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Visual Digital Politics: Imag(in)ing political activities and identities online

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Introduction

US Congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez knows how to use interactive media platforms, whether streaming herself playing *Among Us* on her Twitch channel or answering questions on Instagram Live (D'Anastasio, 2020). In September 2021, Ocasio-Cortez uploaded an Instagram post in which she poses in her Met Gala dress, her back to the photographer as she looks over her shoulder at the camera; the white, otherwise-traditional gown displays 'TAX THE RICH' scrawled across the back in red capitals. Dress designer Aurora James is also pictured within the frame, holding the dress to ensure the key message is clear, and also looking directly at the camera. The first line of the caption reads: 'The medium is the message'. This is almost too a perfect post for media and communication scholars. The phrase is of course media theorist Marshall McLuhan's famous statement from his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), where he argues for close attention to each medium or new technology as 'an extension of ourselves', each affecting how we see the world around us.

If we stay with McLuhan's fairly loose understanding of 'medium' for now, and think about the languages or structures of the various 'mediums' at play here (which we recall, act as extensions ourselves), we can start with Ocasio-Cortez's body, the vehicle used to wear the dress which is itself performing as a medium of communication. The dress carries the written slogan. This gown will later be worn to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) Gala Ball and therefore extensively photographed and filmed by various international media at one of the renowned spectacles of the New York fashion calendar. The digital photograph, so simple to take on a smartphone and immediately upload to the next interrelated medium, the social media platform, Instagram, along with the typed written caption. The caption text emphasises the identity of dressmaker Aurora James as a 'Black woman immigrant designer' who is

working with Ocasio-Cortez to ‘kick open the doors at the Met’. As the image post is liked and commented upon by her millions of followers, it becomes viral, appearing across multiple global media channels.

Why present this example as the opening vignette to this chapter? Because it speaks not only to the image management strategies of politicians in the digital era, whose tech-savviness and political authenticity are entwined with their use of visual imagery, but also to the blurring lines between official and unofficial visual repertoires. Ocasio-Cortez’s dress echoes the subversive ‘image politics’ (Deluca, 1999) and embodied protests of activists and social movements: the white (almost bridal) gown clashing with red graffiti-style text. You could even argue it is a wearable rebuke to the jacket worn by Melania Trump during a trip to a migrant child detention centre in 2018 which had similar all-caps lettering: “I really don’t care, do u?” (BBC, 2018). Ocasio-Cortez’s message is that she does care.

Putting to one side the intersections of fashion and politics (Bartlett 2019), Ocasio-Cortez is asserting a right to the personalised political spectacle that has long been criticised for debasing politics and the public sphere. She merges the entertainment of her political followers with the serious message that: ‘The time is now for childcare, healthcare, and climate action for all. Tax the Rich.’ Ocasio-Cortez knows that she will attract derision and cries of hypocrisy for her showy choices, sartorial and political, but this is a visually-driven provocation aimed at those who routinely police her body and morals in media commentary. As an illustrative example, it both challenges and affirms some of the key characteristics of visual political communication in ways I go on to discuss in this chapter.

Back in 2013, I was invited to write a chapter on visual politics online for the first edition of the *Handbook of Digital Politics* (Parry, 2015). In that chapter, I addressed the concerns about ‘visibility, vision and visuality in political communication and culture’. It felt pertinent then to write about the traditional suspicions and unease around the construction of political spectacles and other image-centred trends in mediated politics. Both socio-technological and scholarly developments over the past decade necessitate extensive revisions to this updated chapter. Social media platforms have become increasingly visually-led over this period, the rapidity and regularity of political memes in response to events has grown vastly, and the interdisciplinary interest in the role of visual images in global politics has likewise expanded.

In this chapter I present a mapping of the field of visual digital politics, showing how both older and newer concerns about political aesthetics continue to be debated, how methods

have evolved to better capture the ways in which new technologies shape political encounters, and how studies in political image-making are now abundant. Similar to the chapter for the first edition, I consider the visual imagery which generates from both official and unofficial political realms, and indeed how those boundaries are becoming more difficult to draw. Journalists remain key players in the mediation of politics, but there is a diversification of image and knowledge producers in the contemporary mediascape, with increasing concerns over visual misinformation and unverifiable or uncredited images. Despite concerns over ‘deepfakes’, it is arguably the unguarded authentic image which continues to cause the most trouble for political leaders. The political functions of images mutate as the visual substance is re-mediated, recontextualised, and remixed for both serious and playful purposes. This chapter draws upon studies and cases from around the world to illustrate how the evidential power of the visual continues to offer a unique communicative force in politics, despite widespread knowledge of manipulation practices.

Mapping the field of visual politics: from the peripheral to abundance

There are broadly three avenues through which to chart the merging fields of the political, the visual, and communication. First, from the perspective of *political communication* and political studies, inquiries are often centred on how political encounters are shaped by the visual in various media forms. Doris Graber (1987) was an early innovator in pointing out how analysis of political television was incomplete without analyzing the visual elements and their meaning-making capacity. Where democratic norms and opportunities for informed debate provide the normative underpinnings for investigations, the question becomes one of how the logic of the visual affects meaningful political action. Traditionally this has led to an ‘iconophobic’ strand of literature which is concerned with the ‘politics of ideals’ being replaced with the ‘politics of illusion’ (Barnhurst et al. 2004), where the *televsual* medium in particular is berated for selling news as a commodity to consumers rather than informing citizens. This tradition of concern around the distorting, seductive power of the visual is discussed in more detail in my earlier chapter (Parry, 2015). Despite persuasive insights from this earlier body of work responding primarily to television, it has been finessed and challenged by scholars this century, as the cultural, aesthetic and emotional turns across social sciences and humanities have led to more sustained interest in the intersections of popular culture and the political realm, enhancements of democratic life through more playful media genres, and how the affective dimensions of politics are part of a vibrant public sphere

(Corner and Pels, 2003; Finnegan and Kang, 2004; Veneti et al., 2019). The ‘unproductive dichotomization’ of the ‘emotive visual’ against the ‘rational text’ (Parry, 2015), or the active citizen against the passive spectator, or indeed a narrow definition of political action which favours the official politics of institutions, can all work to oversimplify and negate the co-constitutive role of image and text, the symbolic and the imaginative, in interpreting our social worlds.

It is also worth noting the advances from International Relations (IR), as opposed to studies more focused on national politics and political communication. Roland Bleiker has been a particularly influential thinker in opening up the field of global politics to the importance of aesthetic sources. Along with other (often Australia-based) scholars, Bleiker and collaborators have challenged disciplinary hostility to build a sub-field of ‘aesthetic politics’ that has burgeoned over the last few decades (Bleiker 2012; 2015; 2021). In a recent piece, Bleiker (2021) reflects on the evolution of aesthetic approaches in IR and how developing innovative and creative modes of inquiry and analysis can struggle to gain legitimacy when disciplinary boundaries are conservatively policed. This academic ‘gatekeeping’ includes both cultural and structural barriers: through what is judged to be ‘proper’ rigorous research and valuable knowledge; in addition to funding, hiring and publishing decisions (Bleiker, 2021). This brief meta-narrative around the formation of the sub-field of ‘aesthetic politics’ is important to note for two reasons: it reminds us that whose knowledge and perspectives are valued is something we can actively shape in our own academic practices (including being alert to the Anglo-American predominance); and secondly, that truly interdisciplinary work that engages with alternative ways to better understand political realities can be rewarding but incredibly hard to achieve. As Bleiker (2021: 579) writes, aesthetic approaches to politics offer:

a type of reflective understanding that emerges not from systematically applying the technical skills of analysis which prevail in the social sciences, but from cultivating a more open-ended level of sensibility about the political. This is why aesthetics is about far more than art: it is about the ability to step back, reflect and see political conflict and dilemmas in new ways.

The second field of study is one which takes for granted the value of aesthetic sources that Bleiker argues for above. For *visual culture studies*, artwork, film, and images are afforded representational complexity rather than associated with triviality, entertainment and spectacle. The visual and symbolic are valued as worthy of close analytical attention on their

own merits, and in their construction of the social and political world around us, not through a lens that is attuned to viewing the aesthetic as detrimental to political decision making. Mieke Bal (2003: 19) sums it up thus: ‘Visual culture works towards a social theory of visibility, focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated’. To avoid reductively characterizing images as tools of manipulation, W.J.T. Mitchell (2002: 175) suggests treating visual images ‘as go-betweens in social transactions [...] that structure our encounters with other human beings’, acknowledging that they are ‘the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people’.

Finally, the third strand comes from the field of *communication studies*, albeit broadly defined and not necessarily straightforwardly distinguishable from the above two categories. It is worth noting that visual communication as a strand of communication studies has also emerged from interdisciplinary interests across anthropology, rhetoric, psychology, cultural studies and sociology aligning with approaches to photography, design and filmmaking (Pauwels and Mannay, 2020). Figures such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Erwin Panofsky, Susan Sontag, among others have provided some of the primary intellectual and philosophical foundations for those working with visual materials across the humanities and social sciences.

In terms of mapping the field, then, in addition to the Barnhurst et al.’s (2004) mapping of ‘visual studies in communication’, mentioned above, which cites articles on political cartoons, advertising and the shaping of political perceptions, several reviews have more directly brought together the visual with political fields of research (Schill, 2012; Gerodimos, 2019). In his review of visual communication research within political communication, Dan Schill (2012: 119) wrote that: ‘The visual aspects of political communication remain one of the least studied and the least understood areas, and research focusing on visual symbols in political communication is severely lacking’. Schill offers an important overview of the function of visual symbols in politics, providing both an extensive literature review and a list of functions of visual symbols for researchers to use and adapt. He also notes how this field of study is ‘often frustratingly complex and multidimensional’ with significant questions remaining about the normative implications of a visually-dominant public sphere: ‘Are visual symbols better or worse for the public sphere than other forms of communication?’ (Schill 2012: 134). He also highlights the neglect of audience research, where questions of how viewers process images are largely unanswered. Since Schill’s article there has indeed been a

growth in research attempting to answer questions of how politicians' visual strategies affect public interest and impressions, and the 'severe lack' or neglect of audience research is an argument that has become harder to make over the past decade (Lobinger and Brantner, 2015; Lindholm et al., 2021).

Shifting back to the broader field of visual political communication, Bucy and Joo (2021: 14-15) state: 'As an area of study, visual politics is not just emerging - it is coming into its own'. We can briefly provide evidence for this in two ways: the emergence of edited collections and special issues in prestigious journals; and the significant growth in attention to visual politics across scholarly work more broadly.

First, the interest paid to visual political communication in edited collections and special issues of journals has worked to enhance its position as worthy of serious study and to consolidate its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. Along with her co-editors, Anastasia Veneti is a driving force behind a number of these edited collections on visual political communication (Veneti et al., 2019; Veneti and Lilleker, forthcoming), including a collection focused on the Global South (Veneti and Rovisco, forthcoming), to complement a special issue on visual activism (Rovisco and Veneti, 2017). Other special issues on visual politics have appeared in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (Crisley et al., 2020) and the *International Journal of Press/Politics* (Bucy and Joo, 2021), while the *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* has also published a forum article on visual misinformation, social media and democracy (Dan et al., 2021), a growing area of concern across public communication scholarship. Other collections specifically on visual activism and protest include Aidan McGarry and co-editors' *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* (McGarry et al., 2020), to complement earlier special issues (for example, Doerr et al. 2013).

Second, in term of sheer numbers, scholarly interest is clearly growing, and in a manner that transcends disciplinary boundaries. In my own very rough and ready search of the Web of Science website of academic articles, using the search term "visual" AND "politic*" appearing in the article abstract within the database, we can see a substantial increase in articles combining those two words (politic* is used to capture 'politics' and 'political'). Including all topics or fields of research, most articles are categorised under 'Communication' (11.2%), with 'Humanities Multidisciplinary' next (10.3%). Possibly reflecting the traditional misgivings noted above, 'Political Science' is lower down the list, with 5.2% (below 'Art', 'History' and 'Cultural Studies'). Interestingly, no single discipline

or subject area dominates at all in this list. Analysing the results via their publication year, we can see the number of articles soar from under 20 articles per year in 1997, to well over 500 per year by 2020. This could reflect the fact that more articles are being produced overall, due to the pressures to publish and growing numbers of journals. But if we use just one of the words, ‘politic*’, in the same kind of search, we see a tenfold increase in the number of articles over the same years (albeit in much larger numbers); whereas the more refined search for both ‘visual’ and ‘politic*’ appearing together in the abstract points to 25 times the number of articles in 2020 than in 1997. Admittedly this is a blunt measurement tool, but it reveals not only the growing abundance of articles which bring these two themes together, but the richness of the variety of approaches and disciplinary foci, whether in anthropological approaches to visual culture, cultural geography, visual news framing, visual narratives, digital-visual methods, or experimental studies examining effects on political knowledge. This list is taken from articles which all appeared on the first page of the search results, when sorted by ‘relevance’.

Each sub-discipline outlined above is likely to hold a different emphasis in its identified research problems, or in its understanding of the visual in relation to the social world, but there are underlying persistent questions that recur across visual politics research: of how visuals construct meanings, and how they potentially persuade. How do visual qualities ‘work’ in the interests of their producers, and how might they ‘work’ on the viewer in different contexts?

Where are we now? Three priority areas for digital visual politics

Where in earlier research the objects of study were television news, political cartoons, and newspaper photography, it is now the digital imagery on platforms such as news websites, image galleries, and social media that attract the lion’s share of attention for those working in the field of visual political communication. And social media imagery could refer to an array of visual content – screenshots, citizen witnessing, CCTV footage, news media videos, selfies, animations, GIFs – and so offers boundless possibilities for representing and supporting users’ politics, identities, values and morals (Frosh, 2019). Concentrating on digital visual politics, I note three priority areas: politician-focused visual imagery, from self-promotional to non-consensual; memes and participatory politics (from the mundane to the dangerously misleading or extreme); and finally, protest imagery. As noted at the start of the

chapter, these distinctions are not always so clear-cut, but they are useful for organising some of the key questions being posed in each area. The expansion of scholarly interest across these topics also requires a challenging degree of selectivity within this chapter.

(Self-)Representation of politicians

As indicated in the opening section of the chapter, image management by politicians is no longer a matter of the occasional photo opportunity afforded by television or print media. The ‘fragility’ of ‘mediated visibility’ observed by John B. Thompson (2005) has become an ever more delicate balance for politicians who hope to project their best qualities through social media accounts and websites, whilst avoiding the gaffes which can be edited and shared instantly. Online spaces provide eagerly monitored sites of contestation, of narratives and counter-narratives, publics and counter-publics: and if they started out as text-based platforms, they have become increasingly visually-led. Visual content has therefore become central to the digital communication strategies of politicians, attempting to create a coherent and authentic image across multiple platforms. Hashtags, emojis and tagging are part of these image-making practices, as Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) found in their study of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s use of Instagram. The personalization of politics often provides an analytical lens for studies of this nature. The content analysis of social media posts allows us to see the degree to which politicians merge their professional and personal lives in these intimate spaces: the values, qualities and popular cultural codes they highlight in their personal branding, and how other users and citizens respond in ‘likes’ and comments.

We might expect politicians to promote themselves as trustworthy and honourable people. But the recent attention to populist communication styles suggests rule-breaking across aesthetics as well as democratic norms. A recent analysis of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s Instagram use shows how populists reject the more traditional leadership qualities as part of their transgressive appeal and their dismissal of the norms of representative politics. Mendonça and Caetano (2021: 213) find that Bolsonaro’s ‘eccentric rejection of basic social standards, over-the-top masculinity, and impromptu use of everyday objects as props work to construct an image that he is just an ordinary man, extraordinarily occupying the presidency’. Studies of this nature tend to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the social media posts to capture visual styles, themes and use of symbols (see also Uluçay and Melek, 2021). Gender-based differences in visual

presentation has also attracted attention: for example, Bast et al.'s (2021) study focused on gender stereotypes on Instagram and also included an online experiment to gauge participants' evaluation of traits such as 'warmth' and 'competence'.

Visual communication is at the heart of the political mediated persona in screen culture, whether by sophisticated or ironic design. But representations can also be non-consensual or aimed at exposure and scandal. The 'Partygate' scandal that occupied the UK government in winter 2021-2022 became energised through the release of videos and photographs that provided the evidential and newsworthy material to keep the story in the headlines. The scandal referred to gatherings that took place at 10 Downing Street and in other government buildings during the stringent Covid lockdown measures of 2020 and 2021, with the Metropolitan Police brought in to investigate in January 2022. Talk of 300 images being analysed by police and even the mere threat of more images being leaked unsettled those supportive of prime minister Boris Johnson, whose statements about his knowledge and participation in the parties revealed inconsistencies, to put it politely. Despite stating in the House of Commons before Christmas that he knew nothing of any of the parties and was 'furious', Johnson then defined them as 'work events' once it emerged that he had attended some of them. A photograph with a high vantage point looking down onto the Downing Street garden was released by the *Guardian* on 19 December 2021. It offered delicious details for those keen to dissect who was present alongside Johnson, the nature of relationships, the cheese and wine being consumed, whilst also causing anger for families who had been unable to see severely ill loved ones or attend funerals on 15 May 2020 when the photo was taken (Mason et al., 2021).

As claims of more parties emerged, Johnson appeared to either not know the rules that he himself had set, or to have ignored them. Social media users responded with ridicule, arguably just as politically damaging as anger. Even airline company Ryanair's official account tweeted an image-post inspired by the scandal, deploying lo-fi internet aesthetics associated with 4chan and Reddit. Johnson is depicted as 'That Feel Guy' standing awkwardly at a party (see Know Your Meme, n.d.). The fact that an airline company can attract 'likes' and retweets by ridiculing the prime minister and signalling their knowledge of a memetic in-joke via Twitter just goes to show the blurring boundaries between official and unofficial visual politics, where citizens, politicians, journalists and corporate digital communications workers participate in subversively humorous expression. It is to the participatory practice of memes that we next turn.

Memes and participatory politics

Meme cultures extend far beyond politics and the political, but the frequency and spread of politically-themed memes means they are now difficult to avoid on many online social networks. Meme production by citizens, activists and political parties is especially intense around elections and scandals, but they are also undoubtedly part of everyday political conversations. As Jonathan Dean (2018) argues, political scientists would benefit from not only studying memes for whether they impact election outcomes, but for how they constitute political communities and contribute to the affective dynamics of political life. Visual images can serve to revive political participation through their associative, affective, creative and rhetorical appeals. For Limor Shifman, it is important to distinguish memetic texts from viral images: unlike an image which is simply shared, the memetic video ‘*lures extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work’ (2012, p.190). Similar to the debates about soft news and political entertainment in the 1990s, it is often those citizens least likely to engage with official politics, especially young people, who are thought to find a sense of political belonging (and of their political adversaries) in contemporary memetic cultures.

Of course, these activities are not always light-hearted in nature, and it is important to explore how symbols and flags can also become rallying features for violent and nationalistic movements. Another growing area of research concerns the intersections of populist, reactionary and far-right political formations, including the symbols and aesthetics employed to augment their tenets and mythologies in digital culture (Mortensen and Neumayer, 2021). Despite its creator Matt Furie’s objections, Pepe the Frog became an early icon of the alt-right, jumping from 4Chan to other platforms and even embraced by Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election. Peters and Allan (2021) explore the ‘*memetic weaponization*’ of visual content and the critical role of journalists in explaining the contexts and public significance of memes such as Pepe, especially where hate-led agendas are normalized to create ‘us’ and ‘them’ binaries at the same time as claiming to be ‘just a bit of fun’ (p.11). In the context of Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo (2021) examine how the Moroccan Right are using Facebook meme pages to reshape local digital political landscapes, adapting far-right memes such as Pepe alongside symbols such as the Marinid flag to express pride in Moroccan identity and nostalgia for the Moorish Empire. As Mortensen and Neumayer (2021: 2367-8) point out, memes are currently

‘an inevitable and intrinsic part of visual communication in relation to political debate and conflict’, with humour and playfulness central to their uses, whether characterized as politicizing or depoliticizing, inclusionary or exclusionary.

Visual Digital Activism

There is a longer history of examining how mainstream media have covered protests, with the ‘protest paradigm’ an influential framework, and studies on the visual framing of protests showing how news images can work to marginalize dissent (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004). But the continuing relevance of the news reporting paradigm has been questioned, as digital communication technologies enable an abundance of choice in media channels including alternative and activist media (Cottle and Lester, 2011). Sophisticated use of ‘image politics’ (Deluca, 1999) includes the creation of humorous or compelling artwork, often merging the DIY aesthetic of homemade banners with digital branding freely available to download (see for example Extinction Rebellion’s website for materials).

Crucially it is the interplay of the embodied demonstrations on the street with image-making practices across hybrid media forms that builds support, amplifies the message, and forms collective identities across borders. For those who are physically present on the ground, images of protests, vigils, or police brutality can be shared instantly during such events as they unfold. Digital pictures can also be easily edited together, have music or captions added (often in English), to produce cultural artefacts designed to attract attention beyond the immediacy of citizen or activist witnessing. This is thought to be especially transformative for diasporic communities or transnational protest movements whose supporters are able to express their solidarity via social media despite geographic distance. The concept of the carnivalesque has become particularly prominent in writing on protest repertoires, with the subversive humour and transgressive power-play of the carnival embraced through theatrical performances, colourful banners and costumes. The affective moods of both joy and rage are harnessed in street protests where the mischief-making of the festival-like gatherings become amplified through hybrid media forms. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri (2021) uses the example of Thailand’s Red Sunday group to demonstrate how the carnivalesque process works, and argues that anger-filled protests can be counter-productive, whereas more ‘friendly’ carnivalesque humor can be used to sustain public support: ‘Because of absurd and at times jocular features of the activities, fun displaced rage in this emotive space’ (p.10).

Yet visuals which capture rage and anger are also central to garnering wider public support. The Black Lives Matter movement would not have gained such international prominence without mobile phone imagery and networked technologies. The fact that many of the cases of police brutality and murder became public knowledge in the first place due to mobile phone footage highlights how citizen-produced imagery is central to the cause. As others have noted, the very nature of police brutality as an issue is well-suited to an internet-based campaign: 'Unlike wealth or income inequality, police brutality is concrete, discrete in its manifestations, and above all, visual' (Freelon et al., 2016: 82). In addition to those harrowing images which serve as evidence of injustice, the street protests and murals have also led to the wide circulation of photographs deemed 'iconic' due to their rhetorical power in contemporary discourses about race (Edrington and Gallagher, 2019; Aiello and Parry 2020).

The 'new kid on the block' in social media and politics at the time of writing is TikTok. Where research had largely focused on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, we now see a shift to TikTok activism. TikTok's popularity soared during the first year of the Covid pandemic in 2020, appealing to age groups outside its core demographic of young people or 'Gen Z'. When it comes to TikTok activism, interests often merge around young people's own social media practices and causes. Hautea et al. (2021: p.1) examine how young non-experts, grappling with 'imperfect understandings and unpolished messaging techniques', nevertheless spread the message that people care about climate change, noting the importance of the platform's unique 'affective affordances', and the reshaping of publics through 'affective contagion' (Papacharissi, 2015).

As with everyday politics outlined above, it is the memetic qualities and affective appeals, alongside the performance-centred genres of TikTok which intrigue scholars. Visually innovative TikTok genres are shaped by users' practices and the functionalities of the platform which encourage intertextual borrowing and remixing with music, sound and images. The gestures, facial expressions, and posture of the human body on display is undoubtedly a crucial element for visual analysis, alongside the emojis, flags, text, and 'stitching' in dialogue with another video.

Conclusions

As Bucy and Joo (2021: 15) write: ‘The scholarly interest in visual politics is palpable.’ This statement has undeniably superseded earlier laments of its neglect. It also means that it is impossible to include all the innovative and consolidatory work in this chapter.

One area I’ve not covered in the chapter is the continuing interest in the visual framing of issues and events (beyond protest), now focused on news media websites and their social media accounts, but often drawing upon Grabe and Bucy’s (2009) earlier framework on ‘image bite politics’ in television news coverage of elections. Visual political news coverage remains a significant area of research, especially as global media outlets adapt to power shifts in the photojournalistic industry along with post-Covid international political relations (El Damanhoury and Garud-Paktar, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic generated novel visual representations on an unprecedented global scale. News producers attempted to capture its ‘essence’ and ‘deep meaning’ through varied visual genres (Sonnevend, 2020), while political leaders had to stage their visual diplomacy through the ‘virtual summitry’ of online meetings (Danielson and Hedling, 2021). Continuing to underpin such studies is the belief that the necessarily selective mediated images are integral to shaping what is deemed important, appropriate and imaginable.

I have also not dealt in detail with a group of studies which attempt to evaluate the impact of selected visual images or their effects on audience engagement. Such work tends to focus on measuring how people respond to certain images of political candidates, and often uses innovative technologies such as eye-tracking or computer vision techniques (Lindholm et al., 2021). Its neglect in this chapter possibly betrays my own humanities-led sensibility. Whilst experimental studies are part of a useful set of tools for distinguishing how people respond to selected modes of communication, my personal concern is that they tie researchers to a restrictive notion of the role of images in political life. The complexity and diversity of visual politics requires a range of theoretical and methodological knowledge to understand; as Bleiker (2015: 889) writes, ‘how images frame the conditions of possibility; how they influence what can and cannot be seen, thought and discussed; in short, how they delineate and shape the political’.

In their special issue introduction, Bucy and Joo (2021: 9) argue that the complexities of contemporary visual politics necessitate collaboration across areas of expertise. For example,

in response to the visual and symbolic forms of hate adopted by extremist groups they suggest:

a combined team of ethnographers to study the culture that produces and puts these signs into circulation, coders and computational scholars to identify and track them, network scientists to analyze the algorithms that accelerate and amplify their reach, and ethicists to describe the wider social implications of a media and political system that tolerates symbolic attacks on entire classes of people.

This speaks to the difficulty of the task ahead, and follows others' calls for multi-disciplinarity: for a mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods, bringing together different logics and even incompatible ways of knowing as an 'assemblage' or 'loose network of methodological connections' (Bleiker, 2015: 883). We cannot investigate visual images out of context or without reference to the interplay with other modes of communication (text, music, sounds, etc.). I cited W.J.T. Mitchell in the earlier edition of this chapter and his argument still holds true: 'the opening out of a general field of study does not abolish difference, but makes it available for investigation, as opposed to treating it as a barrier that must be policed and never crossed' (Mitchell, 2002: 173). New visual styles and strategies, new platforms and new genres all require careful attention, with different media formats analyzed according to their own rhetorical functions or semiotic resources. Viral iconic images, memes, TikTok videos and GIFs operate across diverse contexts, encompassing different aesthetic strategies and cultural practices, serving different purposes and interests (Shifman, 2012; Miltner and Highfield, 2017). Combining recognition of *specificity* when it comes to multimodal formats, with curiosity and critique, informed and energized by multidisciplinary forms of seeing and knowing, will ensure the continued health of this burgeoning field of research. Mitchell's famous claim that 'there are no visual media' is truer still in the smartphone age where visual objects and symbols are encountered as sensory experiences via devices which really have become 'extensions' of ourselves (McLuhan 1964, Mitchell, 2005). Understanding how citizens relate to politics and 'the political' requires paying close attention to the structures and practices of image-making across a multiplicity of media forms.

Suggestions for further reading

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