

Using New Media Tools With Visual Literacy

A variety of new media tools are now available that allow you and your students to add text within the body of a photograph or image. For example, in my lesson plan about the Civil War photo (www.frankwbaker.com/civilwarlessonplan.htm), I posted a number of questions that can be used as prompts for student discussion. Using user-friendly applications such as Bubble Snaps (www.bubblesnaps.com) or Flickr Notes (as in the example shown at www.flickr.com/photos/caterina/31244/), such questions or comments could be posted inside the photo itself.

Is Seeing Believing?

In 2002, I received an email with the subject line “*National Geographic* 2002 Photo of the Year.” Upon opening the email, I was presented with a color photo of what appeared to be a shark coming out of the water about to attack a man coming down the ladder of a helicopter hovering over the water. Wow, I thought, this is impressive, and I forwarded the email to friends.



FIGURE 3.4 A well-done hoax circulated through email.

Source: Unknown.

When I first received the email, I admit, my critical faculties were dropped. It was certainly possible, I reasoned, that *National Geographic*, with photographers literally all over the world, captured this photo of a man about to be attacked by a shark.

Unfortunately, this “photo” does not represent what really happened: it is a digital manipulation. Shortly after the viral email made the rounds, the *National Geographic* website debunked the doctored image (Danielson & Braun, 2005). In

explaining the hoax photo, they describe the original two images that were morphed to create the final image.

Students could use the critical-thinking questions and apply them to this image.

Who created the image? Because it was a viral email, it had no traceable author. All photographers want credit for their work, so when a photo has no caption or author, we should be wary. *What is the purpose of the image?* It is clear that the author/creator hoped readers would forward it, without question, which many of us did.

Who is the audience for this message? Anyone who reads email. *What techniques were used to create it?* The author/creator located real images online, used some kind of photo-editing software, and wrote an email that sounded authentic. To check if an email or image is an “urban legend,” use the Snopes.com website (www.snopes.com), which researches and reports whether a message is true or false. The Internet shark attack hoax is debunked at www.snopes.com/photos/animals/shark.asp.

Visual Literacy and News Content (News Literacy)

Kate Brigham’s thesis, “Decoding Visual News Content” (2002; <http://katebrigham.com/thesis/forMIT/Interface.htm>) is a valuable resource designed to educate news consumers about the design of news graphics on television and layout in news magazines. The intention of the activities on the site, according to the author, “is to introduce people to some methods for looking more critically at visual news content.” She uses the news media coverage about the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York to explore issues. By clicking on Television Stills (for example), you can change the background image or colors. Readers can also explore reasons behind certain image uses, text, visual features, and concepts, as well as explanations of the medium used and the sources of the images.

Visual Literacy in the Political Arena

The next time you see President Obama’s photo in the news, remember this: Everything about that image likely will have been carefully thought out ahead of time. Not many people know that the White House has a Communications Department, composed of television and advertising experts, whose sole job it is to make the president look his best in tomorrow’s news.



FIGURE 3.5 Indiana Town Hall meeting, February 9, 2009.

Source: White House Photo Blog, www.whitehouse.gov/blog_post/indiana

Yes, a stage will have been built, and a lot of thought goes into what is behind the chief executive. In other words, framing: what the camera sees. The photographers will all be told where to stand to get the “best shot,” which is what you will see in the evening news, the morning newspaper, and the weekly news magazine. Image is more important than words; our brains will retain the impressions more than what is said, so image control is paramount. From Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama, the people in office or running for office have been concerned about their image.

Their aides fret over the question: What do we want the public and the media to see? Their campaign aides and consultants try to control how the media convey the politician’s image in the press. “Photo ops” (short for photo opportunities) abound: specific events and times when news photographers can capture the candidates doing anything, from kissing babies to eating lunch. All candidates are interested in how they are represented. Candidates, for example, may wear a coat and tie in order to communicate a serious business or formal message. Or they may dress down, as John Edwards did, wearing blue jeans and no tie for much of his 2008 poverty tour. Or they might wear the color red, as Hillary Clinton did, perhaps to communicate patriotism. Or they may be seated aboard a tank, as Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis did, trying to communicate his strength on America’s defense. President G. W. Bush wanted to send a message of a strong leader when he appeared on an aircraft carrier to declare “Mission Accomplished” in Iraq.

Questioning Photographs

How we interpret photographs depends on a number of factors. For example, have you had any photography training that would help you understand framing, composition, depth of field, focus, backlighting, and the like? Have you been exposed to any visual literacy education designed to help you read photographic images? Assuming the answer is no, then you would not necessarily have the skills needed to read the language of photographic images. Professional photographers and photo-journalists, who have had training, understand how to use the tools of their trade. They also know how to communicate a message to the audience using those tools. Today, those tools include the ability to capture an event, digitally alter an image, and transmit it thousands of miles in a few minutes. But that wasn't always the case.



FIGURE 3.6 Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Robert Kennedy walking alongside his wife, Ethel, on a beach in Astoria, Oregon. The photo was taken May 28, 1968, just a few days before the Oregon primary.

Source: Photo courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Burton Berinsky.

When thinking about the image of the Kennedys (see Figure 3.6) and what it might represent, we might say that it could be representative of a romantic moment: two people sharing some quiet time, relaxing and alone. The fog in the distance also lends to the mood. We might speculate as to the weather, because the Senator has his hands in his pockets; his wife is wearing a coat. She has taken her shoes off in order to walk in the sand. There appear to be tire tracks in the sand, indicative of a car or some other vehicle having driven there.

How did the photographer know they would be on the beach at that time? Did the Kennedy campaign issue a press release notifying the media that the candidate would be available for a photo op? What was the campaign hoping this image would communicate to voters?

The important thing to remember here is that the Kennedys were not alone. There was a photographer who took this picture; he was situated behind them. His framing of this shot, or the cropping of it, is such that we are not allowed to see what might

be to the left or right of the Kennedys. We should ask: what is outside the photographer's viewfinder? What are we not allowed to see and why?

Notice the number of people who can be seen in the wider shot (Figure 3.7). How do you feel about the first photograph, now that you've seen the second one? Does this change your impression or your understanding of this staged event? We might ask, who are those people surrounding the candidate and his wife?



FIGURE 3.7 A subsequent image of Robert and Ethel Kennedy taken by the same photographer a short time later.

Source: Photo courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Burton Berinksy.

Contemporary Use of Images for Political Purposes

In the winter of 2010, President Barack Obama was on a campaign to win support of his health care legislation. One event at the White House was covered by the news media, and photographs of it were published in newspapers, magazines, blogs, and other news-related web pages.



FIGURE 3.8 U.S. President Barack Obama speaking about his health care proposals.

Source: Associated Press photo by Susan Walsh, October 5, 2009.

The photo shows the president speaking from a podium, flanked by people wearing white coats. Thinking about visual literacy, we might ask students to consider the following questions: Who are the people surrounding the president? Did you say doctors? If so, how do you know? If they are doctors, did they arrive at the White House wearing these coats? Is it possible that the White House distributed the coats

to them? Why would it be necessary or desirable for the President to be photographed with “doctors” in white coats? What might this image communicate to news consumers?

For more material on how politicians use images, visit *The People’s Choice: Digital Imagery and the Art of Persuasion* (Burns & Martinez, 2002), at <http://web.archive.org/web/20040105032819/www.southcentralrtec.org/alt/files/people%27schoice/17+Art+of+Persuasion.pdf>. This professional development module (with lesson plans and resources) teaches about visual literacy with a focus on past presidential campaigns’ visual messages.

Reading a Magazine Cover

Magazine covers are like advertisements. The graphic designers put the most controversial content on the cover in order to capture our attention and get us to purchase it. Students should be encouraged to read a cover.

The editors and designers of the *Rolling Stone* example shown in Figure 3.9 placed a caricature of President Bush on the cover of an issue when he was the chief executive. In order to read this cover, you must be able to interpret some of what is portrayed. For example, would students know that Bush is

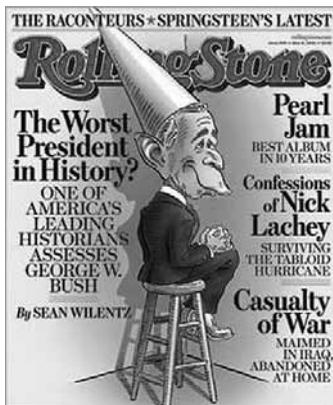


FIGURE 3.9 The May 4, 2006, *Rolling Stone* cover.

Art: Robert Grossman