

Reading Photographs

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The media are important shapers of our perceptions and ideas and, increasingly, non-print media are becoming significant sources of primary information. Young people spend many hours each day watching television, listening to the radio, playing video games, and reading comics. If they read newspapers or magazines they will be attracted to the photographs; while on the way to school they will view a number of billboards advertising a variety of products. It can be argued that young people are receiving more information from out-of-school sources than from the formal education system. If a key element of education is to develop critical thinking skills, then students should be taught not only to read and understand the written word but also non-print sources, especially visual messages.

Films, television programmes, photographs, posters, and billboards should be treated as texts in the same way as books and other written material. Students should be taught the skills to deconstruct these texts in order to understand their messages. They should develop the knowledge and critical understanding not only to analyse this information but also to gain the technical skills to create media materials. Photography is a good place to start because most families have a camera, and photographs are an integral part of our lives. Most people also believe a photograph bears a direct relationship to its subject and the camera does not lie. Unfortunately this is very far from the truth.

On Monday, March 31st 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* published, on its front page, a digitally altered photograph of a British soldier directing civilians to take cover during the recent fighting in Iraq. The photographer was fired because he had not informed the newspaper that he had manipulated the image, and the *Times* has a policy forbidding the altering of the content of news photographs. In fact, the photographer was only embellishing his work as he took two consecutive photographs of the same event and simply mixed the two together, using Photoshop or some other image manipulation software to create a more effectively composed photograph. The original two photographs and the altered image can be viewed at the ZoneZero website at <http://zonezero.com/magazine/articles/altered/altered.html>. While in this case the dismissal of the photographer may have been unwarranted, as he was only trying to enhance the photograph's aesthetic appeal and the content of the image was not in fact altered, the newspaper felt it an important enough issue to make an example of him in order to maintain its strict policy on image manipulation.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the major newspapers generally do acknowledge when a photograph has been digitally altered, but one can be fairly certain that the *Los Angeles Times* example is not unique. The public, and especially students, need to be aware that a number of the photographs that they see in newspapers, magazines, books, posters, or billboards may have been deliberately modified and may bear little relationship to the

original subject matter. Obvious examples are the advertising and fashion industries, which rely on the skills of their photo editors and retouchers to ensure that their products are even more desirable and the models more beautiful.

There are a number of other examples of how images can be manipulated in such a way to create the desired message. Using Photoshop's copy and paste function, one can easily magnify the size of a crowd. This has become a common and accepted technique in creating crowd scenes in movies like *Gladiator* and *Titanic*, but it was also used to increase the crowd size in many front-page photographs of Saddam Hussein's statue being pulled down by a comparatively small crowd of Iraqi citizens.

It is not only through sophisticated image manipulation software that such distortion can take place. A far simpler way is through cropping the pictures. A photographer may take a picture of a government politician addressing a crowd. In the crowd there are a number of supporters, but also a group of protesters. If the newspaper holds a position that is favourable to the government or against the position of the protesters, the photo editor may crop the picture in such a way that the politician is only seen to be addressing his supporters. Cropping can be an innocent device to create emphasis or to make the image more interesting, but it can be used by an editor to create a different message from the one originally intended by the photographer.

An even more basic technique is the one of selection. The photographer may cover a news story in a part of Trinidad and Tobago and take a number of photographs at the location. The job of the photo editor is then to select a photograph to either tell the story on its own, or to illustrate or improve the story written by a journalist. However, if the photographer was covering a strike against a company that the newspaper has a relationship with, the photo editor may select (or be told to select) a favourable picture of the company owner looking dignified in his business suit, while the union leader (if shown at all) would be shown protesting on the street, wearing a T-shirt, part of an unruly crowd of demonstrators.

Pedro Meyer, on the ZoneZero website, discussed the issue of image selection, and the *Los Angeles Times* was criticised for only publishing images of the Iraqi war that the Pentagon or the White House wished them to publish. It was argued that the *Times* did not publish images of the Iraqi children killed or wounded by US bombs and was therefore an integral part of the propaganda machinery of the government. This issue was even more apparent in the American television coverage of the war, as the executives determined what type of images they would allow the public to see, and these images were almost entirely in support of the war and disregarded the civilian suffering.

The meaning of the photograph is also affected by a number of factors: where it is placed, whether it is prominently displayed on the front page of the newspaper or lost in the interior; the impact of other stories or photographs on the same page; the size of the photograph (bigger is usually better) and, most importantly, the caption that accompanies the photograph. Photographic images are polysemic [having more than one meaning], and captions anchor the photograph and provide it with a dominant meaning. The same

picture can transmit totally different messages depending on the caption used. Once again, this is an area in which the photograph can be subjected to manipulation by the editor.

The media constructs our reality in many ways. It is believed that individuals have the power to construct a picture of the world and how it works through the use of their senses. However, a major part of these observations and experiences comes preconstructed by the media, with attitudes and interpretations already built in. It is therefore recommended that our children and our students should be taught how to read and deconstruct all forms of texts, especially visual images that are so attractive and influential.