

# The Power of Visual Material: Persuasion, Emotion and Identification

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The mass media offer up a diet of visual material chosen to attract their audiences' attention. Visuals are used not only to illustrate news and feature genres but also in advertising and campaigns that attempt to persuade their target audiences to change attitudes and behaviours. These include health, safety and charity campaigns.

Against this backdrop, one might expect a major body of social-scientific work to have explored the impact of visual material on the public's uptake of one or other message. Yet empirical evidence concerning its impact is scarce across the social sciences (Domke et al., 2002). Studies of visual material are marginalized (Radley, 2002). This paper forms part of a growing trend that reinvigorates interest in the visual. Specifically, the paper aims to assimilate existing literature on the power of the visual to persuade, as well as to raise issues concerning what audiences bring to the messages and how this may interact with their influence. To this end the paper draws upon studies of the visual in the humanities and social sciences. The emotive power of the visual forms the focus of this review.

## Qualities of the visual

A growing body of studies ascertains the qualities of visual material and how audiences make sense of it. The studies draw an implicit (and sometimes explicit) contrast made between visual and verbal/written material. They tend to highlight a core aspect: visual material's ability to arouse emotion.

The most salient distinction between the relative effects of textual/verbal versus visual messages concerns their emotive impact. Visuals are thought to send people along emotive pathways where textual/verbal material leaves them in a more rational, logical and linear pathway of thought. For example, Iyer and Oldmeadow (2006) found that people presented with visual material of the Kenneth Bigley kid-

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napping, drawn from national newspapers, felt significantly more fear than those who read about the kidnapping from the texts of the newspapers. Not only fear, but also engagement and concern can be stirred by visuals. Boholm (1998) found that visual components of news reportage of the 10th anniversary of Chernobyl across five European countries elicited stronger emotional engagement on the part of audiences, and imbued issues with stronger personal concern, than did texts. Boholm links this, in part, to visual images having 'a strong capacity to represent risks which are remote from everyday experience, as being subjectively relevant' (p. 127). He surmises that this permits identification with their content.

Visual material appears to be especially memorable and the salience that this confers may make it particularly forceful. This links to the vivid quality of visual material. Psychological literature on social cognition is replete with mental strategies whereby people make sense of their worlds. One finding is that people have systematically biased perceptions whereby they overestimate low-frequency 'vivid' killers (and underestimate high-frequency quiet killers). 'Information' is deemed vivid to the extent that it is: emotionally interesting; imagery provoking; and proximate in a sensory, temporal or spatial way.

While this 'vividness effect' may not be robust in itself (see Taylor and Thompson, 1982) two related mental strategies are found to be so. The 'salience effect' posits that when people's attention is differentially directed to one portion of the environment they tend to remember and hold that central when making subsequent judgements. This may relate to the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), a cornerstone of social cognition, which posits that an event is judged frequent or probable to the extent that instances of it can be easily recalled from memory. Thus the argument is that the emotive quality of visual material feeds its vividness. Vivid visuals leave a rich and strong memory trace where less vivid information would fade. This establishes the salience of what it portrays.

This empirical finding supports Boholm's (1998) hypothesis that visuals can exert a 'positioning power' on the viewer's imagination, which may be resistant to commentaries that challenge the feelings they produce. Visuals are readily absorbed in an unmediated manner because viewers are not generally provoked to reflect on or deconstruct them in the way that occurs in relation to verbal material. Debates are often set up in the media concerning which side is 'right' in a controversy (e.g. in terms of arguments in relation to whether the combined mumps, measles and rubella vaccination can cause autism). Yet no analogous 'debate' is possible regarding images. This links with a further quality of the visual: that it is able to verify the authenticity of the story being told (Graber, 1996). Photographs (moving and still), the salient category of visuals in the news media, confirm the 'truth value' of an event. A key feature here is that someone has seen the referent in person, which lends the sense that factual evidence has been provided for the event having occurred (Barthes, 1977). This quality diminishes any chance of 'debate' about and between visuals.

However, while one might argue that debate is inherently verbal/textual, one could juxtapose images and leave people to 'read' the controversies for themselves. An example of this would be the juxtaposition of images of people in the Arab world rejoicing at the fall of the United States' twin towers in 2001 alongside pictures of

westerners in a state of shock. The idea that the people in these images respond in a diametrically opposite way to the same visual event in accordance with their differing identities speaks to the interpretive contribution that visuals demand. This makes them polysemic. Individuals positioned in different groups are likely to have differential responses to the same visuals, which may depend on factors such as their empathy with the victims.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, then, this opens up the possibility that the emotive engagement and identification with suffering that the visual is said to elicit will vary according to such differentials.

On the basis of these qualities of the visual – that it is emotive, absorbed in an unmediated fashion, vivid and memorable, and ‘proves’ the authenticity of the event depicted – one would expect it to be particularly powerful in shaping persuasive messages.

### **Persuasion and tone**

The link between persuasion and visual material is highlighted here by making use of literature on health, safety and charity campaigns. A strong line of argument proposes that persuasion is effected by bringing an audience into a state of emotion. In terms of campaigns, those of the text-rich education-type have been superseded by visual-rich social marketing. This shift reflects a body of evidence that information alone does not attract people’s attention sufficiently to bring on the changes that campaigns hope to effect. Rather, they have to be lured in and, to this end, visual material is called upon.

The persuasive effects of campaigns evoking fear and humour have been the subject of considerable empirical investigation. The history of commercial advertising shows little use of fear to persuade audiences, yet efforts to change health and safety-related behaviours frequently involve material of a threatening nature. There is a history of oscillation between support for and refutation of the persuasive power of fear in the research field. A major 1970s study of fear-evoking campaigns directed towards increasing the use of seatbelts showed no such effect on seatbelt usage (Robertson, 1976). This precipitated a trend in favour of stressing the benefits of adopting health and safety behaviours instead. When fear evocation returned with a vengeance in the 1980s with Aids (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) campaigns the world over, interestingly again, in terms of effect, there was little evidence for its success. On the contrary, the Swiss Aids campaign, widely seen as the most effective (see Kocher, 1992), does not use fear and focuses instead on the benefits of condom use for quality of life.

The continued use of strong fear evocation is evident in Britain in the health and safety sphere. From anti-smoking campaigns that involve people dying of lung disease to ‘think – kill your speed’ campaigns to tackle speeding on the roads, fear is used to persuade people to adopt healthy and safe behaviours and to dissuade them from practices deemed unhealthy and unsafe. While long-term evaluative studies of such contemporary campaigns are in the making, one might argue that they have ignored evidence that fear interferes with both attention and retention (Lazarus, 1980) and induces viewers to look away (Geller, 1989). On the other hand much of

the empirical work pointing to the negative impact of fear-evocation campaigns is dated. Contemporary work points to the useful effects of fear, particularly when accompanied by messages concerning the efficacy of preventive actions (Witte and Allen, 2000). Fear-evoking visuals dominate horror, thriller and action-film genres, all of which appeal to viewers. Furthermore, the 'looking away' that fear is said to induce might more accurately be linked with feelings of disgust.

Disgust, a surprisingly under-explored emotion (Curtis and Biran, 2001), is one of the universal, basic emotions, alongside fear, happiness, sadness, anger and surprise (see Zajonc, 1998). 'Basic' emotions are basic because they are not composites of any others. Disgust is provoked most intensely by seeing (or touching or ingesting) body waste and other body matter. 'Disgust stimuli' also include death and poor hygiene (Rozin and Fallon, 1987). Responses to it include gagging, nausea, recoil and taking offence. Since the visual aspects of many contemporary health and safety campaigns, as well as those representing disasters, use disgust-evoking imagery, this paper turns to exploration of both its persuasive and dissuasive impacts.

Contemporary health campaigns draw heavily on disgust-evoking material. The British media anti-smoking messages of the past few years have represented cigarettes as arteries oozing with cholesterol/fat and shown a human heart with smoke pouring out of it. The intention appears to be to bring people into a state of disgust by drawing them in to look at body matter out of place. Like past anti-smoking messages that have represented the smoker's mouth as an ashtray, the contemporary campaigns show an attractive young woman with deep wrinkles around her mouth, which the accompanying text disambiguates as 'cat's-bum mouth'. Another depicts an otherwise attractive young woman with very stained and uneven teeth. Again, in line with past campaigns, smokers are also shown as almost-dead, diseased people. Such portrayals appear to reflect beliefs, on the part of those devising the campaigns, that elicitation of disgust will stop smokers from smoking and/or non-smokers from taking up smoking.

If disgust elicits looking away, why is it used so copiously by the news media who want to attract viewers, and the health campaigners who want to engage people in messages about the harm they are doing to themselves? One aspect of this answer lies in disgusting objects' ability to 'stick in the mind' or imprint themselves. To understand this one can generalize from Rozin and Fallon's (1987) findings regarding how people become disgusted by certain foods. Certain 'offensive objects' (e.g. a hair, a nail) become 'contaminants; that is, if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable' (Rozin and Fallon, 1987: 23). In other words, physical contact between an acceptable food and a disgust substance causes rejection of the acceptable food, and this is referred to as contamination. This is linked with Nemeroff and Rozin's (1994) notion of magical contagion. Moving beyond the food arena, a practice such as smoking becomes a contaminated entity when tainted with death and other disgust-inducing associations. Persuasive messages that use disgust play not only on a visceral gut-level of response but on a magical-thinking realm. For all of these reasons a sense of disgust stays with one and can rub off onto previously acceptable entities. It is therefore a potentially powerful tool for those who seek to persuade and dissuade.

The power of the disgust-inducing visual is well illustrated in Kitzinger's (1995)

study of Aids in Britain. Early media images of Aids emphasized a particular 'face of Aids', namely, the degeneration of the body that it engendered or the 'visual representation of acute debilitation' (p. 62). 'Before' and 'after' pictures were shown of both ordinary people and celebrities with Aids. Attractive gay men, in particular, characterized the 'before' pictures; in the 'after' pictures they had become emaciated, 'walking-dead' type characters.

Kitzinger characterizes the early Aids reporting as the ravaged 'face of Aids' period. She questions why the media dwelled on such images and answers that they drew on a particular genre of photography wherein the attempt to be eye-catching is realized by way of emphasizing the grotesque consequences of illness. This genre, in the case of Aids, serves to illustrate (and warn people of) the consequences of the 'deviant' lifestyle associated with Aids. Here 'The portrayal of physical affliction is intertwined with notions of sin, punishment, damnation and repentance' (Kitzinger, 1995: 53). By drawing on a genre of photography and of the horror film, these images tap a cultural repertoire in which looking different makes one villainous and threatening. They also objectify and dehumanize the victims as 'vegetables' and 'living skeletons'.

Kitzinger's point is that it is not just the media that adopt these images but the public too. Drawing on a large focus-group-based study she finds that the grotesque or 'yuck' photographs are those most remembered. They are the ones that have come to represent Aids in many people's minds. People explicitly state that these images come from the media. The exaggerated salience of such images derives, according to her participants, from their 'disgusting' and 'horrible' nature. Kitzinger's finding augments the contention that the disgusting visual imprints itself and rubs off onto that which it portrays.

What is the particular interplay of the media image and lay uptake in the persuasive process? Kitzinger's conceptualization of this is among the more sophisticated renditions of the relationship between the media and their audience. For her, the persuasive power of the media on their audiences lies in the 'yuck' images capturing lay people's imaginations for the same reason as they do the media's. These images are then further imprinted into the audience's memory by the way they get invoked and replayed in day-to-day interaction. For example, some of her focus-group participants report playing a 'spot the Aids victim' game, in which they speculate about the HIV status of people in their environments. Some act out the 'face of Aids' with contorted faces, drooling and so on. Their relish in reproducing such images suggests a fascination with what disgusts them (see also Joffe, 1999, regarding this theme). Kitzinger reports that some of her focus groups thought that such images would persuade people to take precautions against Aids. Others surmised that the images would make people feel fearful and turn away.

Disgusting visuals, such as those used in the British anti-smoking and Aids campaigns, may aim to persuade and dissuade in another way too. They may intend to shroud behaviour in disgust to produce its stigmatization in the social environment. Using the definition of stigma as a 'mark of social disgrace' a la Goffman (1963), the behaviour then becomes a marker of social disgrace that acts on individuals who behave in this way or plan to. Thus persuasion and dissuasion via disgust can operate indirectly.

Another way of answering a question as to why those behind persuasive messages use disgust-evoking imagery despite knowledge that it elicits recoil is that such imagery may not induce recoil. Radley (2002) proposes that visuals force people to engage with their own emotions. Analysing the trend for greater openness in the portrayal of post-surgery bodies, he hypothesizes that to look is to have one's affective state changed – be it in disgust, horror and/or fear. To look is also to be brought into a new relationship with the object of one's vision, and perhaps, thereby, to overcome one's disgust and fear regarding it. Here the assumption is that the fearful and/or disgusting stimulus is engaging, as a range of film genres and news images bears out.

### **Persuasion and content**

Beyond the realm of emotional tone, much contemporary thinking on persuasion derives from studies exploring types of visuals that persuade viewers to give to the charities associated with those portrayed. The paper turns to exploration of the persuasive power of the differing types of visual material.

People donate more than double when asked to give money for an individual about whom they have been given some personal information, compared to having been fed statistics (Small et al., 2005). Interestingly, feeling and compassion diminish as soon as one starts to add more people, even just an extra one, to the 'single identified victim'. Depiction of an identified individual victim appears to be highly emotionally evocative and this may motivate distress and, consequently, donations (see Kogut and Ritov, 2005).

The power of the visual, in terms of national and international issues, needs to be set within a climate where people have been force-fed statistics and have statistics fatigue (Slovic, 2006). The problem with a statistic is that it conveys so little about the people it represents – what they feel, how they sound and look. It is not surprising, then, that visuals often strike us more emotively than numbers. In some sense the visual provides a counterpoint to the statistic – particularly in terms of being distinctively emotive – where text and figures speak to more rational pathways of thought. Without affect, information lacks meaning (Zajonc, 1998) and will not be used for judgement and decision-making; thus affect is a key ingredient in decision-making, such as deciding whether to give to a particular disaster fund.

Beyond the role played by pictures of the 'individual identified victim' in persuading people to donate to charities, the type of 'victim' also plays a part. Examining the interaction between charity poster campaigns related to disability and the people viewing them Eayrs and Ellis (1990) show that people intend to give more money when presented with posters depicting children rather than adults. Images of disabled children may evoke particular emotions, such as the distress (see Kogut and Ritov, 2005) which may play a role in intentions to donate.

Thus far various qualities of visual information have been found to make it persuasive. However, no attention has been paid to differences within viewer groups. Are there different ways in which different groups can be persuaded to give money to charity? Regarding charity poster campaigns, Radley and Kennedy (1992)

showed that people from higher socio-economic status (SES) groups resented pity-evoking images and preferred the promotion of equal rights for people with disabilities. On the other hand, lower SES people were moved by posters evoking pity and touching a personal chord. This provides an inroad into how positioning and identification can play a role in the way visual messages are 'read'. Thus it is not just the qualities of emotional tone and content of the visual that are determinants of its persuasive impact, but the positioning and identification of the viewer. This will be further demonstrated by way of the findings from a study of British people's representations of the Ebola virus.

### **Persuasive impacts, emotional tone and identification: a study of representations of the Ebola virus**

Since we experience media in terms of a mix of visuals, texts and sometimes sounds, the visual component cannot be studied in isolation. Bearing this in mind, findings from a study of visuals and texts in British newspaper depictions of the Ebola virus are brought to light. Ebola is a virus named after the Ebola River in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where the first of many known outbreaks occurred in 1976. It is passed on via bodily fluids, there is no cure or vaccine for it and it tends to lead to a swift death. The DRC outbreak in 1995 received considerable attention in the British media and a study set out to examine the interplay of this media material and British lay thinking in the construction of representations of this virus. Media articles and their accompanying visuals were content analysed alongside a thematic analysis of interviews with British readers in which they were asked to talk about what came to mind when they heard the term 'Ebola virus'. The study (Joffe and Haarhoff, 2002) investigated what social representations British national newspapers had helped to cultivate in lay thinking regarding the Ebola virus at the time of the mid-1990s outbreak.

The results showed that in both the newspaper texts and the readers' talk Ebola was located as an African disease. While the tabloids ('low-brow' newspapers) and their readers focused on what were seen as inherent features of the generalized place – Africa – which they linked with ongoing disaster, broadsheets ('high-brow' newspapers) and their readers tended to talk of how Africa's structural features (e.g. health system, poverty, war) had contributed to the spread of Ebola.

This partially shared picture of origin, across the media and audiences, can be juxtaposed with major differences between media and lay perspectives in terms of emotive involvement. Newspapers sensationalized and globalized the risk from Ebola and then reassured audiences about the West's ability to control it. Reader talk was simply detached, with explicit mention of containment, self-limitation and the remoteness of Ebola from the space of the self.

One or multiple visuals accompanied just over a quarter of the articles analysed: The main visuals seen by those who read the tabloid newspapers were of teams of westerners, in hermetically sealed outfits, who went into Zaire to contain Ebola. Those reading broadsheet newspapers would have been most likely to see medical science-type pictures of a virus, sometimes with western scientists handling it in pro-

tective clothing. Notably, there were no images of bodies of the dead and dying, but there were a few of the following: portraits of westerners – particularly a nun – who had died of Ebola; maps of Africa; and two images of people looking fearful (only in the broadsheet newspapers).

While science fiction was *not* mentioned directly in the texts of the newspaper articles, the hermetically sealed protective clothing, seen by those reading articles accompanied by visuals, may have imprinted on readers a certain way of thinking about Ebola. Indeed a number of the participants talked of having seen science-fiction-type visuals depicting Ebola. The medics in the pictures looked like astronauts on a space mission. Furthermore, the film *Outbreak*, widely disseminated at the time, and representing an Ebola-like virus in science-fiction terms, may have been seen by the sample. The visual symbols in which Ebola was couched may have played a critical role in the detached sensibility that lay people expressed in relation to Ebola. Not only was Ebola 'out there' in Africa and controllable by western science, it was part of a world of make-believe, of science fiction.

In relation to the literature on qualities of the visual, the Ebola visuals may have had a 'positioning power' or primacy in terms of forging the sample's representation of Ebola but, in persuasive communication, visuals usually accompany some form of text. One might posit that they 'do something to' the textual message. They may highlight a specific feature and steer the reader to its salience. The Ebola study suggests that while texts talk in a sensationalist manner about globalization of a 'doomsday' disease and the potential for its containment, the most prevalent images contain western astronaut-type disease-control teams tackling Ebola. When asked about Ebola, many readers think of it as a science-fiction-type illness, with connotations of a fictional universe which, consequently, arouses little sense of fear for themselves or empathy for its victims.

Not only have the visuals had a 'positioning power' in forging representations, the viewers' identification – as white Britons responding to an illness that had affected Africa, in the main – seems to have played a part in their detachment; the visual material produced distancing rather than the engagement and identification presupposed by the literature on the visual. Thus the content and tone of visuals appear to interact with identifications to produce engagement and concern or detachment and apathy.

Psychological research has focused on identity, but not on identification. The literature on degree of identification with particular groups (e.g. one's nation, categories such as 'westerners' and even gender groups) is under-developed. There is a need to examine how a person's identification with visual material impacts upon the anxiety evoked in relation to it and the meaning constructed from it. If the sufferer of an illness portrayed in a photograph is seen as similar to oneself, does this increase one's empathy with him or her? Future research might gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms by which people detach themselves from, and identify with, visual material, and link this to persuasive impact.

The Ebola study casts light on a number of additional aspects of the media–mind link. The first is that audiences approach media not as blank slates ready to be imprinted with one or another idea, but with an 'already known' (see Kitzinger, 1998). Media 'signals' are taken up according to people's existing ideas. What audi-



ences already know leads them to selectively highlight, oppose or reconstruct ideas witnessed in the mass media. Second, and related to this, the motivation to see or represent something in one or another way stems from, among other functions, a need for identity protection (Moscovici, 1961/1976). Those representations widely shared among groups function as a means of collective coping with threat; people represent threats in ways that protect the self and the in-group (see Joffe, 1999). In terms of Aids, Ebola and a host of other potential changes brought to attention by the media, dis-identification with the risk fosters protection because it confers immunity from the threat.

### Concluding thoughts

This paper has integrated literature forged within the social sciences and humanities concerning the persuasive impact of visual material, highlighting issues of emotion and identification. Where once the mass media relied heavily on textual information they have shifted, increasingly, to the use of visual material. This is highly apparent not only in the news media but in health, safety and charity campaigns that attempt to socially engineer change in people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. With the increasing presence of such visuals comes a more emotive media environment with which people find themselves forced to engage, and, under certain circumstances, disengage.

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### Notes

1. One might contend that the response to a textual commentary also varies according to the positioning of the individual who reads or hears it.

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