

Essay

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How the presentation of Greta Thunberg is defusing the generational conflict

An analysis of latent frames in the media discourse

Abstract: The climate protests are youth protests. Yet unlike earlier protests, they are not perceived or exercised as a generational conflict, even though the responsibility of the older generation is clear to see. In this constellation, Greta Thunberg has a key socio-psychological function as a media figure: The icon of the climate movement acts as a figurehead, simultaneously staging and hiding the generational conflict. Greta puts the conflict into words, pinning the blame on both policymakers and the older generations in general. The public react by idealizing Greta – and some by denigrating her. Both can serve equally as a defense mechanism against the dramatic nature of the conflict and as a way to block out one's own responsibility for destroying natural resources. This blocking out means that the young people's protest comes to nothing – smothered by the embrace of the older generations.

Greta Thunberg is a remarkably long-lasting media figure – and her longevity is all the more astounding given her lack of all the usual features of a media star. She is not glamorous, nor does she generate scandal, nor does she have the charisma of other leaders of student movements like Rudi Dutschke. Her sober demeanor counters the enthralling horror scenario of the world's demise. The only incident that could be considered spectacular has been her sail across the Atlantic to New York in summer 2019 – but that alone does not explain the long-lasting media hype. All Greta has to offer as a media figure is unwieldy science and a problem that demands that we all fundamentally transform our lifestyle, and indeed make sacrifices: not the stuff that normally wins over the masses.

The success of Greta as a media figure cannot be grasped using the usual setting of news values. So where does the lasting hype come from? What needs of the audience does this media figure serve? Why is Greta still here?

When existing scientific theories or models do not fit, semiotician Peirce proposes selecting abduction as a form of access to gain new insights. He thus solves the philosophical problem of the new in science, which can be recognized neither through deduction of a theory nor through induction within existing concepts. The intuitive development of hypotheses is reflected on through the abduction, before being incorporated into the research process in a systematic and verifiable way. We have selected this point of access because we believe that Greta's persistent presence as a media figure may be explained by a »latent frame« – a frame that is contained in the discourse about her but of which neither the audience nor journalists are aware. Our hypothesis is that a generational conflict, which is actually behind the climate debate, is defused or even entirely prevented by the specific presentation of Greta Thunberg as a media figure.

Innovative in communication studies, the concept of »latent frames« differs from the framing approaches prevalent in the field, such as those developed by Entman (1993). Unlike these, latent frames cannot be derived directly from the surface of the text and can therefore be extracted through neither induction nor deduction (for more detail on this and the following, see Herrmann 2020). Instead, these latent frames are seen in the totality of a medial presentation or a societal discourse and often remain unwitting. They emerge performatively from the communication scene between media contributions and the audience. Factors such as the extent of reporting or indeed what is not said – what is hidden or between the lines – can play a crucial role here. The approach thus ties in with the original framing model by Erving Goffman, whose »frame analysis« draws attention to the interactions of the communication partners in everyday life (Goffman 2016). It is the concept of a critical and progressive science that hopes to gain new courses of action by creating awareness of the routines of everyday life. This applies to both direct and indirect communication between media contributions and the audience.

Back to Greta. Almost all reporting centers around one aspect: her. Climate change is usually a peripheral issue, at best addressed more extensively only when Greta Thunberg herself is given the opportunity in one of her rare interviews (Lobenhofer 2019). Usually, however, media reports focus on Greta's credibility, behavior, personality, appearance, condition, and family.

A striking example of this unadulterated personalization was the farce surrounding Greta Thunberg's trip on the German railways in December 2019. Following the Climate Change Conference in Madrid, Greta tweeted »Finally on my way home,« accompanied by a photo showing her sitting on the floor in the aisle, surrounded by suitcases. »Travelling on overcrowded trains through Germany,«

she added. Deutsche Bahn immediately contradicted her, tweeting »It would have been nicer if you had also mentioned the friendly and competent manner in which you were treated by staff at your seat in first class.« It created a Twitter storm. Was the photo staged, as the German railways suggested? Had Greta actually been waited on in the comfort of first class? Or had Deutsche Bahn tried to save its image by offering their special guest the chance to switch to first class in the overcrowded train – a treat not granted to the average traveler? The debate continued to simmer on social media, with the fight between Greta’s supporters and opponents being fed by the usual ongoing discussion on the state of the German railways. »Germans get angry,« the Berlin-based newspaper taz was amused to note (Asmuth 2019). Eventually, it became clear that Deutsche Bahn’s tweeter was incorrectly informed: Greta had missed her connecting train with a reserved seat in first class due to a delay – the photo was real. But Greta had not intended to criticize Deutsche Bahn in the first place and later wrote: »Overcrowded trains is a great sign because it means the demand for train travel is high!«

The way this banal scene boiled over is symptomatic of the hype around Greta. The question of her character – whether she is truly consistent and credible – appears more important than the issue she stands for – climate change. She herself addressed this fact at the World Economic Forum in Davos, observing that people listened to her but not to the scientists. The debate has shifted away from the climate and towards Greta as a person.

Many media reports suggest that Greta divides society into those who admire or even excessively idealize her and those who criticize or denigrate her. There are countless examples of both: An idealizing point of view celebrates her as the world’s savior, a heroine, an idol for young people, and hope personified. She is compared with Mary, to whom the angel appeared, with Cassandra and Joan of Arc and the child who reveals the emperor as having no clothes (Lobenhofer 2019: 45).

As well as those who »praise and tweet« her (ibid. 58), there are those who consider Greta massively overrated. They deplore her arrogance and radical views, call her »raving« and a »spoilt, overexcited child,« who puts the case for »climate absolutism« (ibid.: 52) and has no idea of the travails of practical policymaking. She is also accused of dramatizing something that will never actually happen. »When Greta Thunberg claims to have been cheated of her youth, I would say that this generation has had the best youth that there has ever been on this continent,« declared German CDU politician Friedrich Merz (merkur.de 2020).

Interestingly, this division between Greta supporters and critics does not run alongside that between the usual political camps. One of the sources of the heaviest criticism is the alternative left-wing newspaper taz, which describes her as a »neurotic middle class brat« (Feddersen 2019), while *Bild* and *Die Welt* celebrate Greta. Most newspapers, however, do not take a clear stance, with both Greta fans and Greta opponents among their deskmen (Lobenhofer 2019: 67f).

Idealization and denigration can also be understood as two sides of the same coin, as a more in-depth analysis in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* indicates (Strittmatter 2019). At first glance, this article appears superficially very sympathetic: It outlines Greta's journey from her first strike to her position as a remarkable admonisher on climate issues, listened to all over the world. It is all connected by Greta's illness. The article shows the enormous blessing her commitment to the climate has been for her own development, peaking in a quote from her father: »We're just so happy she's well.« A year earlier, he continues, he had asked himself whether his daughter would ever be in a position to look after herself. This joy and optimism is in stark contrast to Greta Thunberg's topic, the climate emergency. The latest UN report is quoted as saying that we are »only eleven more years away from the tipping point – the point at which our Earth will change into something unrecognizable.« Given this prognosis, can one still look forward to the future like Greta's father? Yes, if the climate does not play an important role.

We discussed this article in a seminar. At first, the students reacted as expected, with responses like »Greta Thunberg really is an admirable girl« and »the climate is a very important issue.« But the picture suddenly changed when we examined the level of interactions; the communication scene that this journalistic article evoked (Lorenzer 1976). The focus was suddenly on a very different feeling. There was irritation behind the admiration – irritation with Greta Thunberg's moral absolutism; irritation at the hype that has grown up around her; irritation because one feels guilty about continuing to live as before and does not really want to change.

Greta Thunberg as a person is a provocation. Unintentionally, both the idealization and the denigration of the media figure could serve the same purpose: keeping oneself away from Greta Thunberg's admonishment, creating distance, reducing feelings of guilt. Even the banal dispute about her journey on the German railways is laced with the question, Is Greta really more consistent and moral than everyone else?

The enormous emphasis given to Greta's illness in many reports could also serve as a defense against feelings of guilt, in the sense that Greta Thunberg cannot use the usual excuses that we climate sinners do, as she has »Asperger syndrome. She cannot repress facts, increasing global warming, rising CO₂ emissions and the much too timid political measures,« as a well-meaning article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* puts it (Vorsamer 2019). This can also provide relief: Greta lives in a different world; in the radicalism caused by her illness, she vicariously denounces something that we mere mortals quite naturally repress. The explosive nature of the issue is thus simultaneously expressed and kept at arm's length.

As if one needed to have Asperger's to recognize the facts.

A quick recap: By personalizing the climate conflict in the form of Greta Thunberg, it is possible to subconsciously defend against the dramatic nature of the

issue. By idealizing and identifying with Greta and the protest, one can subconsciously deny one's own responsibility. Those who protest are not guilty. But this same defense can be achieved by denigrating Greta Thunberg, by accusing her of exaggeration and radicalism. We find frames at various levels here: On a concrete level, Greta Thunberg is framed either as a savior or as an overexcited child. Both versions feed into a latent frame that can be condensed into the statement: We do not need to panic, nor to feel guilty. This frame is within the communication scene (Lorenzer 1976) that the reporting evokes and that was manifested in the affective reaction of the students to the article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as described above.

Hiding the generational conflict

Our hypothesis, however, is that this defense against the dramatic facts of climate change also leads to a defusing of a second conflict: the generational conflict that is behind the climate debate.

The protest was started by young people and is predominantly the domain of school and university students. In the 2019 European elections, 35 percent of 18 to 24-year-olds voted for the Greens and thus for decisive climate policies. In the 60-69 age group, which originally founded the Greens, the figure was just 17 percent. It is no wonder: The consequences of climate change will be much more dramatic for the younger generation than for older people. Yet the climate conflict is rarely seen as a generational conflict.

It was a different story forty years ago. The renowned psychoanalyst Horst-Eberhard Richter, who was very interested in social policy, reflected on his attitude towards young people protesting in the early 1980s (Richter 1983). »As an older man, I cannot speak about young people like a neutral expert about just any psychosocial problem. Studying today's youth means also examining my own youth. Should I be envious, because I regret those unfulfilled desires that young people today can exercise more freely? Or should I feel sorry for them, because their future prospects do not appear encouraging? How close do I feel to this generation anyway? What of myself do I see in these young people? Or are they foreign to me, and have I become foreign to them?« (Richter 1983: 1)

Richter takes a self-critical attitude here, putting himself in relation to the young people who took a stand against the nuclear arms race, the use of nuclear energy, and forest dieback in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, the older generations were seen as part of the problem and fundamentally attacked. Richter continues:

»They say we, the established generation, are destroying the future. Endangering peace. Wrecking the environment. And basing our actions on an expansionist economic policy that is doomed to fail. We older people are finding ourselves confronted with fear, despair, and outrage. We have to feel attacked, because we are being attacked.« (ibid.: 2)

The scenario now seems to have been fundamentally transformed. It is usually not the older generations as a whole who are being attacked, but only the political and economic elites. Countless adults are joining the young people's protest, using »Fridays for Future« as the template for movements such as »Scientists for Future,« »Psychologists for Future,« »Omas [Grannies] for Future« and many more. This is undoubtedly happening in the knowledge that climate change is now an unavoidable reality, and that action against the environmental threat is urgently needed. But can this be done through immediate identification with the young people's protest? Instead, is it not so that, as Richter put it back then, »we have to feel attacked, because we are being attacked?«

Many adults today, however, clearly do not feel under attack. Unlike earlier youth protests, the climate protest is not being played out as a generational conflict. This is despite the fact that the older generations have contributed to the looming environmental emergency through their consumption-oriented lifestyles and a capitalist economic system focused on constant growth – be it through active support or passive acceptance. There can be no question that the older generations bear responsibility for the current state of our world. Yet young people have refrained from accusing them specifically; or at least their accusations have not been directed at old people in general, but at individual decision-makers in politics and business. The conflict between the generations is not made a major issue here. Relations between parents and children today remain largely harmonious, as shown empirically by the 2019 Shell study.

In this context, the media's presentation of Greta Thunberg as a central figure in the climate protests appears to play a key socio-psychological role that enables the generational conflict regarding the climate to be neglected. The conflict between the generations is delegated to »Greta« as a media figure. On behalf of everyone, Greta denounces political and economic elites, but not her parents, who support her. Once again, it is a child who is expected to save the world. This almost messianic presentation offers the older generation the ability to relieve themselves of any feelings of guilt, without really having to change anything. It is now undeniable that environmental destruction has reached a level that cannot be halted by cosmetic changes such as not holidaying by plane or using reusable bags for vegetables and bread, however sensible these steps are. Instead, it will take a fundamental transformation of our way of life and the economic system that supports it.

This insight is so disturbing and threatening that it has to be defended against in order to allow normal psychological function. A media figure like Greta, with her particular psychological state, appears the only one exempt from this. The theory is that her Asperger syndrome prevents her from using the option of this psychological defense – she cannot »suppress,« as various media have reported. Interpreted in this way, her condition appears to give her superhuman powers that enable her to fearlessly look reality in the eye. The potential subtext of this presentation is that people without the condition find this much more difficult, and therefore have to find other forms of relief. This relief can take the form of either idealization or denigration of Greta. Both serve to negate one's own responsibility. Another problem is the »parentification« of the younger generation, in which young people take societal responsibility in place of their parents, reversing the usual positions of the generationst.

As a figure, Greta thus fulfils an important collective function: She forms the arena for a generational conflict that is both manifested in and hidden behind this media figure. The actual conflict, so hard to bear in its dramatic nature, of being responsible for the increasing destruction of the natural basis of life, can thus be blocked out. However, blocking it out like this means that the young people's protest comes to nothing, smothered by the support of the older generations. Although the protests have been going on for eighteen months now and have led to invitations to high-ranking conferences like the UN General Assembly and the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the young people involved are given an audience and listened to, they have produced absolutely no specific changes in climate policy. It is to be feared that, given their lack of success, these young people become completely frustrated by politics. This could ultimately lead to a dramatic loss of trust in democracy and thus the strengthening of authoritarian structures.

Blocking out responsibility: suppression, denial, division?

In order to further develop this question of how to deal with responsibility to society, let us take another look at the past. Even in the 1980s, there was the problem of suppressing an existential threat, of which the older generation was made aware by the protest of the young. Richter places the responsibility in the laps of the older generation and criticizes their attempts at defense:

»But the vehemence with which the irritated older people react proves that they are affected. Do they feel so threatened because the agitated young people are merely presenting them with the thing that they are trying so hard to suppress? Is the real reason they want to discipline the young

demonstrators in order to protect their internal equilibrium?» (Richter 1983: 3)

And today? Instead of disciplining the young people protesting, one identifies with them. The generational conflict in this issue is rarely expressed. If it is voiced, people appear to want to eradicate the statement as soon as it is said. This was the case in German broadcaster WDR's »Granny-gate« scandal. At Christmas 2019, WDR had children sing a spoof of a popular humorous song, this time renamed »My granny is an old environmental sinner.« The song's lyrics spoke in a sarcastic tone of 4x4s and cheap meat, and ended with a quote from Greta Thunberg in the voiceover: »We will not let you get away with this.« The vehement reaction to the fun, cheeky singing of the children's choir was astounding^[1]: WDR Director Tom Buhrow declared from hospital, apparently from the bedside of his 92-year-old father, that his father was not an environmental sinner. Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia, Armin Laschet, also weighed in to the discussion with outrage. The song was immediately taken offline. Whether or not it was funny is of course a matter of opinion, but the song was satire and no more extreme than many sketches on the ZDF comedy show *Heute-Show*. It seems as though the parent and grandparent generation cannot be attacked with such directness. After all, politics has nothing to do with it – it is us, the average citizens, who should feel attacked for the way we contribute to climate change in our everyday lives.

The »climate debate must not divide us« wrote the *Bild* newspaper as a reaction to »Granny-gate;« there must not be another conflict between the generations like there was in 1968.

»The protesters then are now pensioners, and suddenly this 1968 generation is under attack itself, faced with hostility for the environmental crimes that they have allegedly backed, covered up, committed their whole lives...We should do everything we can to prevent conflict between the generations in Germany, and under no circumstances should we interpret young people's concerns as a resistance movement against their parents and grandparents, thus fueling this (non-existent) conflict even further« (*Bild* 2019)

Suppression is considered an important psychological defensive formation that underlies a subconscious conflict. In the context of environmental destruction,

1 There was a storm of protest online, which had been staged by opponents of the public service broadcasters and was apparently not seen through quickly enough (cf. Geyer 2019). In our view, however, the strong reaction from Buhrow and Laschet is also linked to the fact that the generational conflict is not usually allowed to be addressed so clearly.

it appears more appropriate to speak of denial or division. These forms of defense relate to the situation that uncomfortable facts and information are not perceived at all – either, in the case of denial, because they would be too threatening or, in the case of division, because the emotional foundation is taken away from them. Both serve to manage the threat, to provide psychological stabilization, and to maintain the status quo. Fear and feelings of guilt can be avoided. However, this way of dealing with threats also prevents people from taking responsibility and making the necessary changes to their behavior.

There is also a question as to whether the environmental destruction has now taken on such proportions that the only possible psychological reaction is defense. This same question was asked by Horst-Eberhard Richter almost forty years ago:

»But even if we older people discover that these critical young people are merely reflecting an aspect of our world that we have suppressed, the question remains of how we should deal with this. We have to stand by our responsibility for leading society into the state it is currently in, which is so worthy of criticism. It is we, not the young people, who, through our leadership or at least our responsible collaboration, have caused the environmental, economic and military policy problems to be handled in the way they have been up to now.« (Richter 1983: 2)

The threatening facts were known even then. The Club of Rome made it clear as far back as the 1970s that the growth-targeted world economy had reached its limits. Back then, forest dieback appeared as a forerunner of oncoming environmental emergencies. In the Shell study »Jugend 81,« 58 percent of the young people surveyed took a pessimistic view of the future: Half of young people between 15 and 24 years expected nuclear war. Three quarters feared that technology and chemicals would probably or definitely destroy the world. 80 percent thought that economic crises and famines would break out. In this context, it is interesting that the young protesters in the 1980s were accused of being overly emotional, while today's young people represent the opposite – fact-based objectivity and a focus on science.

Of course, even then, various attempts were made to halt the destruction, with extensive protest movements against nuclear energy and large projects like Runway 18 West in Frankfurt, and the foundation of the political party »Die Grünen,« just two examples. Both were instigated by the generation that must today admit that, despite all their hard work, they have not lived up to their responsibility. Yet they appear to need to defend against this insight. Instead of taking responsibility, identification with Greta and her protest is used as a way to relieve the guilt for the failures and the consumption-oriented way of life up to now, which had not worried about the consequences for the climate. Living at the cost of the next genera-

tion demands an admission of guilt that cannot be accepted by individuals but, given its dimensions, only collectively, and must bring with it a comprehensive change in the way people live and do business. Identifying with Greta and her demand for »them« to change something makes it too easy.

»Fridays for Future« – children of the protest movement?

It appears plausible that such identification could work both ways – not merely the parents' generation joining in with the children, but also vice versa. The young people of the »Fridays for Future« movement could be the children of the earlier protest movement. Through their political involvement, they are picking up on and continuing the past actions of their parents. This can happen in the form of identification, but also through subconscious delegation, as described by Helm Stierlin (Stierlin 1982). This term refers to tasks that parents give to their children, which correspond to the subconscious desires of the parents and which children carry out in order to gain their parents' love and appreciation. The parents see their children's involvement as a narcissistic affirmation of their own actions at the time, and as today exempting them from the need to do something themselves. This potential dynamic between the generations, too, makes the acclaim of the older generation for the young climate activists appear ambivalent.

A child to save the world

The media presentation makes Greta appear almost messianic. She is not just an ordinary teenager, but an exceptional phenomenon: especially talented, determined, persistent and perhaps a little odd. Perhaps this makes it easier for other young people to accept her as a role model and leadership figure. She is not ›one of them,‹ but something special. *Time Magazine* informs us that she was confronted with the climate issue at school at the age of eleven, causing her to fall into a deep depression (Alter, Haynes & Worland 2019). Inspired by the young activists against the gun lobby in the USA, who protested in a school after a massacre, Greta decided to do something. But, instead of joining together with other young people, in August 2018 she simply sat alone in front of the Swedish parliament with a cardboard sign reading »school strike for the climate.« This solitary action is significant for the dynamism of the movement, as it was only then that other young people joined in. She is approached with respect and appreciation, not eye to eye. Greta also has an

important socio-psychological significance for the young people. She represents them in formulating the denunciation of the parents' generation, in some sense taking responsibility for this. She thus relieves the young people of having to enter into conflict with the parents' generation themselves. By joining a protest movement like FFF, they can follow Greta and be part of a collective movement. Their parents' approval, on the other hand, serves as vital reinforcement – it supports the protest and gives it legitimacy. The cause is further aided by awards given to Greta, such as *Time Magazine's* »Person of the Year« in 2019 – she is the youngest person ever to be given that honor.

Greta denounces political and economic elites for having stolen her dreams and her future. It all came to a head in her cry of »How dare you?« at the United Nations. One can defend against this denunciation by criticizing Greta Thunberg and accusing her of over-exaggeration, as many people did at the time. But one can also deflect it by joining Greta's side. In order to put themselves in a better position morally and environmentally, many adults identify with her and praise her as a hero. Journalist Tom Schimmeck makes no attempt to hide his enthusiasm:

»Observers in Stockholm reported it to me, and I thought the same thing when I later observed Greta myself at the UN climate summit in New York: Greta has force, she is authentic, she has this incredible seriousness and focus – in part thanks to her illness. It is simply real, there is no escaping it. That is what makes the difference. I have met many other Gretas in this world, from Tuvalu to New York, and they are all incredibly dedicated, they know an insane amount, have read a lot, you get the impression they know every study out there. But when they get onto the big stage, they are always so gentle and polite. Greta doesn't care – she is absolutely focused, she goes up to adults and says: You have left us high and dry, you're not thinking about the future, you are responsible. That has enormous force – not just for us, but for the important people in the world.« (Deppe 2019)

This statement is an excellent example of division: Although the journalist admits that Greta puts the responsibility on the adults, he also admires her for her power, resistance, and persistence. This idealization means that the denunciation comes to nothing – the adults are relieved of their guilt and do not have to deal with their failures or the urgent need to change the way they live and do business. Nothing changes.

Greta as a media figure is not an invention of the media. She serves the needs of all of society. Yet, as so often, the media act as a platform and amplifier. The media presentation of Greta Thunberg upholds and reinforces the mechanisms of suppression, division and denial of the generational conflict that goes hand in hand with climate change. The latent frame that is subconsciously evoked by this

presentation relieves the adult generation of their guilt and responsibility, thus denying a generational conflict that is actually contained in the climate debate.

Of course, the media also publishes other pieces – explanatory ones that provide extensive information on global warming and its consequences. Everything we know about the climate, we know from the media. Yet the presentation of Greta as a media figure contradicts this explanatory approach. It is the role of critical science to uncover such contexts – analyzing latent frames is one way to do this.

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