Unauthorized practices of communicating environmental change: the case of activist stickers

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Keywords: sticker, environmental communication, activism

Posing various risks to virtually all forms of life on Earth, anthropogenic climate change is disrupting ecological balance more than ever. Being the second out of twenty-three developed countries that are responsible for half of all historical CO_2 emissions (Global Carbon Project 2021), Germany has a substantial impact on global warming. In this study, I look at what recently was a small German village called Lützerath, which is now being dredged for brown coal by the largest polluter in Europe, the energy company RWE AG (Europe Beyond Coal 2018, ECCHR).

As Lützerath acts as a symbol for the 1.5-degree objective of the Paris Agreement in the German environmental discourse and was occupied by climate activists, I investigate its dynamic semiotic landscape as a highly rural, local place becoming globally relevant. The specific signs I consider are stickers. Being easy to produce, distribute and use, they are a notably frequent resource in public space, however, studies on this mode are rather scarce (but see Bloch 2000, Vigsø 2010, Schmitz and Ziegler 2016, Reershemius 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of the semiotics of unauthorized stickers and particularly investigate them as a dynamic bottom-up practice enabling the people to articulate themselves by emplacing their voices in public space. Applying a multimodal social semiotic approach (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) to my fieldwork data and including interviews with producers as well as recipients, I present the complex meaning-making potential of stickers in environmental discourse. In this sense, I explore stickers as semiotic acts of activism and refer to their visual and textual interactions, transtextuality, registers and emplacements. Using diverse multimodal ways of communicating environmental change, such as direct instructions as well as subversive mimicry, the environmental activist stickers realise unauthorized interventions in the public sphere ultimately addressing the fundamental challenge of human kind.

Figure. 1: sticker: system change not climate change. Image credit: Laura Imhoff, CC BY-SA 2.0.

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