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VISUAL RHETORIC AND VIEWER EMPATHY IN NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

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Print-centric academia is finally paying attention to the way our YouTube students are communicating. English departments are late to the game, having failed to become comfortable with the fact that most communication today is multimodal, with images being the primary semiotic tool. Gunter Kress, in presenting the New London Group's case for ♦multiliteracies,♦ points out that

Over the last two or three decades a revolution has taken place in the area of communication which forces us to rethink the social and the semiotic landscape of Western ♦developed' societies. The effect of this revolution has been to dislodge written language from the centrality which it has held, or which has been ascribed to it, in public communication. Perhaps the most obvious example is the increasing prominence♦dominance even♦of the visual in many areas of public communication as well. While this is obvious, the implications of that shift have not in any sense begun to be drawn out or assessed in any coherent, overt, fully conscious, and consistent fashion. (182)

At the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication, in the Chair's Address, Kathleen Blake Yancey articulated the call for research into multimodal composition, warning that if rhetorical theory and practice are to remain relevant to our students' lives, we need to acknowledge, use, and theorize about how other modes (e.g., visual, aural) participate with written language to create meaning.

This is not a surprise to our students. Many would be quick to point out that a great deal of the information they

get about the world is visual. ♦A picture is worth 1000 words,♦ and in the age of scan and click, visuals may be worth even more; they are processed more easily than text since ♦visual encoding is relatively automatic and cognitively cost-free♦ (Potter, Bolls and Dent qtd. in Newton 27). And students instinctively understand the power of visuals. They are happy to discuss the intensity of the effect of TV images of planes hitting the World Trade Center and to argue about how the photographs from Abu Ghraib hurt America 's image abroad and at home. They are often interested to learn about the US government's ban on media images of flag-draped coffins from Iraq and Afghanistan but are quick to understand why the government made such a move, even if they don't understand why the media agreed to it. They know the power of images to evoke sympathy and to inform perception. They prefer to get their news through YouTube and to make new friends and keep the old through photographs and instant-messaging on their Facebook pages.

Our students, with their cellphone cameras and MySpace pages, rejoice that we are surrounded by images that persuade us emotionally as well as informing us logically. Yet, as Kress points out, our students need to be given the tools to think as critically about this form of communication as they do about written texts. Thus the English Writing and Rhetoric department to which I belong challenged its faculty to address visual rhetoric alongside traditional rhetoric and composition in both the general education ♦freshman composition♦ courses and in the course offerings for our undergraduate writing majors. As part of a discussion about the role and the effect of visual elements of texts, I get students to look at the photographs that accompany news stories. News photographs, in particular, are a good place for students to exercise their critical thinking skills since photojournalists are seen as relatively objective ♦eyewitnesses♦ (Newton 27) to the world, and their photographs seem less consciously constructed than the photographs in advertisements or other promotions.

I also like to engage students in discussions about the role of journalism and their engagement with it (or lack thereof). Students are quick to acknowledge the potential for bias or manipulation by the traditional media. In part, they are confusing newspapers' clear, and often strident, editorial stance with their news reporting. But they are also responding to the excesses of Fox News and the rise of blogs as a substitute for mainstream media. Many of my students who keep up with the news at all (a small percentage, it seems) prefer to get their news from blogs where the bias is open and apparent. They feel they are more manipulated by mainstream media who profess objectivity but produce stories which guide them to empathize with some interests and ignore others. While not ignoring the effects of the corporatization of the news media and the very real instances where the political or business connections of owners and editors have influenced the way the news was reported, I urge students to see that much of what they call ♦political bias♦ in news stories is really more of a difference in framing of the story. Reading several different reports of the same event, I argue, is like talking to several different people who witnessed an event♦some facts are more salient in one telling than the other; each story may recount some facts left out of the other story. It's not just that the storytellers are subjective or biased, but that each sees the event differently, so looking at several versions gives us a richer sense of what happened.

In fact, at times the trick is to show that stories (and their accompanying photos) are inevitably framed without making students cynical about any efforts to tell a ♦truth♦ about the world. (In my sophomore-level class we have a discussion of ♦journalistic truth♦ based on a provocative chapter ♦Truth : The First Most Confusing Principle♦ in Kovach and Rosenstiel's *The Elements of Journalism*.) We talk about how the journalist's job involves collecting facts and checking and double-checking sources. But Kovach and Rosenstiel also argue that ♦a journalism built merely on accuracy fails to get us far enough♦ (43), and they quote the 1947 Hutchins Commissions report which warned that news stories can be ♦factually correct but substantially untrue♦ (43). Kovach and Rosenstiel describe journalists' effort to find and check facts and to put them together in a meaningful way for the readers. Journalists, it seems, have to tell stories, and the same facts are likely to suggest different stories to different journalists.

Blogs, however, usually push a certain version of the story more overtly. I encourage students to follow blogs, and I have class exercises comparing mainstream media coverage of events with blogs' coverage of the same events. I ask them to note how often bloggers link to a story from CNN or another mainstream news outlet to provide the facts of the story. We talk, with the help of Kovach and Rosenstiel, about what benefits trained journalists provide to the public, especially those journalists knowledgeable about an area of the world or with

access to classified documents. Getting news from blogs and YouTube is often like diagnosing one's condition from WebMD. There's great information out there but often we need a trained professional to help us put it all together. And often the online sources serve as a great complement/corrective that enriches the narrative told by the mainstream media. But these sources rarely replace, and often rely on, the kind of reporting and fact-checking that the mainstream media provide.

To get at what journalists do and how, I have used an exercise called [◆Unpacking News◆](#), suggested by Deacon et al. in their 1999 text, *Researching Communication*. In this exercise, students find articles from different news sources (e.g., different papers, a newspaper and an online news source, two online news sources) covering the same event. They compare the stories told in the two articles, looking at how each article frames the event, what the writer (and the story editor) considered to be the lede or most compelling angle of the story, who is quoted in the story, and how the quotes are presented. For example, I show students a pair of articles that reported on the release of FBI crime statistics for 2003. The *USA Today* article framed the story as a report on declining crime in cities. Its headline read: [◆FBI Reports Crime Continues Decade-Long Drop◆](#) and the subhead clarified: [◆Homicide rate rose slightly last year, but it is still down 37% since 1994.◆](#) The writer, Donna Leinwand, made clear that [◆Violent crime decreased again last year, marking a decade in which the nation's streets got safer. Only a slight increase in murders . . . marred the FBI's 2003 crime statistics. . . The rate of violent crime has dropped by about a third since the early 1990s when urban areas were awash in gang wars and crack cocaine.◆](#) The same day our local paper, the *Austin American-Statesman*, ran an article that gave the same statistic the opposite spin. Its headline read, [◆Crime Down, but Murder Up,◆](#) and it highlighted the 1.7% increase in murder from 2002, calling it [◆a jump of more than 6 percent since 1999.◆](#) It also claimed that [◆after reaching a low point in 1999 of about 15,500 homicides, the number steadily rose to more than 16,500 in 2003 or almost six murders for every 100,000 U.S. residents.◆](#) Students are amazed and amused that the same statistics, the same FBI report, could be framed, truthfully, as two such different stories.

Sometimes just looking at titles and subheads is illustrative, and for many stories, the headlines are the only parts that are read. For instance, in 2003, we looked at four different newspapers' coverage of a Senate vote on oil drilling in Alaska. While the *San Antonio Express-News* (Dewar) framed the result as a knock-out punch ([◆Senators Slam the Door on Arctic Oil Drilling◆](#)), the *USA Today* (Kiely) framed the story as a partisan issue: "Senate Rejects Oil Drilling in Alaska Refuge: Republican Supporters Vow to Pursue Issue After Narrow Defeat."[◆ The Wall Street Journal](#) (Fialka), however, saw the issue as pitting the environment against national security. Its title read [◆Senate Rejects Drilling For Oil in Alaska Refuge: Narrow Vote Turns on Issue of Damage to Environment Instead of National Security.◆](#)

My students have also enjoyed looking at who was quoted in each story and how each article quoted a different part of the various participants' reactions to the vote. For example, then Majority Leader Tom Daschle is quoted in three of the four articles, but each piece quoted his remarks in the Senate differently. In the *Washington Post*, he sounds stridently partisan: [◆We cannot sit silently by while the administration promoted \[sic\] a short-sighted strategy that mortgages one of our most precious and irreplaceable wild spaces for several months supply of oil◆](#) (Dewar). The *Austin American-Statesman* has him sounding more reasonable: [◆While endangering one of the most pristine areas in the world, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would do nothing to make our country more energy independent◆](#) (Hebert). But the *USA Today's* quote gives students the biggest laugh. Daschle comes across as an ecoterrorist: [◆Even if we drilled in the backyards of every American, we could not satisfy our nation's appetite for oil◆](#) (Kiely).

What I hope students learn from this exercise in [◆unpacking news◆](#) is that stories require a frame, a storyline. So in addition to witnessing events and taking careful notes on what is said, journalists must choose how to tell us the story of what they've seen and recorded in their notes. Most journalists do not intend to distort the news, but in choosing to tell one story (e.g., This increase in murders is scary!) over another (e.g., Crime overall is down.) from a given set of facts, they often provide very different pictures of what's happening in the world. I think it is important for students to see how this happens and to be able to evaluate the kinds of stories they are being told without ascribing all of the differences in the stories to a newspaper's political editorial bias. I want them to realize that the effect of storytelling is both more subtle and more pervasive.

And this is exactly the point I want to make to them about news photographs (and other ubiquitous images in their daily life). As part of the exercise in [unpacking news](#), I have begun asking my students, those in freshman rhetoric and composition classes as well as upper division students examining journalistic discourse, to analyze the role that news photographs play in telling these various stories. Just as they looked at how titles and subheads guide one's reading of a news story, they need to see how news photographs also influence how readers approach a story. And, similarly, if a reader only looks at a photo and perhaps its caption, she needs to ask what story those most obvious visual elements tell.

Some students resist seeing news photographs as carefully constructed. They are used to thinking of the visuals that are part of promotional material as highly constructed and artificial, but news photos and video footage on TV news, have a different aura. It is thought of as eyewitness testimony of sorts. News photographs are not supposed to be [photoshopped](#) or altered; photojournalists have been disciplined and fired for altering photographs even minimally, e.g., Patrick Schneider, a staff photographer, was fired from the *Charlotte Observer*, for enhancing the color of the sky behind the image of a firefighter (Farid). So while our students are relatively sophisticated analysts of advertisements and, to some extent, of visual art and artistic photography which they readily see as posed, framed, and designed, they are not used to looking at news photographs with the same critical eyes. Thus, analyzing the rhetoric of news photographs shows them that certain stories are being told and others silenced even by [eyewitness](#) accounts of the world. They'll readily admit that photojournalists snap and print hundreds of pictures for every one that appears in print or on a website. They are willing to think about what kinds of decisions editors made in choosing which print to use, especially when they think of weeding out shots that were out of focus, over- or under-exposed, badly framed, etc. They'll even admit that framing and cropping photos makes a huge difference in what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded or left out of the picture entirely. They're savvy enough critics of film to be able to discuss the difference that shooting from various angles makes in how viewers see an image. But they rarely put all of these things together and ask what these choices add up to, what story is being told (and which others silenced) through these choices.

A few examples help to get them thinking more critically. Various websites show the variety of photographs taken of the Marines who planted two American flags on Iwo Jima (e.g., Rogers). Clearly the editors who chose Joe Rosenthal's iconic photograph wanted the photograph to tell a particular story, one not told so clearly in the other photographs of a larger group of Marines raising the first, smaller flag on Mt. Suribachi . (See <http://www.iwojima.com/raising/raisingb.htm> for a variety of other photographs shot on Iwo Jima.) More recently, students remember the photos that ran on the day that Saddam's statue was toppled in Baghdad . They can clearly see the story told by the closely cropped photo that ran in most newspapers, suggesting jubilant Iraqis took down the statue. The photograph below was posted on this site <http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/sitehs104.htm> but it was the same photo run in the *Austin American-Statesman* on the front page on Thursday, April 10, 2003 (Kaplow and Lindell).



And they readily recognize the different story told by the wider angle photo posted on many media watchdog websites. The lesser publicized image shows few Iraqis and more American troops and equipment staging the event rather than jubilant Iraqis spontaneously rejoicing in the statue's fall (e.g., [Toppling](#) and [Photographs Tell](#)). The photograph below was posted on SourceWatch ([Toppling](#)).



Equally evident in the news photos is the point of view of the story. In November of 2004, the French had attacked a group of rebels in the Ivory Coast who retaliated by bombing a French military base. Among the stories told to American audiences about this event, the *New York Times*, on November 15, ran a picture of [anti-French protestors](#) in Abuja, Nigeria, including women in headscarves and women and men holding protest signs. But the lead article on the CNN website that day featured a picture of westerners crowded in the Abidjan airport, waiting to escape the violence. Clearly, some stories focus more on [us](#) than on [them](#).

A more humorous example is a photo from the *New York Times* on October 9, 2001, that ran on the page next to a story of Tom Ridge being sworn in as the first director of Homeland Security, then a newly created cabinet position. The *Times*' photo ran in other news outlets as well; it showed an older man being electronically frisked at the entrance to the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. However, the *Times* photo was both larger (it spanned six columns on page B10; the whole page layout can be seen by referencing the October 9, 2001, issue of the *New York Times* on JSTOR) and more closely cropped than other versions of the photo, emphasizing the elderly man being searched for weapons rather than showing him as one of a line of tourists crowded around the entrance and each being subject to the metal detectors. The *Times* photo accompanied a story about jittery Americans (Verhovek) and took up most of the top of one page. The next page contained an article that questioned the necessity of a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security and wondered about the effectiveness of another cabinet secretary whose power was not yet defined. Here's the lede: Tom Ridge was sworn in today as the first director of homeland security, a position the country's leaders never felt was needed before Sept. 11 and a job experts fear will be nearly impossible (Becker and Sciolino B11). The picture of an elderly man being carefully frisked before entering the Liberty Bell exhibit, not necessarily a vital national security site, seemed to reinforce the story of an administration trying to make a jittery public feel safer while not actually making us safer, especially when compared with photographs in other media outlets that showed tourists relatively happy to submit to security procedures. For instance, if you type "Security Measures at Liberty Bell" into the link below, you'll see a number of less ironic images ("Security Measures"): < <http://www.viewimages.com/Search.aspx?phrase=vihome> >.

Over the last few years, my students have done a good job of unpacking news articles, finding the underlying story and noting what was foregrounded and what left out, and also unpacking the accompanying photographs. They have noted various consistencies and inconsistencies in the relationship of the photos to the stories. One example that I remember most vividly involved news stories depicting the death of Yasser Arafat. A November 11, 2004, *USA Today* story portrayed an Arab World Mourning, focusing on the citizens' grief over the loss of their leader. The photo with the story portrayed young Arab men, in western dress (sweaters and sweatshirts and jeans) holding candles and pictures of Arafat; they looked like us. They appeared to be grieving as we would. In contrast, many photos linked to this story in other outlets showed crowds of angry protesters, dressed in Arab headscarves, carrying weapons. The *US News and World Report* story on November 12 showed shouting youths and soldiers. Clearly, in some stories we are supposed to identify with the Palestinians and in others we are supposed to fear them.

Students are excited to be able to analyze and compare various stories and news photos of the same event. In addition to discussions of media bias, we also engage in animated discussions of appropriateness and taste (what should be printed). Unfortunately, we have many examples of gruesome images from the Iraq war (e.g., Abu Ghraib and Falluja) and discussions in the media about what images are newsworthy and which are just sensational (Marvel and Mendoza). But in addition to discussions of taste, we engage in discussions of stereotyping and image control. If Palestinians are most often pictured as violent stone-throwing or gun-toting how does that influence our perceptions of them? Much has been written about the media's stereotyping of African Americans and other minorities, but this begins to make the message hit home for my students. Lester and Ross point out that

[n]ews and entertainment images are especially powerful because visual messages are products of our sense of sight, not our cognition. Pictures are highly emotional objects that have long-lasting staying power within the deepest regions of our brain. But both textual and visual media messages that stereotype individuals by their concentrations, frequencies, and omissions become a part of our long-term memory. (3)

And in addition, images such as news photos that are supposed to be eyewitnesses may be given even more credibility than other images. Thus, news photographs can reinforce stereotypes through their seeming

transparency.

So clearly the stories told by the news media in print and visual modes have great potential for shaping our sense of the world, for engaging our empathy or for engendering distrust, fear, or disgust. And our students need to be equipped with the critical skills to see how this is being done without dismissing all stories as distorted or false because they inhabit a certain, limited point-of-view. Students need to recognize that humans make sense of the world by fitting facts into story frames that make sense. So since story-telling is an inevitable part of how we make sense of the world, we need to make students aware of how stories are told, visually as well as verbally. Aware that each reported event is framed, they'll be less likely to be victims of manipulation and have more questions to ask about what was included and what excluded from any particular telling. Perhaps they'll be more likely to recognize and value points-of-view different from their own. But first they need to see news photos, as they have learned to see news reports, as carefully designed constructions, as stories being told, not as transparent reality.

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