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# Our Visual Persuasion Gap

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Visual media is everywhere. Images, still and moving, have spread across the globe on the wings of new technologies. They bombard us wherever we go, in restaurants, airports, museums, shopping malls, sports arenas, and even in gas stations, no less than at home and in the workplace. Even if we wished, we cannot avoid exposure.

The sheer number of new images produced and communicated is astonishing. YouTube now ingests 20 hours of new video every minute.[1] Its site reaches more than 18 percent of the global Internet audience; by comparison, *The New York Times* site reaches less than one percent.[2] The photo-sharing site Photobucket contains seven billion images and receives 130 billion searches per month, or more than 50,000 searches per second, yet it is playing catch-up to Facebook, which boasts 15 billion images and 300,000 accesses per second.[3] In addition, cable and satellite television providers have added hundreds of new channels, multiplying content while simultaneously increasing and fragmenting the global television audience.

Such statistics reveal two important trends. Many more images than ever before are available, and many more people are paying a disproportionate amount of attention to them. Quite literally, billions of human beings are seeing the world differently. The wholesale transformation of the media information landscape during the last decade in fact represents the triumph of the image over the printed word.

Today, images frame the discussion of those issues that most deeply stir public opinion. Photos of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib arguably caused greater damage to the US cause in Iraq than any defeat on the battlefield. In June 2009, the legitimacy of the Iranian regime was called into question by mobile phone videos showing the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman shot by a government sniper in the streets of Tehran. The imagery sur-

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rounding her death was so moving and iconic that she became a symbol and rallying point for Iran's reformist opposition.[4]

The persuasive power of the image works in part because we are largely unaware of it. Since the first Bible came off Gutenberg's printing press, we have developed a culture of learning based on reading and writing texts, with no corresponding emphasis on visual literacy. As the visual communications scholar Paul Martin Lester puts it:

> The most powerful, meaningful, and culturally important messages are those that combine words and pictures equally and respectfully . . . and yet, educators never developed a visual grammar for photographs in the same way that a verbal grammar was developed for words after Gutenberg. People are taught to read words but are never taught to read pictures.[5]

Because we are skilled at using textual "rhetoric" to influence teachers, employers, and customers, we are rightly suspicious when it is aimed at us. With visual media, however, the illusion is created that we are gazing out of a window at the real world. Watching Neda Agha-Soltan cast her eyes toward the cell phone camera and take her final breaths of life, we feel like direct witnesses rather than members of a detached and distant audience. We react like witnesses, with sympathy and anger, and find it difficult to remind ourselves that this was only one event, one brief moment, in a political upheaval involving 70 million Iranians.

To the proliferation of image producers and consumers, then, we have to add two compelling facts that define and complicate the transformed global information environment. Visual material is felt far more viscerally than text, and human beings are far less skilled at guarding their judgment against this style of persuasion.[6] One implication is that communicators gifted in the use of visual rhetoric will thus exert enormous influence over target audiences. While some members of the new generation of visual persuaders wish to move audiences to do nothing more than buy one brand of soap over another, others seek to promote causes and ideologies which reject democracy and the rule of law while glorifying violence, crime, and other sinister pursuits.

### Persuasion on the Cheap

Visual propaganda is far older than writing. Its persuasive power has long been recognized and turned to advantage by those in authority. In medieval times, the church dominated the visual arts. In the modern era, broadcast television has been tightly controlled from its inception by political and commercial elites who wish to shape public discourse and protect the audience from messages they find harmful or unprofitable. Viewers were largely passive recipients of the images broadcast to them; if they did not like what they saw or heard, they were out of luck.

The digital revolution exploded this top-down model. Vastly more individuals and groups across the globe now have access to inexpensive cameras, sophisticated visual media tools, and a virtually free delivery system in the Internet. The dominance of state and industrial information producers has receded, and a new crop of visual communicators has swept aside the old rules and relationships. Consumers have become producers, and amateurs have pushed their way onto the stage alongside media professionals.

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Because the new players in visual media have moved into an environment once commanded by governments and large companies, their style and content have tended to be subversive of established authority. This attitude has held true in the geopolitical domain as well, as demonstrated by the early adopters of communication-enabled popular mobilization in Eastern Europe's "color" revolutions and the movements worldwide that have strived to emulate them ever since.[7] The visually savvy branding of those pro-democracy movements communicated a sense of power and unity to the authorities and the watching world, while conveying an unmistakable air of momentum and inevitability to their cause.

At the same time, violent groups have acquired the ability to inexpensively conduct visual propaganda. Al Qaeda's video productions deliver a radical Islamist message in a sophisticated package, which often targets not only local groups but also incorporates animation, action shots, and English subtitles to reach an international audience. A typical al Qaeda format is the "martyr video," often featuring a suicide bomber who appears to rise from the grave to lecture the survivors about the justice of his or her cause. From the earliest days of the war in Iraq, terrorist and insurgent attacks were regularly staged so that they could be captured on video.[8] In fact, al Qaeda's penchant for spectacular operations can be interpreted as an attempt to persuade the world, using starkly visual arguments, of the weakness of western nations and the strength and military superiority of a fearless band of warriors.

The grandees of the old information environment, not surprisingly, have lagged a step behind in adapting to the changed landscape. The decline of newspapers is well known. Less publicized is the visual information gap facing analysts and decision-makers in government.

All modern bureaucracies—the US government is no exception—float on an ocean of memorandums, textual analyses, and policy statements. The written word still rules, while visual material tends to be regarded as noise rather than signal. Foreign television programs of interest are translated; historically, the transcribed text has garnered intensive analytical attention, while the more evocative and compelling video languished in a vault.[9] Until recently, US government agencies lacked a systematic approach or

even a shared terminology to analyze visual material. Moreover, intelligence gathering and policy-making have been operating with only a fraction of the information that is actually available in the marketplace, often excluding the more persuasive visual media that increasingly colors the global information landscape and shapes public discourse.

## *Visual Literacy*

The visual information gap does not have to continue. Visual literacy can be taught, learned, and applied, just as textual literacy has been. An increasingly varied array of disciplines, from neuromarketing to Hollywood filmmaking and political advertising, has developed penetrating insight regarding the way consumers interact with, and are persuaded by, images.[10] Applied systematically, this insight provides the foundation for a powerful methodology to understand the interplay of visual media, persuasion, and audience reactions in the geopolitical arena.

A practical way to demonstrate how this visual persuasion methodology can work is to review four of its most important elements: persuasive themes, master narratives, content and technical signatures, and indicators of audience resonance and effects.[11] These elements are not exhaustive; however, they should convey a sense of how visual literacy can be better attained and the persuasive effects of visual media "decoded." Importantly, each element can be applied and tailored across geographic regions or cultural boundaries.

### *Persuasive Themes*

Even a cursory observation of political campaign commercials will show that their imagery highlights specific themes, aiming to evoke feelings of nationalism, tradition and nostalgia, leader glorification, and, needless to say, plenty of scapegoating. A surprisingly short list of themes is sufficient to occupy a substantial portion of airtime.

In fact, looking back through the history of political persuasion, not only in the United States but across the globe, there is a limited set of compelling themes to which message originators repeatedly return in order to reach and influence their target audiences.[12] These themes are appealing for neuropsychological, cultural, and contextual reasons that make them an important weapon in the arsenal of any communicator. When systematically identified and catalogued, they can also prove invaluable in deconstructing a persuader's strategy, goals, and intended audiences.

Persuasive themes come to life through visual content: the people, places, and things employed within a specific visual message. They are also augmented and enhanced by technical factors and choices such as lighting,

camera angles, and music that help position the content, set the mood, and reinforce the message.

One common persuasive theme featured in geopolitical media is strength and superiority. This theme appeals to the audience's belief that the group, nation, or culture to which it belongs is more powerful and advanced than others. Superiority, of course, comes in many guises. A familiar and disturbing example from the past was the Nazi party's doctrine of the master race, propagated to strong effect by posters contrasting sturdy, blond German families with "physically repellent" foreigners or Jews. More recent examples include the Pentagon's "shock and awe" narrative associated with the initial military campaign in the Iraq War and the radical Islamist messaging that equates the claimed moral superiority of the holy warrior with inevitable victory.

Another theme frequently employed by visual persuaders is order and continuity, which emphasize the need to preserve the status quo and fear change. For obvious reasons, this theme has been a favorite of sitting authoritarian regimes, along with paternalism and leader glorification, the latter continuing to inspire into the present an ancient tradition of heroic portraiture of pharaoh, emperor, fuehrer, first party secretary, and "dear leader."

Two persuasive themes that often are paired in visual messaging are intolerance and xenophobia and enemy encirclement. As professed, for example, by anti-immigration groups in Europe, anti-globalization populists, and nationalistic Russian propagandists, these themes—which blend a dislike of foreigners and alien customs with a sense of being surrounded by cunning, powerful enemies—tap into deep-seated emotions of fear and anxiety, and can mobilize audiences to embrace violence.

Persuasive themes provide valuable insight on several fronts. Once decoded, they become an interpretation filter for visual media that most consumers currently lack. They also impose a common vocabulary to label, categorize, and compare content and messages over time and across geographies. By tracking originators' thematic consistency and changes, significant information can be obtained about the senders' evolving outlook, strategic approach, intended audience and effect, and awareness of conditions on the ground. A thematic shift from paternalism to enemy encirclement, for example, may signal a change in the message-sender's circumstances, or an effort to target appeals to new audience segments.

*Master Narratives*

Persuasive themes are striking because they operate so effectively across boundaries and cultures; they are, at a high level, universal. Master narratives sit at the other end of the spectrum, rooted deeply in culture and context. Master narratives are powerful and enduring stories within partic-

ular countries, regions, cultures, or groups. They arise from the rich social heritage of particular communities and settings, and reflect shared hopes, concerns, and aspirations. The identity of any group of people to a considerable extent is shaped by (and reflected in) these oft-told stories, which help group members make sense of life's developments and explain who they are, where they come from, and where they are going.

A familiar master narrative from the US context is the American Dream, which conveys aspirations for personal independence in a land of opportunity. It emphasizes breaking the bonds of the past and of rigid convention, and is passed on via stories about Pilgrims, Founding Fathers, pioneers, and global immigrants. This narrative is continuously employed by filmmakers, advertisers, and politicians who invoke the self-made person, the rags-to-riches ideal, and the tale of those from every nationality and creed who strive to realize their hopes and dreams in a promised land. A tremendous variety of images and content has been generated around this narrative by American persuaders, who appeal to it time and again, in both explicit and subtle ways, due to its resonance with the US public.

In the Arab world, a pervasive master narrative of charity and hospitality emphasizes the need to provide warmth and good will to all visitors, whether friends or strangers. In Russia, the historically grounded narrative of the strong leader underscores that the best way to avoid chaos and social disintegration is for the nation to be run by a single, formidable ruler who enjoys wide latitude in the use of power. In China, the powerful social narrative of filial piety captures the ideal of a harmonious family relationship, with emphasis on the loyalty of children to their parents. Abstracted to the broader Chinese political context, the ruling Communist Party uses explicit and implicit variations of this narrative in its increasingly visual efforts to depict a guiding, paternalistic relationship with the populace. Master narratives can also be found in more finely divided audience segments. The Pakistani military, for example, defines itself as the defender of last resort, a narrative that is articulated when the military confronts external enemies and internal threats to stability.

Because master narratives are deeply rooted in specific contexts and histories and stories are the most powerful form of human communication, they are often quite memorable. As such, they provide visual communicators with a deep reservoir to tap into and an effective lever to stir particular audiences and move them in a preferred direction. As an example, the photos from Abu Ghraib resonated with the Arab public because they seemingly confirmed the frequently repeated tale that American-style freedom leads to sexual debauchery, particularly among women. The video depicting the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, on the other hand, shocked Iranians in part because it made a mockery of the regime's ideological narrative regarding its place as the stalwart defender of women's honor.

Communicators can invoke master narratives with a subtle visual allusion or veer into crude stereotyping. Once articulated, however, such narratives make it possible to better assess how a given visual message aligns or conflicts with the established cultural and contextual grain, which plays a decisive role in determining audience resonance.

## *Content and Technical Signatures*

Although message originators do not always consciously follow a particular formula in their work, visual communications tend to package imagery and technical elements in such a way that one can usually discover an underlying structure. That structure, in turn, constitutes a "signature" that reflects distinct characteristics and choices for every piece of persuasive visual media.

These signatures yield important information regarding the kind of content employed: for example, universally recognized images such as a mother and child, or highly esoteric imagery such as the tattoos and hand signs of Salvadoran criminal gangs. Signatures also shed light on the mood sought for a message: for example, light satire or darker images and themes that convey a more pessimistic point of view. The pacing of a message also can offer strong evidence of the intended audience's chronological age: Frenetic and kinetic material usually reflects an appeal to youth, while stately "talking heads" often aim at older generations. Finally, technical signatures deliver clues related to the capabilities and resources of a given communicator, as evinced by the production quality of the output.

## *Audience Resonance and Effects*

In commercial and social marketing, the cinema, and political campaigning, there is a growing emphasis on measuring the "return on investment" for a given strategic communication. Understandably, those who control the purse strings want to know whether their persuasive campaign had an impact.[13] This results-oriented focus also drives the discourse behind public diplomacy, strategic communication, and operational messaging in the foreign policy arena. In this case, however, rather than asking how many products have been purchased or tickets sold, US government decision-makers want to know how many foot soldiers al Qaeda won over with its latest video release, how much significance they should place in the growth of nationalistic, antiwestern videos in China and Russia, and which foreign audiences were most persuaded by President Obama's latest policy address.

Though it will rarely be possible to prove a direct causal link between a particular media message and observed audience behavior, indicators exist that convey important information regarding audience reaction to a piece of visual media or campaign. These indicators rest on evidence that can be identified,

measured, and synthesized, thereby providing meaningful signals regarding audience resonance and whether a particular effect or impact has occurred.

Indicators vary in strength and directness. Indicators of audience exposure, for example, center on general media access data and try to ascertain who potentially may have received a message in the first place. Indicators of resonance and attitudinal effect involve evidence of "buzz" and observed sentiment, while indicators of behavioral effect focus on observed audience reactions or, if reactions are unattainable, reports and commentary referencing salient actions or behaviors that could be associated with exposure to a given piece of visual media.

For the analyst of visual media, such indicators can show whether the designated measurement of influence is moving with respect to audience exposure and audience impact. For the communicator, they provide an important means to track and measure the extent to which a target audience has been reached and is moving in a favorable direction.

### Visual Persuasion and National Security

Despite the acute visual literacy gap previously described, the good news is that, in recent months, the US government has begun to overcome its institutional fixation with text. For example, elements of the intelligence community have developed innovative ways to apply the methodological elements discussed in this article to the steady flow of global visual material that is relevant to US national security. This innovation is an important first step in the direction of more comprehensive visual literacy by government analysts and message-senders.

To the extent that such efforts are expanded across analytic, communication, and operator communities, the complex interaction of visual information and persuasion will become better understood and far more manageable. This expansion will result in greater global awareness, fewer national security surprises, and more savvy communications and messaging that support rather than undermine US interests. It will become possible to successfully undermine terrorist recruitment tactics, for example, and to gauge the actual damage, if any, inflicted by the anti-American posturings of the Venezuelan or Iranian regime.

At the same time, US policy-makers will obtain a vastly more effective understanding of, and connection with, foreign audiences. They will be able to shape visually persuasive appeals that, in the words of President Obama, adhere to America's core values and interests, yet more accurately reflect the affinities, conditions, and aspirations of the local contexts within which those foreign audiences reside.

A more sophisticated appreciation of visual rhetoric will help all involved better discern signal from noise in a crowded, increasingly chaotic

information landscape. Those charged with presenting American perspectives and positions to a skeptical world will learn to analyze and work with images as deftly as they do with text, while being more sensitive to the influence of culture and context in determining how specific populations respond to visual material. Foreign message-senders, whether friendly or hostile to the United States, will be assessed on their own terms, and their influence clearly understood. This will inform and advance the shaping of US policies. Meanwhile, global audiences, the human face of the marketplace of ideas, will receive imagery-based American messages that are far more eloquent, both in local and universal appeal, than what could ever be expressed with words alone.

## NOTES

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2. This figure is based on three-month averages derived from Alexa, an online tool that ranks comparative Web site traffic. See http://www.alexa.com for further details.

3. http://www.photobucket.com; http://www.facebook.com; Marketing Vox, "Facebook Becomes Largest Online Photo Storage Site," 16 October 2008, http://www.marketingvox.com/facebook-becomes-largest-online-photo-storage-site-041509/.

4. Martin Fletcher, "Video Clip of Student's Last Breath Makes Her Martyr of Tehran," *The Times*, 23 June 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6557858.ece.

5. Paul Martin Lester, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Belmont, Calif.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), vii-viii.

6. Ibid., 65.

7. See Anders Aslund and Michael McFaul, *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

8. See Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Ideas* (Washington: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2007).

9. This was the procedure at the old Foreign Broadcast Information Service, where one of the authors served.

10. See Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (2d ed.; Los Angeles: Silman-James, 2001); Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996); and *Frontline*, "The Persuaders," November 2004, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/.

11. These elements are original concepts derived by the authors, based on exhaustive research and interviews with subject-matter experts in fields such as geopolitical persuasion, cultural anthropology, commercial and social marketing, and political communication.

12. See Nicholas J. Cull, David Culbert, and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2003).

13. For example, see George Perlov and Tony Foleno, "Moving the Needle: How Research and Evaluation Can Ensure Your Communications Program Is a Success," Ad Council, 19 December 2006, http://www.adcouncil.org/files/seminar_series/MovingtheNeedle06/DCPresentation.pdf.