

Reflections

Changing thoughts, changing future – commentary to Huttunen and Albrecht

LENA VON ZABERN AND CHRISTOPHER D. TULLOCH



von Zabern, L. & Tulloch, C. D. (2021) Changing thoughts, changing future – commentary to Huttunen and Albrecht. *Fennia* 199(1) 147–151. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.109348>

In response to Huttunen and Albrecht’s article in this issue of *Fennia* we want to focus our commentary on the two key-findings regarding the media representation of environmental citizenship in the Finnish Fridays for Future (FFF) movement: individualised lifestyle choices and a dominant adult voice. This commentary dovetails into the authors’ critical reflection on the insufficiency of individual action alone in addressing environmental issues and the potential risks of a dominant adult voice for youth agency. By doing so, we will also touch on broader ideas of change within the FFF and climate change framing and aspects of (intergenerational) climate justice.

Keywords: Fridays for Future, Greta Thunberg, environmental citizenship, climate change media framing, intergenerational justice

Lena von Zabern (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0314-6622>), Independent researcher. Former MA student in International Studies on Media, Power and Difference, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: lenavzabern@gmail.com

Christopher D. Tulloch (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5476-0887>), Department of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: christopher.tulloch@upf.edu

When you enter the gardens of Peggy Guggenheim’s Palazzo Venier dei Leoni at the Canale Grande in Venice you are greeted by eight words in yellow neon lights that span the wall of the Guggenheim art collection: “Changing Place, Changing Time, Changing Thoughts, Changing Future” (Peggy Guggenheim Collection 2021). Located in the heart of a sinking city (Levermann 2019), the installation from Italian contemporary artist Maurizio Nannucci may now be interpreted as both: a warning sign for the urgent need for climate action and the reassurance that change is not only possible but now inevitable (Cannon 2019). In March 2019 it was this rather hopeful idea of the possibility of change towards a more sustainable global environmental system with which we ended our study about the media framing of the Fridays for Future (FFF) protests in Germany. Despite having identified that German media coverage tended to reproduce existing power structures by marginalizing and depoliticizing the political agenda of a system critical protest (von Zabern & Tulloch 2021), we watched with interest as to whether further studies would be able to show that the idea of intergenerational climate justice and the protesters’ demands for system change would ultimately get a hold in the media agenda (e.g. Goldenbaum & Thompson 2020; Hayes 2021). Within their comparative framing analysis of the FFF movement in Finnish news and social media in spring and fall 2019, Huttunen and Albrecht (2021) not only added the most relevant component of environmental citizenship but also identified a shift in framing.

This shift became particularly evident in the *school attendance* frame – a frame that had also dominated early German media coverage (von Zabern & Tulloch 2021). Throughout the beginning of coverage in late 2018/spring 2019 this framing reduced the issues FFF sought to address to debates about compulsory education. The fall 2019 results from Huttunen and Albrecht (2021, 55) on the dying discussions about the legitimacy and justification of FFFs collective environmental action indicate how much the “societal context where the movement operates” changed. This shift is especially interesting as it proves that young people were eventually able to bring “climate change to the forefront of political discussion, transforming the focus in discussions to actual solutions.” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 55).

Individualized lifestyle choice and climate justice

The question that we would like to pick up on here is whether the majority of these solutions represented in the FFF media coverage sufficiently addresses the climate crisis and structural responsibility. The strong media focus on the individual lifestyle aspect of environmental citizenship which Huttunen and Albrecht identify as a prominent frame is rightly questioned in its benefits for the FFF movement. Individualized sustainable lifestyle choices as a solution to tackle global warming are without doubt important and highly necessary but alone they risk shifting responsibility onto the individual rather than addressing powerful polluters which bear the historical and intergenerational responsibility for the root causes of the crisis. (Santarius 2007; Schindel Dimick 2015; Young Friends of the Earth 2015). A similar dynamic can be seen in media studies on climate change discourse and climate refugees where a focus on (individual) climate change adaptation has in the past depoliticized the climate crisis and “made those affected by it responsible for their own survival” (Methmann 2014, 416; Hoeg 2017). From an environmental citizenship perspective, Huttunen and Albrecht (2021) show that individual action alone is not enough to address environmental issues (Dobson & Bell 2006). This is also relevant in regard to inclusiveness and the justice component of such action. Global justice perspectives indicate that sustainable lifestyle choices are also a question of access and privilege: while Quoquab and Sukari’s (2017) study from Malaysia hints at the lack of awareness building programs, Walker’s (2020, 1) article shows that in case of “environmentally vulnerable participants” short-term burdens overpowered long-term environmental concern. The risk of depoliticization and lack of climate mitigation action that comes along with the prominence of such framing is also reiterated by Greta Thunberg at the margin of the World Economic Forum in Davos 2019: “Some people say we all caused the climate crisis together. But that is just a convenient lie. Because if everyone is guilty, then no one is guilty [...]” (Betancur 2019).

Who gets to speak?

One of the most interesting findings in view of the above is the simultaneous lack of “political demands for systemic change” in the framing of the Finnish FFF movement (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 55). Similar to the German FFF coverage in 2019, the Finnish coverage focuses strongly on official sources – in this case ‘adult voices’. Although these voices have been largely in favour of the protest and may be interpreted as adult participation needed in solving the climate crisis (Hayward 2021; Huttunen & Albrecht 2021), they may undermine the protester’s self-agency as legitimate actors of change (Kettrey 2018, von Zabern & Tulloch 2021). This is especially visible in the framing of Finnish protesters as apprentices in political-decision making. Rather than representing strikes “as political acts in themselves” (Huttunen & Albrecht 2021, 56) the perceived illegitimacy of the protester is used to undermine their political demands and seems to marginalize their agenda. Against this backdrop it would be all the more important that the media, as influential shapers of public and political opinion (Merkley & Stecula 2019) would include the voices of those most affected by global warming to avoid contributing to the “age-old political problem where marginalized citizens and those living in distant places and times are materially and existentially threatened by the decisions and actions of other individuals, companies, or states” (O’Brien *et al.* 2018, 22). This should also extend to children of lower-income countries which are bearing the double brunt of local and intergenerational climate injustice.

A more intersectional perspective in future studies on these particular vulnerabilities and -isms would thus be fruitful (Krieger 2020; Mocatta & Howley 2020). At the same time, as Huttunen and Albrecht already mentioned, scholars could contribute here by including social media channels used primarily by younger age groups in their analysis (vom Orde & Durner 2020; Díaz-Pérez *et al.* 2021; Tankovska 2021).

Changing future

This brief reflection on the key-findings from Huttunen and Albrecht (2021) shows that while there have been shifts in discourse in Finnish media coverage on the FFF movement from Spring to Fall which may be applied to German coverage, system critical demands, mitigative solution and youth voices have not been prominently represented. Looking at these findings from a protest paradigm angle (McLeod & Hertog 1999) this may hint towards the fact that aspects of the movement which threaten hegemonic power-relationships were not supported (Curran 1982; Smith *et al.* 2001). While this reveals something about the media's proclivity to reproduce these power structures, to a certain extent it also tells us something about change. Looking back to Nanucci's eight words in 2021, we find them illuminated. In Germany (changing place), almost three years after Greta Thunberg demonstrated in front of the Swedish Parliament (changing time), leading German climate activist Luisa Neubauer (changing thought) is now discussing climate action next to Germany's top candidates for chancellor on national prime time television (ARD 2021). The German Green Party has a real chance in the Fall elections (Vates 2021) and the German Constitutional Court recently ruled that Germany's 2019 climate protection act is in part unconstitutional (changing future) (DW 2021). The study from Huttunen and Albrecht (2021) is thus not only important because it shows how the FFF protests fosters active (environmental) citizenship but also because they offer a critical and highly-reflective insight into societal and ecological transformation as it unfolds. The global COVID-19 crisis and its impact on both FFF protests and environmental and climate change narratives (see Burger *et al.* 2020; Galeigha & Burrows 2020; Lyytimäki *et al.* 2020; Mocatta & Howley 2020) will still have to show where this journey leads.

References

- ARD (2021) Anne Will: Von Corona-Krise bis Klimapolitik – kann die Union noch Kanzleramt? Das Erste 9.5.2021 <<https://daserste.ndr.de/annewill/videos/Von-Corona-Krise-bis-Klimapolitik-kann-die-Union-noch-Kanzleramt-,annewill7020.html>>. 2.6.2021.
- Betancur, K. C. (2019) Gretas Welt. Zeit Online 31.1.2019 <<https://www.zeit.de/2019/06/klima-aktivistin-greta-thunberg-klimaschutz-schuelerin>>. 2.6.2021.
- Burger, A., Kristof, K. & Matthey, A. (2020) The green new consensus study shows broad consensus on green recovery programmes and structural reforms. Umweltbundesamt <https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/376/publikationen/thenewgreenconsensus_englisch_bf.pdf>. 28.5.2021.
- Cannon, S. M. (2019) Climate strikes: Greta Thunberg calls for 'system change not climate change' – here's what that could look like. The Conversation.com 15.3.2019 <<https://theconversation.com/climate-strikes-greta-thunberg-calls-for-system-change-not-climate-change-heres-what-that-could-look-like-112891>>. 31.5.2021.
- Curran, J. (1982) Communication, power and social order. In Bennett, T., Curran, J., Gurevitch, M. & Wollacott, J. (eds.) *Culture, Society and the Media*, 202–235. Routledge, New York.
- Díaz-Pérez, S., Soler-i-Martí, R. & Ferrer-Fons, M. (2021) From the global myth to local mobilization: creation and resonance of Greta Thunberg's frame. *Comunicar* 68(3). <https://doi.org/10.3916/C68-2021-03>
- Dobson, A. & Bell, D. (2006) Environmental citizenship: introduction. In Dobson, A. & Bell, D. (eds.) *Environmental Citizenship*, 1–18. MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Deutsche Welle (2021) German climate law is partly unconstitutional, top court rules 29.4.2021 <<https://www.dw.com/en/german-climate-law-is-partly-unconstitutional-top-court-rules/a-57369917>>. 2.6.2021.
- Ghaleigh, N. S. & Burrows, L. (2020) Resetting or reversion in the new climate normal. In Ramraj, V. (eds.) *Covid-19 in Asia: Law and Policy Contexts*, 411–425. Oxford University Press, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197553831.003.0029>

- Goldenbaum, M. & Thompson, C. S. (2020) Fridays for Future im Spiegel der Medienöffentlichkeit. In Haunss, S. & Sommer, M. (eds.) *Fridays for Future – Die Jugend gegen den Klimawandel. Konturen der weltweiten Protestbewegung*, 181–204. Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453476-009>
- Hayes, S. (2021) The Greta effect: visualising climate protest. Webinar at University of Exeter, 24.2.2021 <https://Universityofexeter.zoom.us/rec/share/Odc0X4uhEt_ay_UgsvoBjXjU6FhEhyc2Fo0Fx2q5fegS9OfGRzIHKAORf4To6Cl.6bYHop5XlaeT-cHY?startTime=1614175400000>. 25.5.2021.
- Hayward, B. (2021) *Children, Citizenship and Environment #SchoolStrike Edition*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003000396>
- Høeg, E. (2017) Sinking strangers. Master Thesis. Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain.
- Huttunen, J. & Albrecht, E. (2021) The framing of environmental citizenship and youth participation in the Fridays for Future Movement in Finland. *Fennia* 199(1) 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.102480>
- Kettrey, H. H. (2018) Activism without activists: news media coverage of youth as illegitimate political agents in the virginity-pledge movement and gay-straight alliances. *Mobilization – An International Quarterly* 23(3) 359–364. <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-23-3-349>
- Krieger, N. (2020) ENOUGH: COVID-19, structural racism, police brutality, plutocracy, climate change and time for health justice, democratic governance, and an equitable, sustainable future. *American Journal of Public Health* 110(11) 1620–1623. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305886>
- Levermann, A. (2019) "Venedig wird definitiv untergehen" (interview by Linda Fischer for Zeit Online). Zeit Online 19.11.2019 <<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/umwelt/2019-11/klimawandel-venedig-hochwasser-klimaforschung-anders-levermann>>. 1.6.2021.
- Lyytimäki, J., Kangas, H., Mervaala, E. & Vikström, S. (2020) Muted by a crisis? Covid-19 and the long-term evolution of climate change newspaper coverage. *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 12(20) 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208575>
- McLeod, D. M. & Hertog, J. K. (1999) Social change and the mass media's role in the regulation of protest groups. In Demers, D. & Ames, K. V. (eds.) *Mass Media, Social Control and Social Change: A Macrosocial Perspective*, 305–330. Iowa State University, Iowa.
- Merkley, E. & Stecula D. (2019) Framing climate change: economics, ideology, and uncertainty in American news media content from 1988 to 2014. *Frontiers in Communication* 4(6) 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2019.00006>
- Methmann, C. (2014) Visualizing climate-refugees: race, vulnerability, and resilience in global liberal politics. *International Political Sociology* 8(4) 416–435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12071>
- Mocatta, G. & Hawley, E. (2020) The coronavirus crisis as tipping point: communicating the environment in a time of pandemic. *Media International Australia* 177(1) 119–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20950030>
- O'Brien, K. Selboe, E. & Hayward, B. M. (2018) Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent. *Ecology and Society* 23(3) 42. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10287-230342>
- vom Orde, A. & Durner, A. (2020) Internationales Data on youth and media 2020. Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI) <<https://www.br-online.de/jugend/izi/english/International%20Data%20on%20Youth%20and%20Media.pdf>>. 2.6.2021.
- Peggy Guggenheim Collection (2021) Changing Place, Changing Time, Changing Thoughts, Changing Future. [guggenheim-venice.it](https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/changing-place-changing-time-changing-thoughts-changing-future/). <<https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/changing-place-changing-time-changing-thoughts-changing-future/>>. 1.6.2021.
- Quoquab, F. & Sukari, N. N. (2017) Why sustainable consumption is not in practice? A developing country perspective. In Leal Filho, W., Pociovalisteanu, D. M. & Al-Amin, A. (eds.) *Sustainable Economic Development. World Sustainability Series*, 103–112 Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45081-0_6
- Santarius, T. (2007) Klimawandel und globale Gerechtigkeit. Bpb.de 31.5.2007 <<http://www.bpb.de/apuz/30435/klimawandel-und-globale-gerechtigkeit?p=all>>. 2.6.2021.
- Schindel Dimick, A. (2015) Supporting youth to develop environmental citizenship within/against a neoliberal context. *Environmental Education Research* 21(3) 390–402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2014.994164>
- Smith, J., McCarthy, J.D., McPhail, C., et al. (2001) From protest to agenda building: description bias in media coverage of protest events in Washington, D.C. *Social Forces* 79(4) 1397–1429.
- Tankovska, H. (2021) Reach of social media used by teens and young adults in Germany 2020. Statista. <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1060015/social-media-usage-germany-age-most-popular-15-25/>>. 2.6.2021.
- Vates, D. (2021) Wie sich das Land unter einer Grünen-Kanzlerin verändern würde. Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 11.5.2021 <<https://www.rnd.de/politik/annalena-baerbock-wie-sich-das-land-unter-einer-gruenen-bundeskanzlerin-veraendern-wuerde-JGAKPQV6IRCMPPC2GY55ZH6HDM.html>>. 2.6.2021.

- von Zabern, L. & Tulloch, C. D. (2021) Rebel with a cause: the framing of climate change and intergenerational justice in the German press treatment of the Fridays for Future protests. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(1) 23–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720960923>
- Walker, C. (2020) Uneven solidarity: the school strikes for climate in global and intergenerational perspective. *Sustainable Earth* 3, 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42055-020-00024-3>
- Young friends of the Earth (2015) Climate myth #5: We can solve climate change ourselves by changing our lifestyles. Youngfoe.eu 16.11.2015 <<https://youngfoe.eu/news/climate-myth-5-we-can-solve-climate-change-ourselves-by-changing-our-lifestyles/>>. 2.6.2021.