; Uldam and Askanius 2013; Milner 2013). For some issues, visuals have become the communicative medium through which everyday people engage in political conversation, for example, as demonstrated by the thousands of homemade YouTube videos created in response to the fierce anti-Islam video, *Fitna* (e.g. van Zoonen et al. 2010). Recent scholarly attention has also shed light on the discursive power of visuals to incite a politics of fear (Bleiker et al. 2013), and even moral panic (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

Despite the visual turn in politics and political research, relatively little is known about the meaning of visuals for public deliberation. For example, what role do visuals play in shaping the terms of public debate? How do they influence who participates in a given political controversy and how? To what extent do images and symbols enable or constrain the voices of ‘affected publics’? How do visuals affect the deliberative capacity of public

debate — for example, to what extent do they polarise, clarify or confuse arguments in a particular controversy?

This paper begins to unpack these questions by using the lens of deliberative democracy to explore the *roles* that visuals perform in a political controversy. Consistent with recent shifts in deliberative democratic theory, we conceptualise public deliberation as a broad system that encompasses a diversity of communicative practices, from debates in parliaments and participatory forums through to more informal conversations and contestatory activities (Mansbridge et al. 2012). The ‘deliberative system’ concept lends itself well to studies of communication on contemporary political controversies, which typically involve multiple overlapping sites of expression, contestation and debate (e.g. Dodge 2014; Boswell 2013; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014).

To understand what visuals mean for public deliberation we empirically studied their use in a deliberative system surrounding a specific political controversy. This controversy-centred approach contrasts with much of the emerging empirical literature on visuals in politics, which tends to focus on the perspective of particular actors such as the media or activists (e.g. Bleiker et al. 2013; Doerr et al. 2015) or draws insights from multiple policy examples (e.g. Blair 1996; Lyons 2017). Yet for the purposes of understanding the role of visuals in public deliberation, the social and political context in which they are used deserves consideration. To this end we undertook an in-depth case study of the use of visuals in a controversy surrounding a proposed coal seam gas (CSG) project in Australia — the Narrabri Gas Project (NGP), located south of the town of Narrabri, 500km north-west of Sydney. We examine numerous visuals central to both sides of this controversy, analysing their content and how they are used and interpreted by key actors in the debate. We draw on extensive qualitative data including over 45 in-depth interviews, several fieldtrips to the region, and the content of relevant websites and social media platforms (particularly Facebook) (see Hendriks et al. 2016). Our analysis reveals that visuals shape the discursive boundaries of public debate, influence ideas about who is/should be included and excluded, and whose voices are/should be heard. Furthermore, they aid bonding and recognition, help to translate and amplify discourses from enclaves into the public sphere and shape understandings of trust, legitimacy and public accountability. However, we also find that visuals can pose significant dangers for deliberative systems: they can potentially fuel polarisation, bias discursive attention, and limit argumentative quality.

VISUALS IN PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Visuals have long been recognised as an important part of political life. Much of the recent scholarly attention on visuals has examined their role in election campaigns (e.g. Grabe and Bucy 2009; Parry-Giles 2010), political media coverage (e.g. Bleiker et al. 2013) and social movements and popular mobilisation (e.g. Doerr et al. 2015; DeLuca 2005, Uldam and Askanius 2013; Juris 2008, Deluca and Peeples 2002). Others have studied the role of visuals in the context of global politics and international relations (Bleiker 2001). Within the sub-field of public policy, visuals, and artefacts more broadly, have long been acknowledged as important devices for shaping meanings, building drama and reconfiguring power (Hajer and Uitermark 2008; Stone 2002; Yanow 1995).

Surprisingly little theoretical and empirical attention has been given to the role of visuals in literature on deliberative democracy. This is in large part due to the longstanding emphasis in deliberative scholarship on linguistic communication, particularly the role of speech acts (Rollo 2016). Early deliberative democrats emphasised the importance of rational political discussion, and norms of an ideal deliberative procedure (Habermas 1984; Cohen 1997). In these early works, public deliberation is largely conceptualised as a process involving equal citizens engaged in public argumentation where “no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (Habermas 1975, p. 108). In this structured and small-scale view of public deliberation there is little or no place room for visuals. Indeed images, photos, and art are potentially problematic for reason because they can be ambiguous, malleable, emotive, entertaining, entrancing, and manipulative (see Stephens 1998 p. 60). This speaks to a long-standing fear in political thought that aesthetics can corrupt our capacity to reason and rationality. Plato, for example, was highly critical of paintings and art because of they can create illusions and devalue reality. According to Stephens (1998 p. 60), Plato’s core democratic concern with visuals was that they “inevitably threatened to turn the populace away from the deeper, more cerebral rewards of sacred writings or philosophical discourse.” Similar arguments have followed for centuries about the dangers of images and icons for healthy public communication (see Mitchell 1986).

Yet when public deliberation is conceptualised in broader terms beyond the forum (e.g. Dryzek 1990, 2010; Chambers 2009; Hendriks 2006; Parkinson and Manbridge 2012), then the role of visuals in democratic life comes into view. In the public sphere, for example, visuals play an important rhetorical role in enriching understandings and arguments

(Finnegan and Kang 2004).¹ Images also bring important personal aspects to public deliberation. For example, images of leaders in election campaigns are important for making politicians more accessible and personal to the public, and in doing so they assist us make judgements about the character and virtues of our leaders (Parry-Giles 2010). Some visuals can also make powerful arguments because of their capacity to communicate propositions, illustrate inferences and persuade (Blair 1996; Shelley 1996; Birdsell and Groarke 1996). Visuals also perform argumentative functions in political controversies and public deliberation. For example, Delicath and Deluca (2003 p. 317-18) describe how staged protest activities of environmental groups or ‘image events’ operate as “argumentative fragments...capable of offering unstated propositions and advancing indirect and incomplete claims” in ways that block some ideas while advancing others.

Visuals also offer emancipatory aspects to the public sphere through aesthetic experiences that can educate citizens, pass on cultural traditions, enhance social integration, socialisation and so on (Finnegan and Kang 2004). Those inspired by the prolific use of images on digital platforms contend that some images, for example those that draw on popular culture, can speak to diverse audiences and thereby facilitate broad public debate (Milner 2013; Lyons 2017). Some scholars suggest that the use of visuals in digital environments is opening-up new opportunities for dialogue. For example, Doerr’s (2010 p. 49) comparative study of visuals in Mayday parades in Italy and Germany found evidence of people engaging in “visual dialogues” which in turn widen the “cultural schemes of political deliberation”. The use of visuals in digital environments also reshapes how we think of democratic inclusion and citizenship more broadly. For example, van Zoonen et al. (2010 p. 259) studied of over 700 YouTube videos that were uploaded after the release of the anti-Islam film *Fitna* (produced in 2008 by a member of the Dutch parliament, Geert Wilders, and disseminated through a video-sharing website). They contend that visuals enable a ‘placeless public debate’ where people can perform citizenship in ways that are not limited by the boundaries of the nation-state, or a demarcated polity.

We extend these discussions in this paper by exploring the functions of visuals in public deliberation in systemic terms. In line with recent thinking in democratic theory we conceptualise a ‘deliberative system’ as a series of multiple and overlapping forms of

¹ Some classic public sphere theorists, such as Dewey (1927) and Habermas’ later work (1996) are more circumspect about the role of visuals in the public sphere; they value the communicative potential of “good images” such as art, but warn of the dangers of advertising, public relations and propaganda (see Finnegan and Fang 2004).

political communication that take place in multiple sites including parliaments, social movements, interest groups, elite committees, citizens' forums, the media, online discussions and in everyday talk among citizens. The deliberative system offers conceptual space to consider the role of non-speech acts in public deliberation, such as silence, deeds and the choice to refuse or exit from participation (Rollo 2016). To date there has been little theoretical or empirical consideration of what role visuals play in a systemic understanding of deliberative democracy. One notable exception is the recent work of Benjamin Lyons (2017) who discusses the communicative power of visuals in his exploration of social media as a form of linkage in deliberative systems. Drawing on the work of cultural studies and communication scholars (e.g. Milner 2013; Shifman 2013), Lyons describes how 'image memes' — such as small still-picture and animated GIF files, often with superimposed text — are quickly produced and shared on digital platforms. He argues that in the online environment such "Internet memes" provide important discursive and narrative linkages at the systems level;² they enable the translation of ideas and perspectives from specific enclaves to various sites in the deliberative system.

In this paper we push this line of research further by offering a contextualised empirical investigation of the uses and roles of online and offline visuals in a specific public controversy.

² The phrase "Internet meme" commonly describes "the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet" (Shifman 2013 p. 362).

VISUALS IN ACTION: THE NARRABRI GAS PROJECT

Our analysis centres on prominent visuals in the public controversy surrounding a proposed coal seam gas project (the Narrabri Gas Project, or NGP) in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. We analysed the use and roles visuals in both offline environments (in those on the streets, towns, rural areas and landscape) and in online environments (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and websites). Offline data was collected over three separate fieldtrips to the region between 2015-2017, while online data draws on relevant websites and social media platforms (particularly Facebook) (see Hendriks et al. 2016). In addition we conducted interviews with relevant regional actors —13 specifically explored views on the role of visuals in this particular controversy, and a further 33 for broader communicative context of the controversy. We also considered the observed effects of visuals in terms how they can enhance (but at times also undermine) deliberative systems that form around political controversies.

The proponent of the NGP, Santos, plans to develop 850 gas wells across approximately 100 square kilometres. The majority of the project area lies within an area of forest zoned for commercial development, but also includes some private agricultural land. If the Project proceeds, it is projected to supply up to 200 terajoules of gas per day, equivalent to between 25% and 50% of the entire state of New South Wales gas demand over an operational life of more than 20 years (Buckley 2014; Knox and Baulderstone 2014). Even though the project has not received final approval and the construction phase has not yet commenced, multiple test drilling sites, pipelines, water ponds, roads, and a water treatment facility have been already been established as part of Santos' exploration activities and the operations of Santos' predecessor, Eastern Star Gas (North West Alliance and The Wilderness Society, 2014; Santos 2012; The Wilderness Society et al.. 2011).

Coal seam gas development in the Narrabri region has attracted strong and sustained opposition since at least 2009. Multiple concerns have brought together a diverse range of local and state-based opponents. The location of the project in the Pilliga Forest, its proximity to the prime agricultural area of the Liverpool Plains, and the potential for negative impacts on the recharge zone of the Great Artesian Basin (Australia's largest groundwater basin), have defined the opposition to the NGP. These concerns are voiced alongside more general concerns about CSG's impact on water, farm land, and health that are prominent across Australia. Several incidents of malpractice by CSG companies in the

Pilliga Forest have helped to accentuate opposition in the Narrabri case (see North West Alliance 2014).

The controversy surrounding the NGP is highly polarised, with anti-CSG groups (farmers and environmentalists) pitted against pro-CSG groups (mining companies, some local businesses and the State government). The first opponents to CSG in the Narrabri region appear to have been farmers on the Liverpool Plains who had previously organised to oppose coal mining in their area (News ABC 2009, 2010). From mid-2011 regional, state and national environmental groups became more conspicuously involved, with the Pilliga Forest the focus of their attention (AAP 2011; Fuller 2011; The Wilderness Society et al. 2011). By mid-2013, around 30 groups comprised the North West Alliance — an umbrella organisation of local and supporting groups that oppose coal and coal seam gas in north-west NSW (The Wilderness Society 2013). These groups have dominated the public discursive space in both face-to-face and online spaces; they have mobilised the community to engage in large community protests and forums, and have developed multiple webpages, Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter accounts and YouTube clips.

The public campaign to support the NGP was slower to establish an offline and online presence. In late 2014 the pro-CSG group ‘Yes2Gas From the Pilliga’ formed, at least partly in response to the prolific anti-CSG movement in the region (Narrabri Courier 2014). Its core message is that CSG development presents employment and economic opportunities in the region. The group has an online presence through a Facebook page, Twitter account, and webpage, and it has also placed advertisements in local media profiling local farmers and business people who support the Santos project. It also regularly has information stalls at monthly local markets.

While the NGP is an important issue in the local region, it has also attracted significant political attention at various times across the state of NSW, as well as nationally and internationally. For example, in March 2015 the NGP controversy became a state-wide election issue with the leader of the NSW Labor Opposition, Luke Foley, making a pre-election commitment to ban CSG from the Pilliga Forest if his party was elected (Macdonald-Smith 2015). Labor lost the election, but national attention was again drawn to the NGP when it was one of several project included in a Senate inquiry of the Federal

Parliament into GSG.³ The NGP has also been discussed nationally in the context of national debates over Australia's domestic gas security (with increasing gas volumes destined to international exports) (e.g. Crowe 2017). Indeed the potential of the NGP to substantially contribute to NSW gas supply has also won it vocal support from the conservative Coalition NSW State Government (see for example, Narrabri Courier 2015). In early 2017 Santos lodged its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project. The EIS attracted over 23,000 public submissions many of which were from outside the region, including 200 from overseas (NSW DPE 2017). To date, the battle for and against the NGP continues, with the independent Planning Assessment Commission yet to make a final decision on the merits of the project (NSW DPE 2017).

Overall the deliberative system that has formed around the NGP includes a multiplicity of communicative spaces. It encompasses many traditional spaces such as print and electronic news media, parliamentary debates, council meetings, legislative inquiries and planning procedures (both with public submission processes), elections and political party rooms discussions, scientific inquiries and expert commissions, stakeholder forums, community meetings, and protests. It has also involved numerous online spaces, including websites, Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter accounts, e-petitions, YouTube and other films. Interviews and fieldwork in the region has also revealed that considerable public discussion on the NGP occurs in everyday spaces such as in the bakeries, cafes, pubs, shops, sporting fields, and schools in the towns and localities potentially affected by the proposal.

Within the NGP deliberative system visuals are used extensively offline in the regional areas where the controversy is playing out, and in various online spaces particularly websites, Facebook and YouTube. Offline the most prolific and effective image has been the yellow and black triangle of the anti-NGP movement. Designed by the national anti-CSG group 'Lock the Gate', these yellow triangles are spread across the landscape attached to trees and farm gates, along the roads on car stickers; they provide an immediate visual representation of opposition to the proposed gas project. Other offline visuals used in the controversy include photos in the local paper, street placards, and staged 'image events' (after Delicath and DeLuca 2003). People from both sides of the controversy are also visually present in the community; for example, Santos has opened up public offices (or 'shop fronts') in the mainstream of several local towns; or they hold information stalls at the monthly food markets, local agricultural shows and conduct tours of the affected areas.

³ The Federal Senate Select Committee on Unconventional Gas Mining – The 'Bender Inquiry' 2015-16

In the online environment visuals are very diverse; some are highly stylised and professional, for example the Santos' project website,⁴ while others are relatively simple and low budget as demonstrated by the Yes2Gas⁵ and North West Alliance websites⁶ and the numerous Facebook pages dedicated to the issue (see Hendriks et al. 2016).

While the visuals associated with the controversy (both offline and online) are diverse, their use and the meaning differs between the two opposing sides of the debate. Our analysis in this paper builds on the previous research we conducted on the performative analysis of the online sites associated with the NGP controversy (Hendriks et al. 2016). That research focused on the visuals and content posted in Facebook sites by actors from both sides of the debate. In this paper, we consider the use and roles of visuals in a range of online and offline settings, based on the insights we gained from our in-depth interviews with people involved in the local debate. Our analysis demonstrates that in most instances visuals are used for various strategic purposes with targeted audiences in mind. Below we discuss six main uses of visuals in this particular controversy. A summary of our analysis is presented in Table 1.

⁴ <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/>

⁵ <http://www.yes2gas.net/>

⁶ <http://www.csgfreenorthwest.org.au/>

Table 1: Uses and democratic roles of visuals in the NGP controversy

| Use of visuals in the NGP controversy | Examples | Democratic roles of visuals in public deliberation |
|---|---|---|
| <p>i. Visuals to frame issues</p> <p><i>The NGP is about...</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> CSG can co-exist with farming Project is non-political Issues resolved by technical facts</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> CSG will destroy water, landscape and biodiversity CSG dangerous, risky</p> | <p>Defining boundaries of the debate through framing issues and defining what is contested (and not)</p> <p>Translating and amplifying discourses from enclaves to broader publics</p> |
| <p>ii. Visuals to depict to ‘the affected’</p> <p><i>The NGP will affect...</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> Individual photos of farmers, people with new jobs, Local business gaining from the project Group photos show community cohesion, harmony and many local faces of support</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> Individual images/videos of farmers, families, pregnant women, children, Indigenous peoples, threatened species Group photos of mass gatherings and protest photos</p> | <p>Influencing inclusion/exclusion of particular publics</p> |
| <p>iii. Visuals as cues</p> <p><i>My/Their position on the NGP is....</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> Yes2Gas signs, caps and other merchandise Advertisements in local media Colours: Green and white (Yes2Gas), blue (Santos)</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> Lock the gate triangle Bumper Stickers Warning/danger colours: yellow and black</p> | <p>Bonding and recognition within enclaves by providing discursive short cuts</p> <p>Translating and amplifying discourses from enclaves to broader publics</p> <p>Affecting argumentative quality of the debate</p> |
| <p>iv. Visuals for scale and physicality</p> <p><i>Seeing is believing</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> Tours of the proposed facilities Bringing the Queensland experience to the region</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> Tours in the forests Site visits to CSG areas in Queensland Bringing Queensland and the US experience to the region</p> | <p>Defining boundaries of the debate by physically seeing impacts</p> <p>Translating and amplifying discourses from enclaves to broader publics</p> <p>Shaping understanding of trust, legitimacy and accountability by bearing witness</p> |
| <p>v. Visuals to be seen</p> <p><i>I’m here!</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> Santos shop-fronts Market stalls</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> Staged demonstrations, highway protests to attract media Forest camp Knitting on the street (KNAG)</p> | <p>Shaping notions of trust, legitimacy and accountability by being locally present in public spaces</p> <p>Translating discourses from enclaves to public sphere</p> |
| <p>vi. Visuals for surveillance</p> <p><i>We’re watching</i></p> | <p><i>Pro:</i> Following and watching protests</p> <p><i>Anti:</i> Videos and photos of pollution and malpractice</p> | <p>Shaping notions of trust, legitimacy and accountability by bearing witness</p> |

i) The use of visuals to frame the controversy

Images, symbols and photos are used extensively in the controversy to project a particular narrative about NGP; and in doing so they emphasise different frames and arguments about the controversy. Each frame offers a particular way of classifying information that enables people to make sense, relate and label everyday occurrences in a particular way (Goffman, 1974). In doing so, each image selects some aspects of perceived reality and promotes a particular problem definition. For example, those supporting the NGP use imagery of rural places and technical expertise to reassure the community that the project poses no threat to agriculture and that the two industries can co-exist. They project images of the benefits of the project — of local employees and of farmers working together with Santos, and of local businesspeople and community members who support the project (see Figure 1). There are also many images of Santos' commitment to the local community, for example supporting the football team and the local annual show (see Santos' Facebook page⁷).



Figure 1: Image from Santos' Narrabri Gas Project⁸

It is interesting to also note what is *not* visualised in such accounts. For example, images used on Santos' website and Facebook page and in hard copy publications on the NGP generally de-emphasise gas exploration and infrastructure development; instead the chosen visuals foreground people and agriculture (see Figure 2 below from the Santos Facebook page).

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/santosnsw/>

⁸ <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/community/landholders/>



Figure 2: Cover image used on Santos’ Facebook site for the Narrabri Gas, foregrounding agriculture with gas infrastructure barely discernible⁹

Those opposing the NGP also develop and project scripts about the controversy through the imagery they deploy online and in the region where the project is proposed. Local anti-CSG groups commonly broadcast images of rural people and places, emphasising a narrative about the threat CSG poses to livelihoods, lifestyles, landscapes, the agricultural industry and precious water resources. More environmentally-focused groups regularly use images of the iconic Pilliga Forest and some of its important threatened species. Scenes from blockades and protests are also frequently shared on social media — especially those that depict large numbers of local people opposed to development, unlikely conservative-farmer-activists taking direct action, and dramatic images such as women dressed as ‘climate angels’ resisting police arrest (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). People in the region have identified these latter two images as some of the most powerful images in the local debate.¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/santosnsw/>

¹⁰ Interviewee #22, 6.6.17.



Figure 3: ‘Unlikely protesters’: Farmers, Neil and Anne Kennedy, from Coonamble protesting at Santos’ Leewood facility¹¹



Figure 4: Image of a ‘Climate Angel’ protestor in the Pilliga Forest broadcast on social media¹²

Other actors such as the Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG) use images to publicise their activities. They use images to reframe the tone of the debate away from a highly polarised antagonistic issue to something that is fun and personal (see Clarke 2016). For example on their main website they use images of women enjoying themselves while protesting against CSG with their ‘future generations’, on their land and even on holidays.¹³ Such visuals are a potent means of reaching people who may not otherwise be engaged.

¹¹ <http://www.westernmagazine.com.au/story/3712920/protesters-arrested-in-pilliga-forest/>

¹² <https://twitter.com/hashtag/ClimateAngel?src=hash>

¹³ <http://www.knitting-nannas.com/>

The consistent colours (yellow and black) and symbols (beanies, knitting needles, wool) also connects local KNAG 'loops' with KNAG loops elsewhere, generating a larger circle of concern and engagement. On social media this translates to wide broadcasting of images that draw on the KNAG brand (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).



Figure 5: Image from KNAG website, demonstrating the group's characteristically fun and humorous style¹⁴



Figure 6: Knitting Nannas protesting against Santos at AgQuip, Gunnedah in North West NSW¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://www.knitting-nannas.com/>, accessed 18.9.15

¹⁵ http://www.imgrum.org/media/1319102737082125591_2328992566

ii) The use of visuals to represent ‘the affected’

Both sides of the polarised public debate on the NGP use visuals, especially photos, to depict who is potentially ‘affected’. Here imagery is intentionally personal; individual portraits are used of well-known local farmers, business people, their employees, as well as women, children and Indigenous peoples.

For those opposing the project, visuals of the ‘affected’ have been an important means through which ‘unheard’ perspectives are voiced. One example is the series of intimate portraits of individuals and families taken at the Narrabri Big Picture event that deliver the stories of local opposition through imagery (see Figure 7 below).



Figure 7: Family portrait taken at the Narrabri Big Picture event posted on People for the Plains Facebook page¹⁶

Other visuals are used to bring forth indigenous perspectives on the NGP. Consider, for example, the YouTube clip in which local landholder and teacher Jane Judd, and Indigenous woman Aunty Maureen interact closely in sharing their personal and advocacy stories about what the Pilliga bush means to them and their communities, and their visions for the future (see Figure 8).

¹⁶<https://www.facebook.com/peoplefortheplains/photos/a.1494339837468163.1073741832.1430335823868565/1689586044610207/?type=3&theater>



Figure 8: Screenshot from 'Aunty Maureen and Jane's Pilliga' YouTube video¹⁷

On the other side of the debate, the local pro-CSG group 'Yes2Gas' has placed a series of ads in the local newspaper with close-up photos to similarly depict the personal stories of local farmers and business people, but those who would like to see the project go ahead (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Photo used in an ad from Yes2Gas depicting local support for the NGP, published in the local newspaper and also available on the Yes2Gas Facebook page¹⁸

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFFlt0mQF8s>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/Yes2Gas/photos/a.1572608346305918.1073741828.1542098756023544/1617553178478101/?type=3&theater>

As well as these close-up, personalised images, people on both sides of the debate use visuals to demonstrate the numbers that they represent; as a sign of solidarity for those who stand to be affected by the potential positive or negative aspects of the project (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). Both the personalised and the crowd images are used to positively or negatively depict affected publics and frame notions of insiders/outsideers.



Figure 10: Yes2Gas depicting a crowd¹⁹



Figure 11: People for the Plains depicting a crowd²⁰

¹⁹

<https://www.facebook.com/Yes2Gas/photos/a.1542111976022222.1073741827.1542098756023544/1572682282965191/?type=3&theater>

²⁰

<https://www.facebook.com/peoplefortheplains/photos/a.1430346743867473.1073741826.1430335823868565/1580456388856507/?type=3&theater>

In depicting affected publics, visuals can serve to re-cast the main players in the controversy and this in turn affects the inclusivity/exclusivity of the public debate. In the NGP there is evidence of visuals both opening up debate to different voices, as well as trying to exclude ‘unwanted’ perspectives. For example, in some visuals the central subjects are non-human, including different species potentially affected by the NGP (either positively or negatively) such as the endangered Black-striped Wallaby and vulnerable Pilliga Mouse (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Pilliga Mouse, a prominent visual used by The Wilderness Society in the campaign to stop the NGP²¹

Other images intentionally seek to cast certain characters in a particularly negative light (see Figure 13).

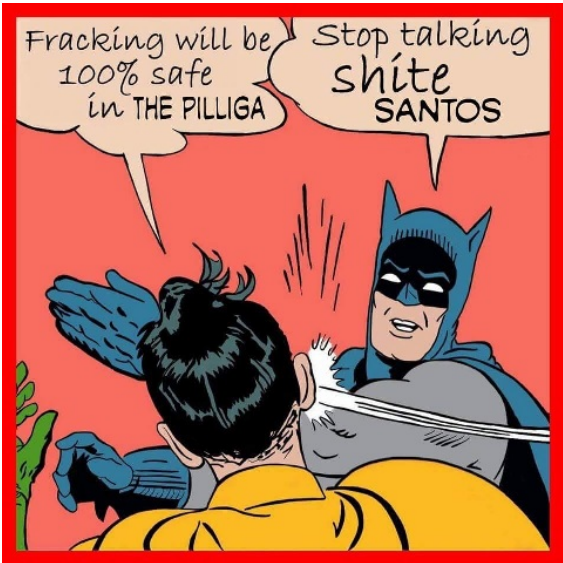


Figure 13: A meme posted on Twitter that demonises Santos²²

²¹ <https://www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/pilliga-forest>

iii) The use of visuals as cues

Visuals, particularly icons and symbols, have been used extensively in this controversy as discursive cues to signal support or opposition to the project. The most prolific and effective discursive cue has been the yellow and black triangle of the anti-CSG movement, as mentioned above (see Figure 14).



Figure 14: Triangular Lock the Gate symbol on a farm gate, photographed during fieldwork, 2015²³

In response to this strong anti-CSG visual device, local pro-CSG residents developed an alternative green and white 'Yes2Gas' logo that adorns their digital pages as well as signs, banners and merchandise such as the 'Yes to Gas' cap (see Figure 15).

²² <https://twitter.com/AustralisTerry/status/843258867504967680>

²³ Photo by Selen Ercan



Figure 15: A Yes2Gas sign and Yes2Gas caps²⁴

We also witnessed in the controversy how some visual cues were tarnished or captured by opponents. Consider, for example, the campaign effort of The Wilderness Society in Figure 16, in which Santos' brand is defaced.



Figure 16: The Wilderness Society captures and defaces the Santos brand²⁵

²⁴ The sign was photographed by Brendon Thorne for Bloomberg:
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-06-12/why-australia-can-t-get-at-its-huge-underground-gas-reserves>; Image of caps taken from
<https://www.facebook.com/Yes2Gas/photos/a.1572608346305918.1073741828.1542098756023544/1721895964710488/?type=3&theater>

²⁵ <https://www.wilderness.org.au/articles/credit-suisse-agrees-%E2%80%93-santos-risky-business>

iv) The use of visuals for scale and physicality

Both proponents and opponents of the NGP run public tours to demonstrate to interested people the scale and other physical dimensions of the proposed project. Participants in such tours are encouraged to ‘see and believe’. For example, Santos runs a half-day community tour each month when there is enough demand (see Figure 17). The authors were taken on such a tour; it involved Santos employees driving us to see a wastewater processing facility in the Pilliga Forest, its large water storage ponds, a gas well site in the middle of a cropping paddock, and a gas flare north of the forest. We were also shown old spill sites and the efforts being made towards rehabilitation of those areas. These are matter-of-fact tours with a visual demonstration of highly technical, controlled, industrial workings. Overall there is an emphasis on portraying minimal disturbance in a vast landscape of forest and farmland.



Figure 17: A Santos monthly community tour²⁶

Those opposing the NGP also run ‘discovery’ tours each month in the Pilliga Forest. Typically these eco-tours run over three days, with participants driving in convoy. As well as showing participants the gas production and spill sites, a strong purpose of these tours is to “showcase the beauty of the region” (Forbes 2012). The focus on the aesthetics aspects

²⁶ <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/2015/01/people-for-the-plains-tour-santos-operations/>

emphasise what is at stake in a more general sense, and would assist in helping participants form some level of attachment to the place, thereby making them more likely to actively engage in oppositional work. The organisers of these Pilliga anti-CSG tours have also developed instructions for one day, three day and ‘grey nomad’ self-guided tours (Schultz 2016) in attempt to spread the visual/physical experience to as many people as possible. According to one tour guide, many people who attend the tours often return to the forest for the purpose of showing others around and to demonstrate what the NGP will mean for the forest and surrounding ecosystems.²⁷

In addition to local tours, people from different sides of the debate have also visited the northern state of Queensland to witness the social and community impacts of more extensive CSG production.²⁸ Speakers from Queensland are also invited into the Narrabri region to share their expertise or share their personal experiences. Speakers from both sides of the controversy use photos, videos or visuals descriptions of the Queensland experience for their argumentation.

Overall these particular visuals bring people to ‘see’ the real world of CSG in action, and in doing so they help people make sense of the technology for their local context. And while participants seek out these types of visual ‘real world’ experiences, the various decisions about what is shown and interpretations placed on what is seen, highlights that strategic meaning-making is active offline as well as online.

v) The use of visuals to be seen

Actors in the NGP controversy also use the visual medium as a way of being seen either to attract media attention or to communicate presence in the region. For example, the anti-CSG movement uses visuals extensively to attract media attention, by staging events and actions such as blockages, highway actions, and protests camps. Images from these staged events are quickly posted onto websites and Facebook pages to attract local and national media interest (e.g. Figure 18).

²⁷ Interviewee # 45, 9.6.17

²⁸Examples include: <http://blogs.abc.net.au/nsw/2012/02/gunnedahs-csg-tour-of-queensland.html>;
<https://www.facebook.com/wilderness.society/posts/10152376748193500>;
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2013-08-14/gsg-tour-qld.jpg/4886842>



Figure 18: Example of a protest photo posted to Facebook²⁹

The anti-CSG movement is also visually present offline, in the community. Besides protests and demonstrations they hold information stalls at the markets. Groups of Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAGs) sit and knit as a way to ‘be present’ at protests, official meetings and in the street (see Figure 19).



Figure 19: Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAGs) sit and knit during a Planning and Assessment hearing in Narrabri in 2014³⁰

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<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1625167207811681&set=g.1633945210200948&type=1&theater>

³⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-19/santos-exploration-extension-discussed-at-pac-meeting-in-narrab/5535178?pfmredir=sm>

Those supporting the project are also visually present in the community; they also hold information stalls at the monthly markets. Santos' role in the community is reinforced visually through its physical presence in Narrabri — they have a permanent shop front in the main street and there is the regular appearance of its logo on company vehicles, staff uniforms, and sport sponsorship (see Figure 20).



Figure 20: Santos sports' sponsorship puts the company name on display in the community³¹

vi) The use of visuals for monitoring and surveillance

Visuals are also used actively in the NGP to monitor the actions of 'the other side'. Here the visual is about surveillance and keeping track of what opponents are up to. According to our interviews, actors on both sides of the controversy actively monitor relevant online sites and digital platforms to strategically assess what is being said, or what is planned and so on. As a result of monitoring and surveillance, actors may then go onto the public record in order to 'correct misinformation'. For example, Santos has produced press statements in relation to the NGP in response to false claims it has seen in the media or on particular sites that it seeks to 'correct'.³² Surveillance is also something that occurs offline as well. According to some interviewees, Santos security staff regularly follow and track protestors in the forests.

³¹ <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/>

³² For example, see <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/2015/06/santos-statement-on-siding-spring-observatory-meeting/>; <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/2017/05/>

Anti-CSG groups also use visuals such as photos and film to expose activities that are illegal or detrimental to the environment. One local opponent of the NGP has created a YouTube channel with twelve short videos depicting what he projects is Santos' poor practice in the Pilliga Forest.³³ This kind of public surveillance is mostly about 'shaming and naming'.

Similarly, anti-CSG group Lock the Gate uses 'Flickr' to put together a 'pictorial history' of CSG in the Pilliga that highlights damage to water, land and animals.³⁴

THE ROLES OF VISUALS IN PUBLIC DELIBERATION

In the previous section, we identified six key uses of visuals in the context of the NGP controversy drawing on the interviews we conducted with actors involved in the debate and observations in the region during fieldwork. In what follows we discuss how the case study informs our understanding of the roles visual perform in public deliberation.

1. Defining boundaries of the debate

Visuals help to define the scope and parameters of the public debate around contested issues. Symbols and imagery provide room for alternative ways of understanding 'the problem' and issues at stake. For example, in our case study environmentalists use visuals to frame the controversy as a battle against mining companies and untrustworthy governments. Other visuals, such as those from the Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG), reframe the NGP controversy as something fun, humorous and about community. Visuals can also be used to depoliticise issues. Consider, for example, how Santos uses imagery to frame the NGP as an opportunity for local farmers and the town of Narrabri; while they minimise the visual story of gas exploration, extraction and development in the landscape.

Visuals also serve to define the geographical scope of the controversy. In our case study, proponents visually frame the NGP as a small scale local project that will benefit farmers and the town of Narrabri, whereas opponents draw upon imagery to frame the NGP as something with detrimental impacts for the broader region, NSW, the nation and the world.

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWGA1j6bDQzzAUhcm8peKpA>

³⁴ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lockthegatealliance/sets/72157644814078323/>

2. Influencing inclusion/exclusion

Visuals play an important role in influencing inclusivity in the deliberative system around a controversy by opening up public debate to new voices and perspectives. For example in the NGP debate we see and hear a diversity of views, including those from local farmers, businesses, their employees, as well as women, children and Indigenous peoples. In some online platforms the images of non-human animals are front and centre, including different species potentially affected by the NGP.

Visuals can serve to overcome some of the ways our physical environment can constrain inclusion in public debate. For example, it can be challenging to form inclusive publics in contexts where citizens are divided by administrative boundaries or geographical distances (as is the case in rural and remote context of the NGP controversy). However, in our case study the distribution of symbols throughout the landscape and on the streets, and the circulation of images and videos on online platforms, enabled concerned citizens and communities to ‘share’ visual cues and stories, despite the vast distances between them.

The accessibility of visuals spaces also extends to those who hold unpopular perspectives. For example, visuals from the local anonymous local residents, Yes2Gas, provide a cue or signpost to others in the community to publically stand up and express their support for the NGP.

3. Translating and amplifying

Through their capacity to frame issues, visuals serve important translation functions in deliberative systems by making issues more publicly accessible. Films, music, videos, photos and symbols can make controversies more relevant to the broader public by depicting the issues as interesting, simple, dramatic, personal or fun. Visuals also work on a more emotive level, appealing to personal feelings, to humour, to narratives and to our imagination. Visuals also help take specific concerns from enclave publics to broader audiences and in doing so they can facilitate large-scale public deliberation.

In our case study, visuals serve to translate a dry technical engineering issue into an issue that is rural/personal/political/fun/dramatic. Consistent with other empirical studies on visuals in social movements (e.g. DeLuca and Peeples 2002; Juris 2008; Milner 2013) we find that visuals assist movements to mobilise and build solidarity. In the NGP debate

activists stage dramatic protests and disruptive actions to attract media and in doing so they translate a local controversy to broader publics. We also see how visuals provide recognisable visual cues (e.g. colour, shapes), and how they can be easily circulated and re-produced, especially online.

4. Shaping trust, legitimacy and public accountability

Visuals perform an important role in shaping public understandings of trust, legitimacy and accountability in deliberative systems. In our case study, we saw how ‘being visual’ serves to build trust in the community and demonstrate legitimacy. Especially powerful here is the role of ‘presence’, for example Santos’ permanent shop front, and photos demonstrating its financial support for community events and infrastructure.

Visuals can also be used to undermine public trust and legitimacy. For example, the regular protests by Knitting Nannas question the legitimacy of political authority. These ‘wise women’ bear witness and demonstrate ongoing community questioning and concern. Others use imagery for surveillance to document pollution and corporate or civil misconduct to promote community distrust.

Imagery and film can raise public concerns about corporate and public accountability. For example videos serve to expose activities that are illegal or detrimental to the environment. In this way visuals are used to scrutinise the practices, activities and policies of policy actors (most obviously government and industry, but also environmentalists), and hold them to account.

5. Bonding and recognition amongst like-minded

Online and offline visuals are important artefacts for facilitating bonding and recognition amongst like-minded groups and individuals. Online, visuals are circulated to followers to encourage their participation and action; in offline spaces visuals demonstrate solidarity and resistance, such as the presence of yellow and black triangle spread throughout the landscape.

Yet in simplifying complex arguments, visuals tend to privilege recognition over understanding. In our case study we observe how visuals provide discursive short cuts and act as signifiers of recognition amongst like-minded. Visuals can also fuel antagonism: in our controversy some interviewees described how they feared using certain visuals for fear

of harassment in the community. Our research suggests that visuals fuel polarisation because they hinder communication across difference.

6. Shifting discursive attention

As translation devices, visuals can shift discursive attention in deliberative systems towards issues or perspectives that are more popular/dramatic/sensational. Perspectives and arguments that are more nuanced, technical, diffuse or less-popular are not always well-served by visuals.

In the case study considered in this paper, many of the contested issues revolve around highly technical and scientific claims, for example, on the potential hydrogeological impacts of extracting CSG. Yet no visual can easily capture all these technical arguments. In our case study the most effective visuals were those depicting drama and negative impacts, while the arguments about the more diffuse positive benefits of the project (such as increased employment, or additional local revenue) are harder to depict visually. In this controversy, the anti-CSG movement has been far more successful in having clear brands (yellow triangle) and using dramatic images (protest actions), which has contributed to the overall success of their public campaigns. The visual bias in the debate towards the anti-NGP perspective is something commented upon by a number of supporters of the project we interviewed.

7. Affecting argumentative quality

Another democratic downside of the translation function of visuals is that they work on argumentative shortcuts. This has epistemic consequences for deliberative systems; visuals can make complex issues more understandable but in the translation, some arguments can be lost, misdirected or misunderstood. Similar observations have been made of online videos (YouTube) in that they can fail to provide viewers with the larger political and historical context of issues (Fenton & Barassi 2011; Gregory 2010).

In our case study, visuals on both sides of the debate promote claims using visuals that would probably not have withstood a robust process of deliberative argumentation. For example, supporters of the project rely strongly on images of people (industry staff, people who support or might benefit from the project) rather than of the actual gas infrastructure and physical impacts. Similarly anti-CSG campaigners have used visuals to bring arguments from elsewhere into view: images and ‘horror stories’ from Queensland and the

United States are commonly depicted even though the geology and technological conditions are very different from those in the region of the NGP. So despite the different geological and engineering conditions of CSG in Queensland, it has become an important visual reference point for the anti-NGP movement.

We found limited evidence of visual dialogue in our case, with most visuals aimed at creating statements and setting agendas, rather than reaching mutual understanding with opponents. This speaks to a broader weakness of visual argument that Blair (1996) points out in his discussion of the argumentative force of visuals in paintings, magazines, commercials and cartoons. He contends that visual argument tend to be a “one-sided, uni-dimensional argument...they present the case for one side only, without including the arguments against it, or without doing so sympathetically, and without representing alternative standpoints and their merits and defects” (Blair 1996 p. 38).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we empirically considered the role of visuals in public deliberation understood in systemic terms. Our in-depth case analysis of a polarised controversy demonstrates how visuals can open up as well as constrain public deliberation on divisive issues. We found that actors on both sides of the debate use visuals very deliberately to shape meanings of the issue, and understandings of potentially affected publics.

Drawing insights from this empirical study we argue that visuals perform various democratic functions in contemporary deliberative systems. They can make political issues more accessible and relevant to broader publics through the employment of different types of aesthetics (such as colour, films, music, photos) and repertoires, such as humour and story-telling. In doing so, visuals shape the boundaries of the deliberative systems around a given controversy, and define who should be seen as legitimate participants in the debate. In other words, visuals can make deliberative systems more porous: they open public debate up to new perspectives and forms of expression. Of course more characters on the stage may simply mean an overcrowding of discursive space, making it difficult for decision makers to know who to listen to (or they might simply listen to the loudest). Moreover while visuals may provide alternative opportunities for expression, they are not necessarily always noticed (Ercan et al. 2015). Indeed as we observed in our case study, at

some point a visual device (for example a prolific symbol) can be so ubiquitous that it becomes invisible.

On the whole our empirical study demonstrates that visuals have the potential to reconfigure existing power dynamics in deliberative systems. In the case considered here the alliances of anti-CSG actors have been most effective at using the communicative functions of visuals in the CSG deliberative system. As we see, some groups use visuals to question and delegitimise political authority (through humour, exposing malpractice or shaming), which helps to reconfigure power relations. This finding is consistent with other studies showing how environmental activist groups worldwide use images to reach broader audiences and mobilise the public for their cause (e.g. Delicath and DeLuca 2003).

While visuals have communicative strengths, they also carry some dangers for public deliberation, most significantly because not all arguments lend themselves well to visualisation. Visuals, particularly brands and symbols, can also fuel polarisation and antagonism because they lend themselves to recognition amongst like-minded as opposed to mutual understanding across differences. This is a topic that deserves further empirical investigation but our research suggests that visuals potentially privilege political arguments that rely on dramatic impacts and effects. The challenge for ensuring balanced and informed public deliberation is that we need to ‘read’ visuals critically and in the context of other relevant information and argumentation. Here Blair (1996 p. 38) suggests that we ask: “Is that the whole story? Are there other points of view? Is the real picture so black and white?”

Visuals are an increasingly significant communicative medium in contemporary political discourse. Yet their implications for public deliberation are only beginning to attract scholarly attention. Visuals like other forms of non-speech acts deserve far more consideration by theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy. While talk, argumentation and reasoning remain essential components of high quality public deliberation, more analytic attention must be paid to the other ways that people communicate politically. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. And in a digital era, we contend that their power to influence what is said, by whom and with what public legitimacy is even greater than ever.

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