

Special issue on methods in visual politics and protest

Deconstruction, reflexivity & femmix

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Abstract

This special issue forms the second part of a double issue on methods in visual politics and protest. It draws together five articles that provide new pathways for deconstructing visual political narratives and offers reflexive and nuanced accounts for researching visual data and information shared on social media platforms (here: TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook). They do so through the application of feminist mixed methods (femmix), cross-platform analysis, and context-aware, comparative, and triangulated approaches. Taken together, the double issue offers a substantive compendium of articles exploring the latest methodological developments in visual politics and protest.

Keywords: visual methods; protest; politics; feminist methods; digital methods; reflexivity; social media images

1. Methods in visual politics and protest: A double special issue

While visuality has been a longstanding point of interest in political research, this double issue fills a clear gap by addressing it in relation to digital social research, and, above all, platform research (both what has been labelled visual social media and visual data circulating on other platform types - for the full definition of terms see Özkula et al. 2024a). Contributions published in the first part addressed current methodological challenges in visual research and extended extant methodological repertoires. The second part continues these conversations by highlighting the need for transnational investigations, and in itself constitutes a pledge for decolonial research on visual politics. The five articles presented here explore protests in India and Brazil, as well as global issues like climate change across Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the US. These papers touch on key political themes like feminism on social media (Wiens and McDonalds, Gajjala et al.), national elections (Martini), and climate change communication (Yan and Zeng) in relation to a diverse set of visual formats and artefacts (pictures, short videos, carousel reels, tweet networks) and social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook,

TikTok). They do so through a range of methodological approaches including feminist, mixed, and digital methods.

These articles complement the five previous ones (see Özkula et al. 2024a), presented in three thematic areas: 1) mixed visual methods that enable researchers to overcome the limitations of a single methodological approach and gain more nuanced and contextualised findings (Caldeira, 2024; Omena et al. 2024; Hohner et al. 2024; Giorgi and Rama, 2024), 2) dataset-building techniques beyond text searches for collecting and curating visual data, such as the use of sound/soundscapes (Geboers and Pilipets, 2024), social cues (Omena et al. 2024), and macros (Giorgi and Rama, 2024), and 3) the development of methodological approaches for capturing anti-democratic visual practices, such as propagandist or farright videos and bot accounts that represent contemporary anti-publics (Geboers and Pilipets, 2024; Hohner et al. 2024; Omena et al. 2024). Those contributions featured a variety of case studies from different cultural regions (countries: Germany, Italy, Brazil, Portugal, Russia, Ukraine), platforms (TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X), visual formats (memes, videos, posts), and political themes (war propaganda, political bots, elections, far-right extremism, feminist movements). For an overview of the double issue, see Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of Methods in Visual Politics and Protest: the double special issue

	Part I	Part II
Main thematic contributions	Mixed methods, data curation, anti-publics	Deconstruction, femmix, positionality, reflexivity
Political themes & practices	Far-right extremism	Climate change
	War propaganda	Feminist movements
	National elections	Political campaigning
	Political bots	Political bots
	Feminist movements	
Case study countries	Germany, Italy, Brazil, Russia, Ukraine, Portugal	UK, India, Brazil, US, Japan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand
Platform focus	TikTok, Instagram Twitter/X	TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, Facebook
Analysed artefacts	short videos, bots, memes, soundscapes, posts, hashtags	carousels, social network maps, memes, bots, photographs
Proposed methodological approaches & models	quali-quanti visual methods, contingent macro analysis, digital dwelling, "extra-hard" data, Leadership Visual Performance Model, feminist mixed visual methods, feminist intersectional small data analysis	

2. Deconstructing visual political narratives

A common challenge across these papers has been understanding how different forms of visual communication (co-)create, construct, and curate visual political narratives, and how such narratives are to be interpreted across diverse contexts of production and dissemination (see challenges in Part I of the double issue). Several of the papers here, therefore, engage in and build on the longstanding tradition of reading, interpreting, and deconstructing meaning-making in social "texts" (a practice common and indeed anchored in semiotics; see Barthes, 1968). Deconstruction is particularly relevant for the interpretation of visual information as the process challenges traditional interpretations of language, texts, and culture based on the premise that their definitions and meanings are not fixed but subject to a range of underlying assumptions and hierarchies (see Derrida, 1974/1976). Deconstructing visuals then involves analysing and breaking down visual elements to understand the underlying messages, assumptions, testimonies, and cultural narratives they convey (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001; Kuppers, 2001;

Rose, 2022). This may include the deconstruction of the different sites in which the meaning of an image is generated, such as its compositional interpretation, production, circulation, and how it is seen by different audiences (Gries and Hallinan, 2022; Rose, 2022). By doing so, researchers may uncover the otherwise (in)visible ways in which these visuals construct or deconstruct narratives on political conflicts, identities, ideologies, and beliefs (an asset to research applying feminist methods, positionality, and reflexivity as these question dominant and hierarchical practices of meaning-making, cf. subsection 3).

The works presented here add to this body of work through a detailed engagement with communicative practices, social media affordances, and technological attributes tied to the new visualities and visual dynamics produced by social media engagements, including: social cues in the circulation of visuals, image macros, video frames, soundscapes (see part 1 of this double issue), visual performative leadership, Instagram carousel practices, social network maps, polysemy in memes, and visual styles and aesthetics (in this second part). For example, Wiens and MacDonald unpack visual political narratives through an embodied and collaborative approach to curated digital content collections, a process they term "digital dwelling". By prioritising the communicative and networked solidarities integral to feminist activism (and research), this process facilitates a detailed examination of the intricate interplay of affect, histories, culture, politics, and resistance created by feminist activists' practices. Other papers in this special issue focus on content comparisons in image and video collections. For example, Yan and Zeng adopt a multimodal computational analysis to explore climate change narratives on TikTok through two dimensions: visual style, characterised by aesthetic features rooted in primary visual elements, and communicative functions related to the content's intended message or objective. A different approach is taken by Martini, whose work introduces the Leadership Visual Performance Model (LVPM), a model designed specifically for analysing leadership portrayal on visual social media as it highlights differences in leadership styles towards the creation of a leadership typology based on visual narratives. He does so through a systematic exploration of different performative elements within each image, going beyond simple thematic coding by using a range of structural indicators that enable better comparison across different contexts.

Other authors of this special issue have, in Part I, similarly engaged in deconstructive exercises that provide nuanced and contextual meanings to the often implicit nature of individual images; for example through explorations of ephemeral macros in memes circulating on social media, the application of soundscapes in short videos, and the significance of social cues in understanding bot behaviours (Geboers and Pilipets, 2024; Giorgi and Rama, 2024; Omena et al. 2024). They present different entry points and pathways for interpreting visual data, which means that visuals are not analysed in isolation, but within the specific contexts they have been circulated in or on the basis of the multiple meanings they combine, rendering them less implicit for researchers.

3. Reflexivity, positionality, & femmix

Another substantial contribution of the work presented in this issue lies in a heightened attention to reflexivity and positionality, which we term *femmix* - feminist mixed visual methods. This is materialised primarily through an embodied and intersectional reflection on research as a craft, thereby making explicit the influences of researchers' identities and bodies (online and offline) on how they ask research questions, approach field sites, share/disseminate knowledge, and, as above, how they read and interpret data - a tenet in feminist research (see Prieto-Blanco, García-Mingo, Fernández-Díaz, 2022; van den Berg and Rezvani, 2022).

These questions are then also relevant for the analysis of visual data as, compared to text, visual information is often implicit, i.e. its readings depend on a range of contextual factors. As such, positionality in visual research acts as a bridge towards acknowledging who "we" are as researchers in digital networks and how we consequently read data that is highly context-dependent. This approach is above all common in feminist methods as these foreground research as embodied and subjective, based

on the recognition that knowledge is written into the body, the self, and the communities established on this basis (see Dupuis et al. 2022). Positionality in visual research is then both a feminist exercise and a reflection on how researchers' bodies and identities relate to visual political data circulated online, i.e. also in relation to other identity attributes such as their ethnic origin, location in relation to research object, and spoken languages. This means that the regions and sociopolitical contexts in which researchers are physically situated during research matter for how they collect and interpret data - a point made by Wiens and MacDonald, Gajjala et al., and Özkula, Omena, and Gajjala in this issue, as well as in Part I by Caldeira (2024). For example, in their feminist small data analysis, Wiens and MacDonald draw on the method of dwelling not only to observe, but also participate in and affect these situations, and to explore the various possible meanings of those entangled practices and digital communities. The premise for this process is that different researchers may choose to examine different texts or see other relationships between ideas - a form of triangulation.

The papers presented in this double issue are a testament to this *in* and *beyond* feminist research. They document how readings of visual data depend on (a) how bodies are inscribed in online cultures, above all in locally anchored political events, and (b) how the physical and psychological experiences bodies carry affect how politically charged data (visual, network, textual, multimedia, or metadata) are read in chains of de- and re-contextualisation as mediated by digital technologies. Through applications of ethics of care, accountability, affect, reflexivity, and responsibility in research - approaches rooted in feminist research (see Dupuis et al. 2022; Liljeström, 2010; Özkula et al. 2024b; Pedwell, 2010), these approaches acknowledge the intersectional identities and bodies of both those creating or reproducing contents as well as those interpreting them (i.e. researchers). As such, these works illustrate the relevance of feminist principles in other forms of minority ethics of care that consider body politics and the associated biases and power relations underpinning research.

A further contribution of the double issue lies in its combination of digital methods (i.e. approaches drawing on digitally native data and methods, see Rogers, 2019) and qualitative data (both qualitative digital social research and on-the-ground engagement) for visual methods - termed "quali-quanti visual methods" (Omena et al. 2024). In this second part, these methodological approaches are additionally characterised by their embodied and reflexive application, above all in relation to gendered situations, i.e. feminist mixed visual methods (femmix). On the surface level, digital social research may seem less affected by researchers' environmental and bodily circumstances since they do not often contact research subjects directly and large amounts of data are distributed through algorithms and curated by software without the direct engagement of human researchers. However, digital environments are not neutral, nor are the algorithms that distribute content or the software used to generate or scrape it (boyd and Crawford, 2011; Chun, 2021; Crawford and Paglen, 2021; Marres, 2017). Hence, researchers need to be aware of the implications of using software, data, and accounts in light of their own physical circumstances such as login locations (Elmer et al. 2015), their embodied experiences, as well as the biases produced by these. Here, an embodied feminist approach to visual analysis (or its addition to digital methods through femmix) bridges a gap created by research designs focusing on gathering mass data, as it pays more attention to research as a craft and the social experiences and power dynamics that underpin and therefore impact research.

Several authors in this double issue develop and discuss such approaches. For instance, Gajjala et al. point out that even if researchers consider their socio-economic and cultural location, the data remain situated and biased since each platform uses personal settings and preferences even at the stage of scraping. To overcome this challenge, they include interviews with local political activists and 'ground' digital social research within the associated local contexts. In doing so, they offer a reflexive, self-aware analysis, a holistic approach that they define as feminist intersectional small data analysis. The relevance of comparative, contextual, and embodied (here: feminist) readings is also highlighted by Özkula, Omena, and Gajjala (a reflexive account that draws on two case studies applying feminist methods). They draw attention to new potentialities of software-based visual research on protest and politics through rich cross-

project comparisons, complementing platform data with on-the-ground engagement, and quali-quanti visual methods. These, they say, allow for what they call "extra-hard data", based on rich data journeys underpinned by multi-modality, hybridity, comprehensive data curation, reiterative data collection and interpretation, and the inclusion of contextual reflections in focused visual research. Elements of reflexivity and mixed methods in feminist research have also been addressed by other authors in this issue based on the nuance and context these provide. For example, Caldeira (2024) applies feminist mixed methods (femmix) as a way of complementing practices of high-visibility actors with actors who are not used to broad exposure or high levels of engagement - a particular benefit given that this combination provides both distant and close readings, as well as objective and subjective readings.

These papers therefore add to the growing, albeit scarce (see Özkula et al. 2024b), body of knowledge that applies feminist, body-sensitive, and context-aware approaches (positionality and reflexivity) to visual methods, including femmix. In doing so, the works presented here serve as a vignette for understanding how visuals are embedded in, shaped by, and read based on power dynamics and forms of resistance in visual politics and protest.

4. Methods in visual politics & protest revisited

This double issue has brought together ten articles addressing common challenges in visual methods in politics and protest, such as the proliferation of visual social media, the study of newly emerging visual practices, and the growing repertoires and application of digital methods (see Özkula et al. 2024a). They address these through methodological approaches that draw on cross-platform research, regional anchoring, mixed visual methods, slow reading/dwelling, femmix, and wider reflections on researchers' positioning in research. Even so, the articles highlighted a range of challenges that remain in the field. Above all, they draw attention to technological biases (or, in Marres' words, "digital bias"; see Marres, 2017) that remain difficult to bridge and need to be subjected to critical scrutiny. These include algorithmic influences that need to be taken into consideration, biases written into digital methods tools, and other technological effects that may remain invisible to researchers due to the black box of mechanics.

Although the articles propose triangulation efforts to bridge these (e.g. enriching data collected through digital methods through cross-platform research or with qualitative data), they acknowledge that these are time-intensive processes that typically require privileged access or opportunities (see also Özkula, Omena, and Gajjala in this issue). While this special issue does not specifically address this, current trends in access regimes have shown the volatility and shifting terrains in research access to platform data. Changing platform ownership, policies, and their respective access regimes have shown to change how and what types of data researchers may access (above all, the case with Twitter/X, Meta, and TikTok). Thus, where tools are provided and/or controlled by platform providers, political research may likely be subject to more scrutiny and restrictions, e.g. where researchers have to apply for access. This means that researchers will rely even more strongly on gathering qualitative data, triangulating through on-the-ground engagement, and/or supplementing visual data with other forms of contextual or mixed methods readings - challenges for which this double issue provides a range of potential approaches and/or solutions.

Beyond the themes addressed in this double issue, it also remains to be seen how new developments in generative AI will affect visual methods and data collected through these going forward. As a new and evolving field with (at this point with limited research) developments in generative AI pose new prospects, limitations, and challenges for visual research, for example through artificially generated videos, avatars, and memes. On the one hand, these tools may provide new possibilities for ethically visualising data, reading visual data across different contexts, and experiments with visual data. To illustrate, generative AI (= infrastructure, e.g. Chat GPT) may become a research tool in itself, e.g. for data analysis and interpretation. On the other hand, these developments will likely require future research designs and methodologies to adapt towards capturing these complexities. For example, the authenticity

of visual content created through generative AI may become both a focus and a challenge in future research on mis- or disinformation in political campaigns, witnessing in conflict coverage, and video reliability in sousveillance practices. While some research already addresses these issues through tailored methodological approaches (see, e.g., on bots, Omena et al. 2024, in part I of this double issue), issues of origin and authenticity may become more significant challenges in research to come.

As such, this double issue serves as both a collection of methodological repertoires and a further stepping stone in addressing the shifting terrains of visual methods research.

5. Featured in this special issue

In what follows, we briefly outline the individual papers included in this **second** part of the special issue. **Gajjala et al.** present a case study of the 2020 Shaheen Bagh Protests in India, focusing on the role of social media in amplifying women protesters' voices. Their study employs quantitative and qualitative methods, including "algorithmic ethnography", to analyse the protesters' online presence using social media small data (selected tweets, Instagram posts, and interviews with activists). This use of small data enriches the dataset, allowing for a critical interpretation and nuanced understanding of the online visibility and amplification of the Shaheen Bagh protesters. Gajjala et al.'s approach, which blends ethnographic and computational techniques, is grounded in feminist and postcolonial critiques and emphasises the integration of empathetic technologies and algorithmic ethnography. This allows for an exploration of both the affective and embodied dimensions of technology use, and provides deeper

Wiens and MacDonald introduce "digital dwelling" as a feminist method for researchers studying digital media artefacts on Instagram. This approach involves immersive engagement with selected curated carousel posts to gain an in-depth understanding of audience interactions with the content and its connections to the current political climate. Their technique highlights the need to consider the personal connections and acts of defiance occurring in digital environments, along with the underlying power imbalances and disparities. They advocate for a critical examination of large datasets and a recognition of the intricate details offered by smaller datasets in feminist media research.

insights into the sensory experiences of individuals in digital environments.

Özkula, Omena, and Gajjala present the notion of "extra-hard" data, a possibility afforded by cross-project comparisons, combinations of platform data with on-the-ground engagement, and the application of mixed visual methods - a particular benefit in what has been described as the post-API age. They note that new developments in digital methods have opened up new possibilities for visual data collection and analysis, but are also subject to limitations in capturing the complexity and scale of digital-visual practices. Through a range of case studies, they highlight possibilities for contextualisation in visual research through aligning data curation and collection with the researched digital spaces, considerations of the diverse platform (sub)spaces, user dynamics, and cultures (in- or post-research design), exploratory, iterative, and multi-level analysis of visualisation software, and contextualising statistical or metadata.

Zeng and Yan explore climate change communication on TikTok in a cross-cultural study across seven countries. Through an analysis of 7564 videos using computational methods, they reveal key visual characteristics and regional differences, highlighting the influence of cultural and political contexts in shaping climate-related campaigns on TikTok. Their research showcases the potential of computational visual data analysis through the integration of computer vision and topic modelling for exploring visual styles and communicative functions, for example (as in their case) findings on whether these contents are person-centred, nature-centred, or text-centred. They consequently argue in favour of using computational methods for gaining cross-cultural insights into visual storytelling in the context of climate change.

Martini develops the Leadership Visual Performance Model (LVPM) to study the visual portrayal of political figures on social media platforms, with a focus on Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn's Instagram

activities during the 2019 UK General Election. This innovative framework employs structural indicators for analysing leadership styles through leader-follower interactions in visual content. Integrating visual semiotics and the concept of leader distance into social media leadership analysis, Martini offers a detailed method for examining how political leaders craft their digital image, interact with followers, and visually curate their communities.

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Articles in this special issue

Part I Methods in Visual Politics and Protest: mixed methods, data curation & anti-publics

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Part II Special issue on methods in visual politics and protest: Deconstruction, reflexivity & femmix

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