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VISUAL COMMUNICATION

INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIES

WILEY Blackwell

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VISUAL COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS AND STRATEGIES

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Preface

How can we make sense of the myriad visual images surrounding us today? How can we strategically use images with a clear understanding of their function and impact?

This book answers these questions by providing new “ways of seeing” visual representations through different lenses and in different contexts. It then provides practical guidance for creating purposeful and ethical visual communication.

The authors recognize the accelerating dominion of images in communication, society, and culture. We human beings process images and video effortlessly and automatically. Visuals carry an emotional and visceral punch that text can rarely, if ever, match. As multinational marketers, social media influencers, and teenagers on TikTok know, visuals create their own language, accessible to all, regardless of traditional textual barriers of understanding such as education or language.

We've watched as entertainment and information have morphed into largely image-based communication including advertising and brand messaging, organizational communication, and individual creation and uploading of images, memes, and videos of all kinds. As of this writing in early 2021, people are watching 5 billion YouTube videos every day and Instagram has over one billion users worldwide. U.S. digital advertising expenditures are projected to grow to 22.18 billion U.S. dollars in 2021 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/256272/digital-video-advertising-spending-in-the-us/>).

Most of us take the sphere of images for granted: it's just the way the world is. Of course, human beings have always

created symbolic structures of meaning that shape how we interpret and participate in social life. However, we also tend to treat these image systems as natural phenomena. We conveniently forget that we ourselves invented these structures of meaning and it's important we understand their significance and meaning in more thoughtful and nuanced ways.

For some years, we've been conducting research on images, moving and still, and their various roles in society. We've studied and written about digital visual folklore in emails about President Obama, the widespread sharing of memes of football star Richard Sherman, comedy television's performance of vice presidential debates, presidential candidates' online visual storytelling, images of morality in political TV ads and news coverage, sexual imagery in advertising, issues in visual persuasion ethics, photographic coverage of the Pope's 2015 visit to Cuba, ethical implications of VR, AR, and 360° technologies, and satiric images of Trump as spectacle in global magazines, among other visual topics.

Inspired by our previous work, we wrote this book for students and scholars with the intent of providing insights into the role of visuals in our dynamic social environment. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We are symbols and we inhabit symbols" (*The Poet*, 1844). We hope this book connects with a broad range of scholars and practitioners in the arts, humanities, social sciences, engineering, technology, and neuroscience and serves as an invitation to future study.

Acknowledgments

Both authors made generous contributions in the research and writing of this book. As this project has evolved through its various phases, there are many people to whom we owe special thanks.

We would like to begin by thanking our academic colleagues in visual communication for inspiring and challenging us to create this book and extend our theoretical, applied approach to visual communication education to students in all preprofessional fields that encounter visual phenomena.

Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers who offered clear critique, advice, and suggestions based on their own teaching experiences in visual communication. We also benefited greatly from our students who, through classroom engagement, provided helpful feedback on lessons and exercises.

We want to acknowledge our colleagues and administrators at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Communication, and the Novak Leadership Institute at Missouri School of Journalism for their support during the research and writing of this book.

We also deeply appreciate the contributions from the professionals and academics who shared insightful profiles in our chapters and who offered their suggestions and ideas as we developed the outline of the book.

Drawing from years of study and practice in fine art, Janis is especially grateful for the long-term mentoring in visual metaphors by Sr. Alyce Van Acker, O.P., of the Fine Line Creative Arts Center, St. Charles, IL.

Finally, we would like to thank our spouses William Page and Daryl Moen for their constant encouragement throughout our long process of shaping and perfecting each chapter, resulting in a work we are truly proud of.

About the Authors

Janis Teruggi Page is a faculty member in the Department of Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago, and has been affiliated with the Strategic Public Relations Master's Program, George Washington University, for more than a decade. She has taught visual communication courses throughout her academic career. As a Fulbright distinguished chair, in 2018 she researched intercultural visual communication and taught visual literacy at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. An award-winning author, her research includes "Images with Messages: A Semiotic Approach to Identifying and Decoding Strategic Visual Communication," published in the *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (2015), and "Trump as Global Spectacle: The Visual Rhetoric of Magazine Covers," published in the *Handbook of Visual Communication* (2020). She is also coauthor of the textbook *Introduction to Public Relations: Strategic, Digital, and Socially Responsible Communication* (2019, 2021) with Lawrence J. Parnell. Prior to joining academia, she had a 20-year career as creative and marketing director for various US media companies. A former student at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, she holds a PhD from the Missouri School of Journalism with a secondary emphasis in art history.

Margaret Duffy is Professor of Strategic Communication and cofounder and executive director of the Novak Leadership Institute. She led the effort to obtain a \$21.6 million gift to endow the Institute from David Novak, alumnus of the Missouri School of Journalism advertising program. Mr. Novak is the retired CEO of YUM! Brands (Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, and KFC) and credits his education in

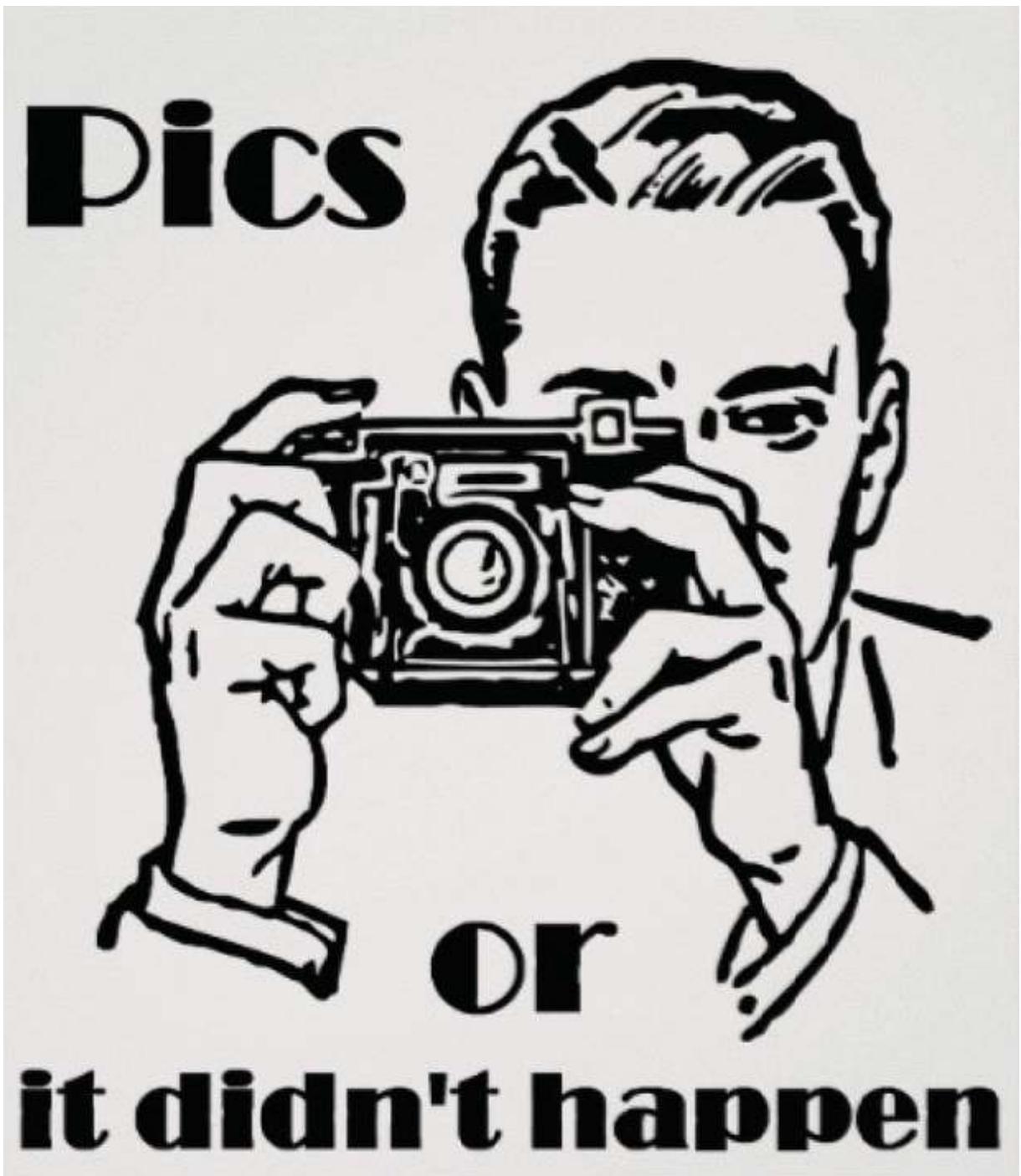
advertising as the catalyst for his leadership success. Until 2016, Dr. Duffy chaired the Strategic Communication Faculty at the Missouri School of Journalism. She also served as associate dean for graduate studies. Dr. Duffy directed the Missouri School of Journalism's Online Master's Program from 2001 to 2016. An award-winning scholar, her research focuses on leadership, organizational communication, visual communication, and persuasion ethics. She coedited the book *Persuasion Ethics Today* (2016) and cowrote *Advertising Age: The Principles of Advertising and Marketing Communication at Work* (2011), Dr. Duffy is a founding board member of the Institute for Advertising Ethics and an inaugural fellow at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute. In 2019, she received the University of Missouri Distinguished Faculty Award. She is a former marketing executive and earned her PhD from the University of Iowa. An author and consultant, Dr. Duffy conducts research and advises media companies and brands around the world with clients as varied as Estée Lauder and the US Army.

PART ONE

Understanding Visual Communication

Chapter 1
Making Sense of Visual Culture: *1000*
Words or One Simple Picture?

“Pics or it didn’t happen.”



Source: <http://www.dpreview.com/forums/post/58791114>. Reproduced with permission of RetroClipArt/Shutterstock.com.

By 2015, this phrase had morphed from a meme to a catchphrase that seemed to be everywhere. If a friend tweeted that she'd been cliff diving in Acapulco, you might respond with that phrase suggesting that perhaps she was

being boastful without any evidence to back it up (Whitehead, [2015](#)). If your gamer pal claimed to have reached level 60 in World of Warcraft, you might demand some proof.

Other phrases call on our desire to tap into what Whitehead and others have called “visual authority.” You've all heard that “seeing is believing” and heard people say, “I'll believe it when I see it with my own eyes.” And consider the famous Chinese proverb, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Here's the thing: it's not Chinese, and it's not a proverb. In fact, it was likely the creation of ad man Fred Barnard¹ in the 1920s. As William Safire ([1996](#)) writes, Barnard, trying to increase his agency's business selling ads on railway cars, came up with the phrase. He had it translated into Chinese characters with the caption “Chinese Proverb: One Picture is Worth Ten Thousand Words” and it passed into popular culture as “one thousand words.” Whether it is one thousand or ten, Barnard tapped into the notion that most people find visual evidence more credible and interesting than verbal or textual expression (Graber, [1990](#)).

In entertainment, politics, interpersonal interactions, and at work and at play, we're all consuming, evaluating, and creating visuals. Our culture is increasingly suffused with images aimed at selling us something, persuading us, informing us, entertaining us, and connecting us with others. Your skills and capabilities in communicating effectively and critically evaluating what's around you are crucial to your personal and professional success and that is what this book is about. In the following chapters, we'll provide you with the tools to become an ethical and effective communicator in an era increasingly suffused with images of all kinds.

Key Learning Objectives

1. Understand visual culture and its transformation in the digital age.
2. Explore the fluidity of visual meaning.
3. Identify ways to research and analyze visuals.

Chapter Overview

In this introductory chapter, you'll explore five important issues relating to visuals in contemporary society. First, you'll be introduced to how visuals work and how we interpret them. Second, we'll review the astounding growth of visuals and video in recent years and how this trend is on a steep upward trajectory. Third, we examine the concept of visual culture and how changing technology relates to that culture. Fourth, you'll delve into how individuals can draw different meanings from the same visuals or video artifacts and how that process relates to social life and the meanings we take from our environment. Fifth, we preview ways to analyze visuals. At the close of the chapter we offer two vignettes illustrating how visuals work and provide an overview of the book as a whole.

HOW VISUALS WORK

LO1 Understand visual culture and its transformation in the digital age

Today almost every part of our lives is visual and visualized. We routinely use devices to see, to capture experiences, and to communicate. As suggested by Tavin ([2009](#)), visual culture is “a condition in which human experience is profoundly affected by images, new technologies for looking, and various practices of seeing, showing, and picturing” (p. 3, 4). We are now at a place of unlimited visual culture and thus how we understand media and visual literacy has changed.

Photographic Truth?

Among the things that strike us about images and photographs in particular is how they *feel* as if they are presenting us with a truth about reality. Sturken and Cartwright ([2009](#)) call this the “myth of photographic truth” (p. 24) because it obscures the roles of human beings who are creating the image. Those acts of creation include many factors such as the choices the photographer makes about the scene, lighting, and composition. Indeed, the photographer decides what subjects are worthy of their time or attention.

Even with technologies that make it easy and inexpensive to capture images of all kinds, the picture-taker must choose those subjects, whether they are powerful images of war or funny pictures of grumpy cats. All of these will affect the tone of a photo and thus the interpretations people take away from it. Even though we may know intellectually that the photographer has chosen a certain subject at a certain time and framed it a certain way, a photo still carries a sense of legitimacy. Put differently, it involves the “legacy of objectivity that clings to the cameras and machines that produce images today” (Sturken and Cartwright, [2009](#), p. 18).

FOCUS: A Historical Perspective on Visual Culture

Another way to understand visual culture is to look at it historically. This example illustrates the role of perspective. When we compare medieval paintings (1300–1500) to contemporary paintings, we see remarkable differences. People in today's societies are used to seeing two-dimensional (flat surfaces) that depict three-dimensional spaces such as a road receding into the distance. In medieval times, Christianity was the primary organizing principle of society and artists presented religious and historical images based on the importance of those portrayed rather than more realistic representations (Willard [n.d.](#)). The world depicted in the paintings was the domain of God, not the lived experience of people, as shown in this two-dimensional artwork from 1295 depicting the Twelve Apostles receiving inspiration from the Holy Spirit: