Power in the Image | Visual Literacy in the Age of COVID-19

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Abstract

The aim of this portfolio is to explore a journey of research examining the role of photography and visual literacy in contemporary society through the lens of COVID-19 media coverage, attending to the misrepresentation of marginalized communities. The digital revolution has made a significant impact on the way photographs are created, modified, and shared, yet not enough attention is devoted to investigating the implications of this shift. Images published on online platforms, including mainstream media, social media and elsewhere, continue to function as public pedagogy, influencing the ways we understand the pandemic, the world, and ourselves. This portfolio presents four artifacts which contribute to the discourse examining the role of visual culture and visual literacy following the digital turn. These items include 1) a literature review; 2) chapters from a book which examines visual documentation of the Capitol Riots; 3) a visual synthesis of a media observatory study which examines discourse on social media and finally, 4) an educational video presentation exploring visual literacy through the lens of COVID-19 media coverage.

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Chapter 1: Narrative

The power of the photograph in contemporary society is multidimensional; it plays a role in mass media as public pedagogy, in commerce as persuasive advertising, in culture as art and in politics as propaganda. The digital revolution has, in many ways, democratized image-making and publishing as photographs have become easier and less expensive to create, edit, and share. My research and praxis continue to explore the impact of recent technological advances on photography as a unique medium for telling stories, persuading audiences, as well as describing or misrepresenting reality.

Images have played a pivotal role throughout my professional and academic journey. After completing an undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto in visual studies and philosophy, I began a career in the arts and culture sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For the better part of a decade, I worked with lens-based artists, photojournalists, and documentary photographers, creating exhibitions, art installations and public programs which explored narratives from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. This work began at Gulf Photo Plus, Dubai's centre for photography which continues to provide educational programs, exhibitions and free events which gather and inspire the creative community. Returning to academia during the pandemic, my fascination for photography has supported the work presented in this Masters portfolio and has led to my acceptance into the Communications & Culture Ph.D. program at York University, which I am excited to begin this September.

A Journey in Three Images

Three images provide a visual narrative which traces the beginning of my academic journey at Lakehead University. On April 14 in 2020, roughly one month after the WHO announced COVID-19 to be a pandemic, Marcy Grossman, the Canadian Ambassador to the UAE, posted a video of herself on Twitter addressing Canadians in the country by stating, "...We

have it on very good authority that there are no confirmed flights leaving the UAE, either directly or indirectly after April the 20th…" (min 0:19). The caption furthered this sentiment by adding "for an undetermined time" (Grossman, 2020). Absorbing the impact of this video, while considering the very real possibility that I may not be able to see my family for an 'undetermined' amount of time, I booked a flight home to Canada and left my home, community, and career behind on April 16, 2020. The video posted by Ambassador Grossman triggered my relocation across 10,000 km with 48 hours' notice (Appendix A).

By July 2020, having settled with my family in Orillia, Ontario, I began collaborating remotely with a Dubai-based colleague Kevin Jones (2022) of Juniper Mind to create a zoom-based, synchronous workshop for adults which explored visual literacy practices by examining the imagery published in online media covering the pandemic. On September 26, 2020, Dr. Michael Hoechsmann saw a photograph (Appendix B) posted on Facebook by a local artist, Charles Pachter, which tagged me and described my visit to Pachter's studio in Orillia. The photograph caption mentioned my curatorial work and brought Dr. Hoechsmann to my Facebook page, where I had shared a visual promoting the visual literacy workshop (Appendix C). Dr. Hoechsmann reached out and inquired about the visual literacy workshop; these conversations and his encouragement led to my enrolment in the Master of Education for Change program at Lakehead University under his supervision. This short narrative in reference to three image-based social media articles, introduces my journey while emphasizing the pivotal role imagery can play in the trajectory of one's life. The three image-based reference points are not simply *documenting* key moments in my journey; each instance *triggered* a shift that has led to the completion of this Masters degree portfolio project.

Building Praxis: Course Work, Research and Teaching Assistantships

My course work, combined with my teaching assistant position and later my research assistant opportunities, have shaped my theoretical position as well as my Masters portfolio

work. Two courses led by Dr. Jan Oakley, Foundations Social Justice Education and Activism in Education, created space for me to explore the role of photography in social justice activism, while Dr. Jess Clausen's Power in Social Justice Discourse solidified my grasp on contemporary theoretical notions of power including the work of Marx and Foucault.

Dr. Robin Persad's Qualitative Research in Education course provided an in-depth understanding of the steps required to execute ethically sound qualitative research. My final project for Dr. Persad afforded me the opportunity to execute a COVID-19 image-focused study where I interviewed 15 participants from various countries including Dubai (UAE), Montreal (Canada), Riyadh (KSA), Roswell (USA), Toronto (Canada), Valladolid (Spain), and Washington DC (USA). The goal of the research was to develop a better understanding of how people during the pandemic were using images to communicate and potentially process their emotions. Each participant submitted one or a series of images that were used during the interview to elicit reflections on their current or recent emotional journey. The interviews were fascinating and provided insight regarding the experience of others experiencing different levels and forms of isolation, anxiety, and the ongoing negotiation of boundaries in public and private life when sharing imagery.

Dr. Hoechsmann's Media & Digital Literacies course embraced multimodal learning while exploring pedagogical philosophies. This course shaped my COVID-19 research from the visual literacies workshop, developing it into a tighter presentation for fellow learners and eventually future conferences, including; 1) the Lakehead Research and Innovation Week (2021) as a co-presenter alongside Dr. Hoechsmann, Dr. Sandra Jeppesen iowyth hezel ulthiin, and David VanDyke in March; 2) the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT Symposium (2021) in May in an open setting, and; 3) at the Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas (2021) in October with co-presenters Andrea Gambino and Kiran Bhatia. This presentation represents one of the four artifacts I present in my portfolio (see Chapter 5). The Lakehead presentation also

brought together the five co-authors, including myself, as collaborators who went on to publish a book now in print by Routledge titled *The Capitol Riots: Digital Media, Disinformation, and Democracy Under Attac*k with Sandra Jeppesen, Michael Hoechsmann, iowyth hezel ulthiin, and David VanDyke (2022), excerpts of which are included here in Chapter 3.

In addition to my courses, my academic work has been shaped by experiences afforded to me through research assistant positions. I was hired in April of 2021 as a research assistant for the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT working for Dr. Paul R. Carr and Dr. Gina Thésée on projects which examine democracy, global citizenship and transformative education. I provided support as the lead communications strategist for the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT 2021 symposium, which included unexpected discoveries revealing Facebook algorithms that reject content containing words including "critical pedagogy" and "democracy and conflict in the USA." These findings were published in the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT 2021 Symposium Synthesis Report (2021). Collaborations with the symposium community resulted in an opportunity to contribute as a co-author to the article *Teaching in the Age of Covid-19 - A Longitudinal Study* (Jandrić et al., 2021). This role also led to a remote speaking engagement at UCLA, where I shared my visual literacy presentation.

I contributed work as a research assistant to the ongoing study "Counter-mapping COVID: grassroots visualizations of data on the margins in pandemic times," supported by the SSHRC grant and supervised by Dr. Sandra Jeppesen, Dr. Emiliano Treré, and Dr. Michael Hoechsmann. I have provided visual analysis after coding over 900 images sourced from COVID-19 anti-eviction activist collectives which aim to champion social justice through counter-mapping pandemic data.

I worked as a teaching assistant to Shannon Stevens and Kim Schroeder, lecturers at Lakehead University who taught "Curriculum and Instruction in Visual Arts" to multiple cohorts in the BEd program. Stevens and Schroeder shared pedagogical practices from their years of

experience teaching visual arts to youth. Their support and guidance allowed me to successfully take on a contract lecturer role leading the same course in September of 2021. Teaching visual arts remotely due to pandemic restrictions provided unique challenges and an inspiring learning experience for me as an educator. Many of the students reported feeling an emotional relief from the pressures of the pandemic through artistic practice, renewing my faith in the connections between art and well-being and reaffirming the importance of artistic expression within a learner's educational experience.

Each of these roles has contributed to an incredibly rewarding and multimodal journey through the MEd program. Experiencing course work as a student while simultaneously functioning as an educator shaped my perspective of pedagogical practices. The power of visual imagery continues to shape my research, my academic journey, and indeed major milestones in my life. The four portfolio components presented here demonstrate an exploration of both the theory and practice of visual literacy, using the lens of COVID-19 to examine the power of an image.

Portfolio Components

I have included here four artifacts that represent my work towards a Master of Education for Change with a focus on social justice. The first component is a literature review (see Chapter 2) which begins by examining the work of semiotics and the analysis of visual culture. This was an important place to start as contemporary visual literacy practices build upon this foundational work. The review then examines how imagery can be used in mainstream media to perpetuate the oppression of marginalized communities, misleading viewers through misrepresentation while reinforcing hegemonic narratives. Narrowing the focus, the literature review then examines death and disease in photography, leading to a final section on an exploration of visual coverage of COVID-19 taking into account the impact of the digital revolution on visual communication and reinforcing the value of visual literacy praxis.

The literature covered in the review supported the research needed to develop the two chapters I contributed to in the book *Capitol Riots* (Jeppesen et al., 2022) featured in [Chapter 3](). The visual coverage which emerged online from the January 6 insurrection in Washington was gripping. It shaped the first impressions of those not on the ground that day and remained long after the events had ceased, in some cases, admitted as evidence in court (Munoz, 2021). The images revealed an existential crisis taking place within the American extreme right and played an essential role in the overall performance of the rioters (Jeppesen et al., 2022). The research and writing for the book offered an opportunity for me to examine how the digital revolution has impacted the way individuals process identity struggles through the creation of imagery. Media, both social and otherwise, plays a critical role in socio-political culture; visual media continues to grow in importance as emphasized by the work featured within the *Capitol Riots* book.

Social media platforms have embraced visual media. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, TikTok, Whatsapp and WeChat have been designed for digital imagery, encouraging users to capture, alter and share their visual stories with the public. Dr. Hoechsmann and iowyth hezel ulthiin began working on a Media Observatory supported by the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT, examining Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube flashpoints in political, social and activist discourses online. I was given the opportunity to synthesize the research and produce a visually engaging publication of the findings. The goal was to present the study to allow the public to navigate and absorb a considerable amount of information. A key finding from the research emphasized that "Social media sites, due to the structural nature as well as the quality of their moderation, result in a sort of rhetorical style" (ulthiin et al., 2022). This point initiated my interest in visualizing the different characteristics shaping discourse on the five platforms examined, which I have highlighted here in [Chapter 4](). I designed the entirety of the document linked below in Chapter 4.

The final element of my portfolio takes the form of a visual presentation. The YouTube video linked in <u>Chapter 5</u> was created for this portfolio and relates to the previous visual literacy presentations shared at conferences. This has been a work in progress, beginning with the collaborative workshop with Jones and will continue to evolve. Each time I present this work, new audiences provide feedback and insight related to their positionality and experiences with visual material. This is a crucial aspect of visual literacy praxis; visual culture is not stagnant but continues to evolve with time. Maintaining and engaging in the discourse surrounding visual literacy praxis will be a lifelong journey which continues to champion socially just visual representation for all.

Situating Myself

I am a white, female, able-bodied, Canadian of European settler descent. I live and work in Orillia, Ontario, Canada which is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg peoples including the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomi nations, collectively known as the Three Fires Confederacy. While I recognize the significant privileges afforded to me, I have more work to do to appreciate the experiences of others. This work will take a lifetime, if not longer, and I believe research in photography will support this journey.

Conclusion

The main focus of my research examined the power of imagery as public pedagogy, with a particular interest in hegemonic biases visually embedded within photographs and illustrations published in online media. My professional practice has instilled within me a passion for visual storytelling that works to counteract oppressive, hegemonic master narratives. The Master portfolio project presented here examines the role of photography and visual literacy in contemporary society through the lens of COVID-19 media coverage, attending to the misrepresentation of marginalized communities. The impact of ubiquitous technology, social media and datafication upon our ability to communicate visually is significant, and researchers

are only beginning to scratch the surface of this emerging reality. My research explores this

pivotal moment from the perspective of visual literacy as theory and practice.

Appendix

Appendix A: Canadian Ambassador to the UAE, Marcy Grossman's tweet on April 14, 2020.
Source: Marcy Grossman🇨🇦 [@MarcyGrossman]. (2020, April 14). ✈️🍁The time is now!
There are no confirmed flights leaving #UAE that will get you to #Canada after April 20 for an
undetermined period of time. Https://t.co/asFuXSk4ab [Tweet]. Twitter.
https://twitter.com/MarcyGrossman/status/1250027846770319361

Charles Pachter
Sep 26, 2020 · 🌐

Orillia's Miranda McKee, back home from 9 years in Dubai and Abu Dabi where she curated international contemporary art exhibitions from around the world.

Appendix B: Charles Pachter's Facebook post on September 26, 2020.
Source: Pachter, C. (2020, September 26). Charles Pachter | @Charles.pachter. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/charles.pachter
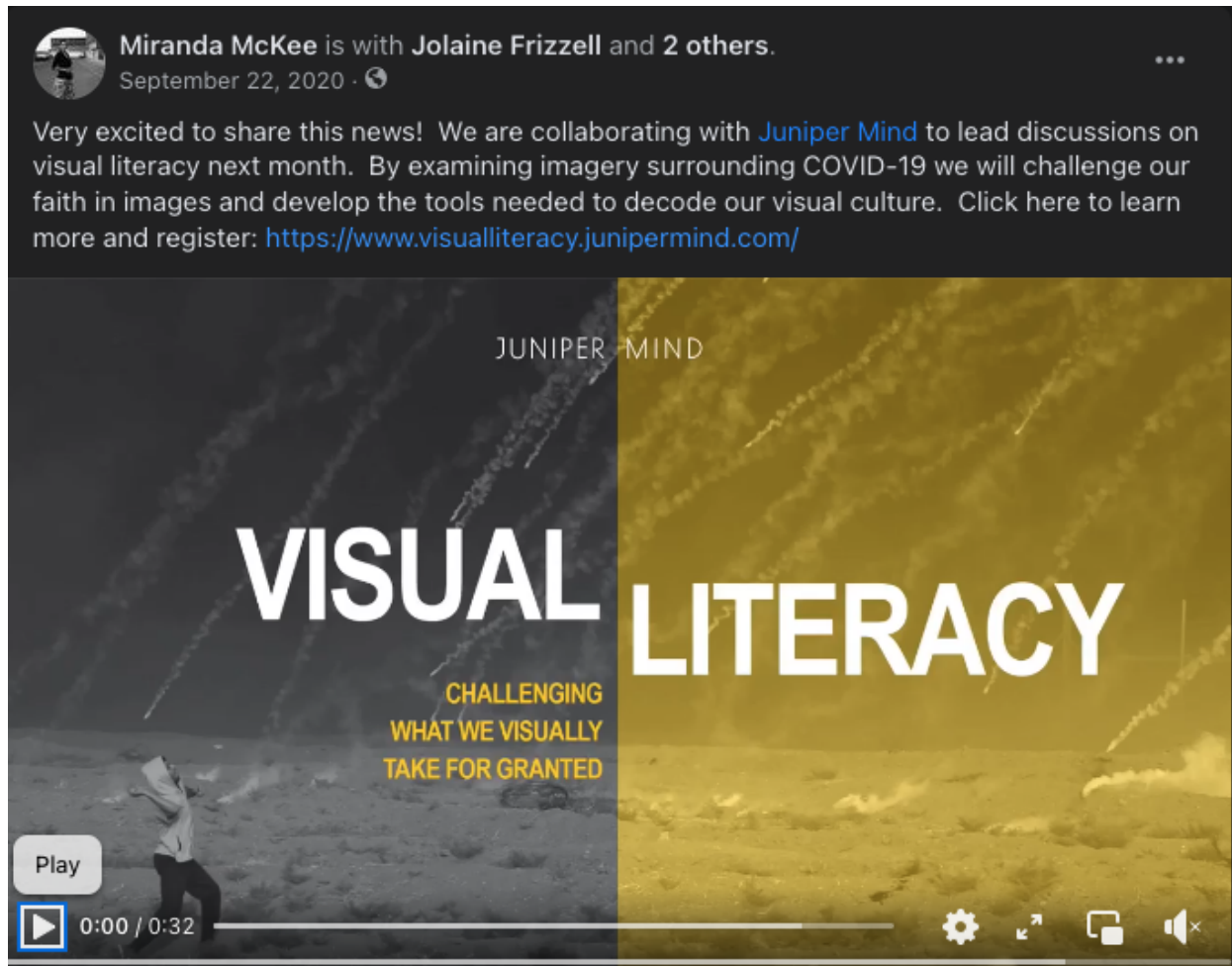
Appendix C: My post on Facebook promoting the visual literacy workshop.
Source: McKee, M. (2020, September 26). Miranda McKee | @miranda.mckee.75. Facebook.
https://www.facebook.com/miranda.mckee.75/

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no confirmed flights leaving #UAE that will get you to #Canada after April 20 for an

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

How we produce and consume photography has changed significantly since the medium's inception. Although it was at one time reserved for the wealthy elite, photography has transformed over the decades, specifically in light of the digital revolution, and now plays an integral role in everyday life in online mediascapes. Audiences of the digital age are not only consuming vast amounts of visual imagery; recent developments, in particular social media and smartphone technology, provide people with the opportunity to create and disseminate visual media. Although visual literacy has been discussed for quite some time within the broader scope of critical media literacies, this topic requires more attention. This review aims to examine the literature which traces the trajectory of semiotic analysis and situates it within a contemporary praxis that values socially just visual representation in the media. This brief overview begins by situating photography in a theoretical framework and then proceeds to contemporary problematics around decolonizing the photographic image. Reviewing examples of death and disease in photography then provides a broader context within which one can situate the recent media documentation of COVID-19, finally looking at pedagogical discourses surrounding visual literacy following the digital turn. By locating visual literacy within a broader discourse, I aim to understand how visual literacy theory and practice can support a socially just representation of our past, present and future.

Semiotics and the Analysis of Visual Culture

Semioticians provided a foundation for the contemporary analysis of photographs by outlining a basic approach for critically examining signs, specifically how signs convey messages. As a key philosopher of semiotic theory, de Saussure (1959) spoke in particular about the relationship between the sign, the signifier and the signified, which together play an important role in understanding the relationship between what we see in a photograph and what

is conceptually communicated by the visual information present. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1959), de Saussure examined language. For example, he pointed to the word "tree' which contains two additional elements beyond the letters t-r-e-e, that is, what he refers to as the *sound image* and the *concept* of a tree. When a reader sees the word "tree" de Saussure argued, they have in their mind (assuming they are indeed a hearing person) the sound image of what the word sounds like when enunciated out loud. The reader, assuming they are familiar with the meaning of the word, also conjures the concept of a tree. These two elements are intimately intertwined, and this combination de Saussure named the sign, referring to the whole package.

De Saussure replaced 'sound-image' with the word *signifier* and the 'concept' with *signified*. He was quick to point out that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, 'tree' could indeed have been assigned as "teer," for example, and so long as everyone agreed, it would be so. The relationship between the signifier and the signified, in this case, is socially constructed; however, the semiotic relationship between the signifier and the signified within a graphic symbol (or a photograph) is not always so arbitrary. De Saussure pointed to the symbol of justice as an example - the weighted scales refer to something tangible in the physical world. In summarizing de Saussure's system, Layton explained;

> A semiotic system is thus made up of two parallel structures: a set of ideas that divide up experience into discrete units, and a set of material signifiers that stand for those ideas. The signifiers may be sounds, pictures or gestures. Signifiers may be completely conventional, or there may be an iconic or associative connection between the signifier and the object, the idea of which it signifies (Layton, 2006).

The linguistic semiotic analysis that de Saussure outlined provided the beginnings of a Structuralist methodology that supports the critical analysis of photographs. Building on the work of de Saussure, Barthes's (1977) interpretation of semiotics provides a more specific

understanding of how one might use semiotic analysis to extract meaning from imagery, which will be discussed further below.

Before we consider the work of Barthes, Ong (1962) provides an important segue from linguistic analysis to visual analysis. Ong spoke of the shift from oration to a focus on what we can see, considering this shift to be one of the most significant in Western intellectual history. Ong contextualized the role of semiotic theory by emphasizing a crucial conceptual transition in the West from the ancient to the modern world, associated with the Renaissance, namely the epistemological transition from a focus on oration to learning through observation. Ong described this change as significant because it relocated the authority of truth, which, in the West, was initially thought to emanate from master lecturers and eventually transferred to observable evidence and the scientific method. This transformation is important to acknowledge in the trajectory of the image as a vehicle for knowledge. The importance of the shift from verbal to visual remains crucial to examining imagery as a form of communication. This lays the groundwork for imagery as a source of evidence, an idea that comes with its own inherent problems to be discussed further below.

Shaping visual analysis, Barthes further developed semiotic theory by examining its value as a method of ideological critique, encouraging readers to recognize the constructed nature of social and cultural environments. In *Image, music, text: Essays,* Barthes (1977) dissected an advertisement for Panzani Italian food products in his chapter on "The Rhetoric of The Image," separating the three layers of messaging into distinct parts; 1) the linguistic message, meaning the actual text "Panzani" 2) the symbolic, or connoted message, built from socially understood codes such as the 'Itanianicity' of peppers and tomatoes, and 3) the literal or denoted message, in his example an image of a tomato–which represents the real tomato. These distinctions assist in grasping the essential role of visual literacy, namely, the viewer's ability to analyze the connoted meaning of an image and the different lexicons held by diverse societies.

In the advertisement described, the viewer must consider the linguistic, connotated and denoted messages to understand what the creator of the ad intended to communicate. For example, the ad may have intended to say, "Panzani food products are authentic Italian and therefore a high-quality purchase," or further, "You should buy this product; it's good." Through visual literacy skill-building, the viewer can also, perhaps more importantly, critically examine the three parts of this advertisement with the aim to consider questions about the author's intention and the socio-cultural influences that might play a role. For example, why should peppers and tomatoes indicate Italianicity? Why does Italianicity equate with high quality, and do I believe this? What motivations does the designer of the advertisement, or the Panzani company itself, have to sell me this product and could this motivation overpower a sense of honesty or responsibility to the public? In late-stage capitalist societies, this last question must be considered every time one views an image of any kind, advertisement or otherwise.

As Barthes (1977) pointed out, it is not only the author of the image that creates meaning but also the viewer, an idea expanded upon by Berger. Berger's (1997) book and BBC show of the same title *Ways of Seeing,* helped to demystify the process of visual analysis and semiotics by examining art, advertising, and photography. The goal of this demystification was two-fold; Berger argued that the elite minority of the West had used visual representation to reinforce their claim to power while erasing alternative perspectives, and the same group of elites worked to further obscure their self-serving intentions by sustaining a form of art education that complicated the process of identifying and decoding visual meaning. Berger's work encouraged the viewer to consider the ulterior motivations which drove visual culture practices and the misrepresentation of reality within visual imagery. He furthered the practice of decoding imagery by examining the cultural influences that have shaped the way we see from century to century, pointing out that to read visual material, we must consider the cultural framework within which each image is created and circulated. These cultural influences can embed problematic

worldviews related to class, race, gender, and other hegemonic ideals that misrepresent reality and perpetuate social injustice.

From Berger's work, particularly his TV series, viewers were reminded they must consider the socio-cultural environment of the image-creator when critically analyzing visual material. Berger brought together individuals willing to be part of this discourse, reflecting upon, within a group setting, what they see and what it means to them. This form of intervention can be incredibly informative within media literacy practices: regularly seeking reflections from diverse sources who interpret the content in question from various perspectives. Visual literacy practices today continue this work which will be further examined later.

De Lauretis (1987) discussed the importance of analyzing what is both included and excluded from the frame. Attending to feminist theory within the semiotic practice, de Lauretis examined gender portrayals as a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, describing the concept of gender as a product and process of representation. Reflecting on the work of Foucault (1980) and his theory of sexuality, de Laurentis acknowledged gender as a product of social technologies, like cinema and photography, and differentiated this from the gender a child is assigned at birth. Gender, in this way, is a semiotic apparatus which emerges from the signs and symbols Western society collectively reinforces as feminine or masculine. In discussing visual literacy theory, de Laurentis borrowed the term space-off from film theory, which refers to the area outside the frame which is not viewable. De Laurentis warned that to appropriately attend to the implications of gender in visual mediums such as film, the space-off must be analyzed and the following question considered; what is missing from view and why? For example, this question may manifest within the context of COVID-19 coverage; what does it mean if patient caregivers are regularly represented as predominantly female? Within visual literacy theory and practice, these considerations provide opportunities to improve gender representation.

Williamson (1986) also examined gender in advertising symbolism, specifically its relationship with the colonial gaze. She began by pointing out the nature of the capitalist-driven economic system, which values profit while failing to deliver freedom and human fulfillment. Williamson provided an example, pointing out that the average person has little control over nuclear weapons but believes they have control over their happiness. She argued that by participating in capitalist consumption practices, influenced by the advertising we see, individuals mistakenly believe they can 'choose' the things in their lives that ultimately make a significant difference. Williamson pointed out the exoticism and patriarchal norms that drive the conceptual narrative essentializing femininity through several advertisement examples. She explained the relationship between capitalism and propaganda, which employs the power of signs and symbols to sell ideas at virtually any cost to humanity. While contemporary advertising might have more subtle visual tactics than the examples from the 1980s–which blatantly promote patriarchal, colonial and classist agendas–the driving force of capitalism remains a significant influence on the visual rhetoric of past and present-day media.

The semiotic work of de Saussure, Ong, Barthes, Berger, de Lauretis, and Williamson provided a foundation from which to understand the signs and symbols embedded within the imagery we consume. It should be acknowledged that their work emerged from a time when visual material was created first and foremost by advertisers, photographers and other professionals working in the business of image-making. Bennett and McDougall (2013) apply the work of semioticians, particularly Barthes, to more recent circumstances. The contributors to Bennett and McDougall's 2013 collection of writings reflect on Barthes' work situating it within Poststructuralism and acknowledging the deconstruction of representation. From these reflections, semiotics is identified as a tool often used and abused by those in power from these reflections. Although the collection by Bennett and McDougall begins to address current issues surrounding visual literacy today, it is the scholars who focus on media literacy, to be reviewed

below, who provide more clarity regarding semiotic work in practice and the responsibility of the

contemporary citizen to acquire visual literacy skills in today's socio-political landscape.

Power in the Image: Oppression in the Press

Sontag (1977) provided insight from a photographer's perspective, which challenged

notions about photography and its relationship to reality, echoed by Solomon-Godeau (1991),

Simon (1994), and Kellner and Share (2019), warning that a heavy reliance on photographs as

evidence of truth neglects the significant influence of the intentions of the photographer. Sontag

described photography's role as providing information about an event as a substitute for the

experience of the event. She questioned the value of this substitution, foreshadowing the problem

of mis-and-disinformation, which utilizes imagery to misrepresent reality. Sontag,

Solomon-Godeau, Simon, and Kellner and Share provide the context within which one can

consider the power of photography to influence the masses.

The visceral nature of photography lends it the power to influence viewers; however, it is

a mistake to assume photographs represent objective truth (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Photoshopping and other digital or physical photo manipulation are not the only cause for images

to be misleading. More subtle forms of influence take shape within the frame based on

composition choices such as shot distance, camera angle, and gaze (Durrani, 2020), projecting a

message that may carry bias and misrepresent the truth.

Photographs published in the media function as public pedagogy, providing viewers with

information and insight about phenomena occurring around the world. However, while students

begin to learn about text-based analysis at a young age, visual analysis is equally important in

response to the increasingly visual mediascape, yet not always demonstrated within curricula

(Dodd, 2020). Like text, images embed notions of power, representation and identity within their

content (Durrani, 2020). For example, Durrani's 2020 study analyzed 376 images covering news

from Iran in the magazine *Time Asia* from 1981 to 2010. Through semiotic analysis, Durrani developed "a diachronic semiotic inventory of visual news narratives extending across several decades" (p. 6) which concluded that images in the data set constructed value via the visual treatment of the Iranian people. For instance, the 'long shot' taken at a distance from the person in the photograph lends itself to a narrative of 'othering,' creating significant literal and figurative space between the viewer and subject (Durrani, 2020).

Durrani also observed that close-up photographs of women in the data increased over time, which tracked the political and cultural trends in Iran as they became less repressive towards women. Durrani further explained, "The impact of "othering" on discourse is to place more value on certain identities, or the bodies inhabiting these identities, at the expense of others" (2020, p. 5). As the photographers moved closer to the Iranian women portrayed, they allowed the viewer to develop a tighter social bond with the subject, qualifying the person as a "valuable body" (Durrani, 2020, p. 10, referencing Butler, 1993). Durrani noted that the close-up photos of women tended to be subjects described as 'trailblazing,' aligning with Western notions of progress. Durrani pointed out,

> As Iran is viewed as having an oppressive government inimical to western interests, those who question the ways of the state and society are prized and lionized, a narrative that fits in well with the global circuits of power (Foucault 1980) that circumscribe Iran's global narrative. (2020, p. 14)

In this way, Durrani's study provides evidence of political agendas embedded within photographic content published in mainstream media.

Similarly, Good (2020) described confronting colonialism in photography as a professor lecturing on the history and theory of photojournalism and documentary work. Good explained,

"...every student and practitioner working within the discipline faces their own reckoning with the camera as an apparatus of colonial violence" (p. 2). Much like the male gaze Berger (1997) discussed and the western gaze described by Durrani, the colonial gaze presents subjects through the colonizer's lens. Good demonstrated the colonial gaze in its overt form by showing images of people photographed in chains. Yet, Good also explained the colonial gaze is not always as blatant; the visual trope of exoticizing people of colour and Indigenous peoples in photography continues to carry the destructive legacy of colonialism.

Fackler (2019) writes more specifically about the documentation of violence against marginalized communities through which those who abuse power can be held accountable;

> Influenced by (post-)Marxism and postmodern theories that highlighted the pervasiveness of (state) power, regulation, and surveillance in knowledge production and practices of representation, they [postmodern critics] concentrated on the ways in which the increasing number of photographs that circulated in the public sphere tended to perpetuate existing ideologies and consolidate exploitative power structures (p. 522).

Azoulay (2008) elaborated further on the responsibility assigned to the viewer of contemporary photography. She pointed to the civil contract embedded in today's image-making, emphasizing the role of photographs as an active part of recent catastrophes, not merely functioning as a passive artifact. According to Azoulay, photography is a political tool; the meaning of each photograph is negotiated by the photographer, the spectator and the subject, thus becoming a civil contract among citizens. Like Solomon-Godeau (1991), Simon (1994), and Kellner and Share (2019), Azoulay acknowledged photography could mislead the viewer but also provides renewed faith in the power of imagery to speak to essential truths about social inequality.

Alam (2008) furthered the notion of social justice in photography by examining the potential of photos to misrepresent people of colour, particularly as western media publications often hire white photographers to cover stories in non-western contexts. Alam created the photography agency Majority World (2021) to provide representation and employment opportunities for photographers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East who were often ignored by western media. Alam also created Pathshala, the South Asian Institute of Photography, to provide high-quality training to photographers and videographers in the region. Alam developed Chobi Mela, an annual international photography festival providing a platform for photographers to exhibit their work. It is essential to acknowledge these institutions as an integral part of visual literacy pedagogy. Simply becoming aware of the problems posed by the nature of the medium is only half of the task; it is important to teach visual literacy skills in classrooms, but it is also essential to provide opportunities for photographers, editors and publishers to create and have access to more socially just material. Photographers like Azoulay and Alam lend their voices to the discourse of visual literacy practices by emphasizing the impact imagery has on current socio-cultural circumstances, addressing the power of an image and reinforcing the need to equip the public with the skills required to decode imagery.

In the words of Foucault (1980), "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (p. 93). The public turns to news publications seeking information about the world in real-time; however, the ideologies of the powerful people who own and operate media dictate the kinds of photojournalism or 'truth' published. Frye (2010) pointed out the root word 'press' within the term 'oppression,' and recalling the printing press, among other examples, she furthered, "Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility" (para. 5). This sentiment provides a meaningful metaphor for photojournalism; pressed by the

forces of hegemonic bias, photojournalists, editors, publishers, and viewers become complicit in the role of the image as it perpetuates the oppression of marginalized peoples. As Bannerji (2011) explained while building upon Marxist theories regarding race, gender and class, "Ideological forms masquerade as knowledge" (p. 54). In photography, ideological narratives are often presented as objective truth; without critical reflection, this disinformation can be mistaken for knowledge.

Photographing Death and Disease

Reflecting upon photographs in mainstream media that have harnessed the power to influence the public, the image of a young Syrian boy named Alan Shenu (aka Aylan Kurdi) rises to the fore (Smith, 2015). Shenu's body was portrayed face down on the Turkish coast of Bodrum, having drowned during his family's attempt to flee the conflict in Syria (Smith, 2015). The Guardian described the image as "shocking," furthering, "The full horror of the human tragedy unfolding on the shores of Europe was brought home…" through the photos (Smith, 2015, para. 1). In a study which investigated the impact of the photograph, Slovic et al. (2017) explained, "People who were unmoved by the relentlessly rising death toll in Syria appeared to care much more about the crisis there after having seen Aylan's photograph" (p.640). This iconic photo triggered viewers' emotions worldwide, bringing much-needed attention to the plight of Syrians, which proved more impactful than reports and statistics regarding deaths from the conflict (Slovic et al., 2017). Described as the "iconic victim effect" (Slovic et al., 2017, p. 641), the number of daily donations to the Red Cross increased more than 100-fold compared with the week before the image was published. Although this attention was short-lived, it does speak to the power an image can have to draw attention to specific crises.

A lingering question remains regarding the photograph of Shenu, particularly concerning the role that intersectionality plays in photojournalism. If Shenu was a white child of western

descent, would the picture have been as widely published and shared? When does the risk of

trauma to the deceased's family outweigh the 'benefit' of circulating the image?

In 2020, the Ghanaian photographer and activist Nana Kofi Acquah (2020) spoke out

regarding the tendency in photojournalism to treat white and racialized bodies differently;

> Over 3,000 deaths in Italy, yet no graphic photos of the dying or dead. Dear White
>
> Journalists, can you photograph Africa with the same level of respect and empathy?
>
> Dignity is a fundamental human right, not the privilege of a few.

Kofi Acquah's tweet generated further dialogue, which took shape in an interview with Villasana

(2020). Kofi Acquah explained that while horrific incidents occur in Europe and North America,

including terrorist attacks and the more recent pandemic as examples, the photographic

documentation of death in these nations appears to prioritize greater respect for the deceased and

their family members (Villasana, 2020). He continued, "It became obvious that the reason we are

not seeing those gory, distasteful photographs is because people don't make those kinds of

photographs about themselves" (Villasana, 2020, para. 6). In response, Villansana emphasized

the need to rethink the visual approach to representing tragedy, especially when dominant groups

portray those who are marginalized.

The influence of racism in photography can shape what is visible and omitted from the

frame. For example, until recently, a tool called the ['Shirley Card' (del Barco, 2014)](#) was used to

adjust a camera's light settings based on a photo of a light-skinned woman. Known as 'Shirley,'

the white woman was presented as an 'ideal standard' of complexion. The Shirley Card endorsed

racism ideologically by falsely defining white skin as superior while, in a practical sense,

triggering camera settings that would underexpose darker skin. This meant people of colour

would be rendered with less detail, visually hidden within the shadows of the image.

The Shirley Card is an example that falls in line with a long history of misrepresenting race through photographs. Kellner and Share explain that "By as early as the 1850s, Louis Agassiz and other eugenicists were using photography to justify their theories about the racial inferiority of non-Europeans" (2019, p. 47). Today, the medical industry continues to fall short of equal and appropriate representation of race. A recent study examining medical textbooks found that only 4.5% of the images featured dark skin and furthered, "These omissions may provide one route through which bias enters medical treatment" (Louie & Wilkes, 2018, p. 38). Not only is this omission problematic for students of colour like Chidiebere Ibe (TEDx Talks, 2022), who express the need to see the representation of skin tone like his in the textbooks he studies, but also, the lack of imagery representing people of colour in medical publications can lead to misdiagnosis (Ebede & Papier, 2006).

When AIDS first emerged in mainstream news, scapegoating targeted marginalized communities, and gay men in particular. Oliviero Toscani's 1990 "Dying of AIDS" poster, which was initially released as a press photo by journalism student Therese Frare and later revisioned as a campaign for the United Colours of Benetton, recalls the visual representation of the epidemic and the controversy of photographs depicting death from disease (Genova, 2016). The image portrayed an AIDS activist and patient David Kirby, lying in a hospital bed, gaunt and frail-looking, cradled by his father and observed by his mother and sister at his bedside. A particular segment of critics were aghast that the depiction was Christ-like, protesting the "immoral" lifestyle that was associated with the disease at the time (Cooter & Stein, 2011). The second layer of critique challenged the commercial use of the image. While Frare's photograph told the story of tragedy, witnessing a family distraught while caring for an ill family member, the use of the photo by a clothing company *as advertising* begs the question; is this a campaign to raise awareness about a deadly disease that is in desperate need of public attention or a *company* that is desperate for attention? Cooter and Stein further, the campaign "…raises

interesting questions about the history and nature of medicine's visual representation, about who owns and controls such images, and about how any complicity with them may have been established" (Cooter & Stein, 2011, p. 170). What is public and what is private during an epidemic, and how should this be portrayed in media?

The 1980s AIDS epidemic foreshadowed many of the problems related to representation in the media, which resurface within visualizations of the current pandemic. Scapegoating in the 1980s blamed gay men, individuals struggling with addiction, and people of colour, paralleling today's pandemic, which visualizes blame, instead targeting China–and more broadly those of Asian descent–in addition to blaming the poor, youth, and again, people of colour. Unfortunately, the similarities do not end there. In the 1980s, a "mass media panic" (Williams, 1986, p. 8) misrepresented people with AIDS and the nature of its transmission. On the topic of photographing people with AIDS, Engelmann explained, "The captured persons are often seen as desexualized, stigmatized, and isolated, as being stripped of their individuality, history, and dignity, and, most importantly, as being exposed to a pathologizing gaze" (2016, p. 256). These 'moral' evaluations attempted to justify the path of the disease, as it would only befall those who deviated from what those with moral high ground deemed bad behaviour. Engelmann furthered,

> The 1980s were marked by exhausting and historically unequaled conflicts in which medicine, politics, and a growing community of AIDS activists struggled to contain the deadly epidemic as well as its many meanings and stereotyped images, merging the disease with those most vulnerable to it. (2016, p. 251)

We see this form of blame again in COVID-19 coverage with images of party-goers, crowds at sports events, and large groups of people living in circumstances where social distancing is a luxury they cannot afford.

The visual coverage of the AIDS epidemic helps us to recognize that media coverage of health and science-related news is not immune to the influence of contemporary culture, bias,

and hegemonic agendas. While one expects the objective of this coverage to be pedagogical, to provide citizens with practical information to help them make better-informed choices (Delicado & Rowland, 2021), misinformation and disinformation continue to be embedded within visual news. Furthermore, images are taking center stage in digital media, with an increasing ratio compared with text, and yet not enough attention is being dedicated to visual literacy among scientists, journalists and the public (Trumbo, 1999).

Photographing COVID-19 and the Influence of the Digital Revolution

At the beginning of the pandemic, news media struggled to portray the 'invisible' virus. In reaction to this challenge, the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released an illustration on January 29, 2020, that would become familiar to many, designed by illustrators Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins (Appendix A). In an article published in The New York Times (Giaimo, 2020), Eckert elaborated on the process involved in creating this image, explaining the illustration aimed to develop an identity for this threat, to bring "the unseeable into view" (Giaimo, 2020, para. 6). The illustrators explained they wanted to emphasize the gravity of the situation by presenting the virus as something that had texture and, therefore, could be touched and physically transmitted (Giaimo, 2020).

The interview also highlighted another consideration; while Eckart described the colour scheme, she explained the illustration "was going to have to go along with the branding" (Giaimo, 2020, para 15). The ominous red spikes with tiny yellow and orange flecks could symbolize caution, alarm, or blood to emphasize the seriousness of the disease. However, the question remained, what type of 'branding' were the illustrators building? The interview does not elaborate. After the illustration's release, it was used extensively in news related to COVID-19, supported by the fact that the CDC made the high-resolution image free to use and available when visualizations of the virus were sparse. Soon after, publications such as the Financial Times (Kynge et. al. 2020) discovered that the new COVID-19 'branding' merges exceptionally well

with the communist flag, conveniently reinforcing Donald Trump's "China-virus" rhetoric (Kiely et al., 2020). The point here is not to implicate Eckhart or Higgins in a plot to target Communism or China but instead to emphasize that the choices made by two illustrators in a week-long 'branding' exercise could influence how the public began to see and understand the pandemic.

While publications like The Economist performed heavy-handed blame tactics perpetuating Islamaphobia through visual representations, as pointed out by activist Miqdaad Versi here (Versi, 2020), other mainstream media platforms exercised a more subtle but equally concerning approach. Global News Canada released a video report on March 19th, 2020, highlighting a particularly dark moment as Italy's death toll surpassed China's (Balmer, 2020). Halfway through the video report, the narrator explained that both Australia and New Zealand were banning foreigners (Appendix B.1 & B.2) in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. However, just as the voice-over mentioned the word 'foreigners,' video footage of an airport was presented with a woman wearing a chador walking into the frame on the right. Although anyone residing outside of these two island nations would be considered a 'foreigner' potentially bringing infection with them, the news report points the finger at a particular marginalized community. As Asian hate and Islamophobia continue to plague Canada, where this news report emerged, publications that perpetuate these hateful narratives must be held accountable, whether the blame is subtle or blatant, text-based or visual.

Visual themes emerged from visual COVID-19 coverage, which indicated evidence of racism intersecting with classism. Pointing to examples from multiple international publications, The BBC (2020), CBC News (Chung, 2020), Hindustan Times (Mullick, 2020), and Time Magazine (Hincks, 2020) ran images of healthcare workers pointing temperature guns and disinfectant spray at the bodies of working-class, racialized individuals. Although pointing an infrared thermometer at someone's head is less violent than shooting disinfectant into a person's face (Chung, 2020), in both cases, the decision to photograph this moment and *publish it* is in

question. Within these photos, racialized, working-class communities are portrayed as 'the

problem' within the context of the pandemic, subject to aggressive measures by the authorities.

Miller and Ahluwalia (2020) speak to this issue, "The current pandemic brings into sharp relief

the fault lines of inequality that divide the world both between and within sovereign-states,

compelling near-universal fear and suffering" (p. 571). Vulnerable communities are at significant

risk due to COVID-19 (Milan et al., 2021), yet, instead of generating attention and much-needed

assistance, these photographs invoke blame and hostility. The responsibility to communicate the

news lies not with the photographer alone; the interconnected nature of society necessitates that

everyone takes responsibility for their role in media, including the producer, the publisher, and

the consumer. As Pixely pointed out, if social media users want misrepresentation to stop, they

will need to stop clicking on and sharing the content that misrepresents (Dodd, 2020).

Looking at examples from the pandemic, The New York Times (Gebrekidan et al. 2020)

published a photo of a man who died on the street in Wuhan in the early days of the outbreak.

Part of the man's face is visible, and local viewers could potentially identify the neighbourhood

based on the scene's background elements included in the frame. Two healthcare workers in

biohazard suits have their back turned to the man; no one tends to the victim in the photo. How

would it impact a family member or neighbour to learn about this man's death by witnessing this

photo? Compare this image to an image published later by The New York Times (Montgomery

& Jones, 2020) in an article aptly titled "How Do You Maintain Dignity for the Dead in a

Pandemic?" In the featured photo, Nick Farenga, a funeral director, cradles the body of a

COVID-19 victim while moving it from storage to a stretcher. He wears see-through protective

gear that reveals a dress shirt and tie. The caption notes that the image was "altered to obscure a

name to protect the privacy of the deceased" that would have otherwise been visible on the body

tag (Montgomery & Jones, 2020). The New York Times examples reflect the hegemonic

tendency to use racialized bodies to portray horrific news, proceeding with far more care when the victims in the photo are white. Kofi Acquah's words ring true here once again.

While the examples of COVID-19 visual coverage mentioned above come predominantly from specially trained image-makers, professional graphic designers and career photojournalists, however the images that shape visual culture today are increasingly generated by everyday people. Within current media ecosystems, digital citizens can visually communicate with the public instantaneously, in large part thanks to the integration of smartphone camera technology with social media and other publishing platforms. The digital lives of those who have access to the internet are immersed in what Jurgenson (2019) defined as *The Social Photo*, which includes snapshots, personal photographs, and banal imagery. The social photos Jurgenson described are not focused on professional photography and artistic composition traditions but instead are created and used as a form of social communication. The development of the social photo is a pivotal moment in the trajectory of image-making, as it has become common practice within everyday civilian interaction (Ritchin 2010, Jurgenson, 2019).

Ritchin's book After Photography (2010), like Jurgenson's book, examines the digital revolution's impact on visual communication. Within this discourse, Ritchin highlighted a paradox; while imagery continues to have the potential to be interpreted as evidence, it is also now recognized as a medium for mis-and-disinformation, which can lead to inaction on the part of the viewer even if they see human rights violations portrayed in photos. Ritchin pondered that the average person with access to the digital world sees so much imagery that it reverses into truly observing nothing; however, he found a way for contemporary photography to be redeemed in the form of multimedia. Ritchin argued that imagery delivery could be accompanied by rich information hyperlinked and interconnected to various sources, including background information such as time, date and location details, as well as additional resources. According to

Ritchin, everyone has become an artist and critic, a witness and an interpreter of images, and thus bears responsibility as a co-author.

One of the most impactful citizen-journalist-generated visuals to emerge from the pandemic was the death of George Floyd, recorded and shared by Darnella Frazier who was seventeen at the time and has since received an award for journalism by the Pulitzer Prize board (Hernandez, 2021). Much like the early variants of the coronavirus, which attacked the lungs, the use of tear gas at Black Lives Matter protests increases the risk of respiratory illness (Chatterjee, 2020). It is also clear that people of colour were disproportionately over-represented in the number of deaths from the virus, providing further evidence for; the deadly impact of systemic racism, and the multilayered relevance of the BLM slogan "I can't breathe" (Chatterjee, 2020). Examples of the abuse of power, such as the murder of George Floyd by police, are more likely to be brought to justice when captured by video, particularly due to the collective witnessing that is made possible through technological advances (Corley, 2021). The video functioned as key evidence in the Chauvin trial; New York has since banned the use of chokeholds, and in Chicago, an officer now is obligated to intervene if they see excessive force being used by another officer (Corley, 2021).

Visual Literacy Praxis

It is clear from the examples discussed above that images of suffering and death can bring about positive change, but they also come with significant ethical concerns. Navigating this territory requires the ongoing development of visual literacy skills on behalf of image makers, publishers, and consumers. It is a practice of meaning-making which takes into consideration certain social conditions, "Once we begin to think of literacy in this way, it is a short step to conclude that literacy is also linked to social identities - to being the kind of people we are and hope to be" (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. 140). Visual literacy practices reflect value systems and should take different forms depending on the type of learner the material caters to.

Multiple organizations have developed directives to improve visualization standards in professional circumstances. Amnesty International (2010) published a manual of "Photo Guidelines," which includes prescribed practices such as concealing the identity of those portrayed in photos and rules against photo manipulation. Similarly, Save the Children published a research project titled "THE PEOPLE IN THE PICTURES Vital perspectives on Save the Children's image making" (Warrington & Crombie, 2017). The recommendations from the final report include prioritizing an investment in the documentation of multiple stories focused on the same individuals over long periods as well as championing participatory image making as a collaboration with those portrayed.

Annual photo award competitions can shape industry standards and have also produced literature on photo ethics. World Press Photo (2022) has a yearly "Contest code of ethics." Within their list of 12 rules, photographers are encouraged to "Avoid reinforcing stereotypes and be aware of biases that can result in misrepresentation" (*Code of ethics*, 2022, para 3). Photographers Without Borders published a "Code of Ethics" on their website, which they describe as "...a constant work in progress, in collaboration with our global community" (*Code of Ethics*, 2018, para 8). The first rule listed in this set of guidelines addresses the decolonization process because "nearly every problem we seek to address today was in some way caused by unchecked colonialism and capitalist frameworks" (*Code of Ethics*, 2018, para 8). These entities can help reshape imagery made by those who are in the business of creating images.

There are also several resources for educators and learners seeking visual literacy praxis. The UNESCO Media and Information Literacy (MIL) website provides free online courses, curricula for all age groups and additional valuable resources (UNESCO, 2022). The Critical Media Project (2022) is another free resource for educators and students aged 8-21, which aims to develop critical thinking and empathy while encouraging youth to advocate for change. MediaSmarts, "Canada's centre for digital and media literacy," provides free curricula and online

courses for instructors interested in developing lessons for children K-12 (MediaSmarts, n.d.).

For adult learning, the Photography Ethics Centre produces a podcast, online training, lectures,

and interactive workshops that examine the ethics of photography and its impact (Photography

Ethics Centre, 2022). These are a few of the numerous resources that support visual literacy and,

more broadly, media literacy pedagogies.

Conclusion

From this literature review, what has become clear is the significant need for visual

literacy skills to safeguard citizens from the potential perils of visual misinformation and

disinformation. Semiologists provide the foundational theory and practice of decoding visual

culture (de Saussure, 1923; Berger, 1972; Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1980; de Laurentis, 1987).

Contemporary voices have built upon this foundation by further exploring the power of imagery

and the responsibility of the image makers to take seriously the impact of (mis)representation

(Sontag, 1977; Azoulay, 2008; Alam, 2008; Bennett & McDougall, 2013; Kellner & Share,

2019; Good, 2020; Durrani, 2020). Historical visual documentation of disease and death in the

press emphasizes the pedagogical role of photographs and betrays the risk and detrimental

impact of misleading visual coverage. The imagery which has emerged from coverage of the

current pandemic reinforces the notion of power within photography and provides fresh concern

regarding oppression, marginalization and the perpetuation of hegemonic narratives within

imagery (Miller & Ahluwalia, 2020; Chatterjee, 2020; Corley, 2021; Milan et al., 2021).

The digital revolution has, in many ways, democratized image-making and publishing

channels (Ritchin, 2010; Jurgenson, 2019), which offers the potential to develop a new culture of

imagery that no longer perpetuates oppression; a robust and rigorous visual literacy praxis

supports this pursuit. This review locates visual literacy within the broader media literacy

discourse, pointing to imagery as a source of public pedagogy, for better or for worse, depending

on the author's intent, the quality of the information communicated, and the ability of citizens to

interpret imagery critically. Although the essential work has already begun to advocate for visual literacy theory and practice, technological and socio-political changes are occurring at an incredibly rapid pace, which means that this work will be ongoing, in particular as we attempt to develop pedagogical strategies driving education for change. More can be done within and beyond classroom walls to encourage students and citizens to sharpen their visual literacy skills. Additional support should be provided for the photographers, editors and publishers of future generations to champion accurate and just representation in visual storytelling. Within the context of education for change, these findings emphasize visual literacy as a necessary skill set for supporting a socially just visual culture now and in the future.

Appendix
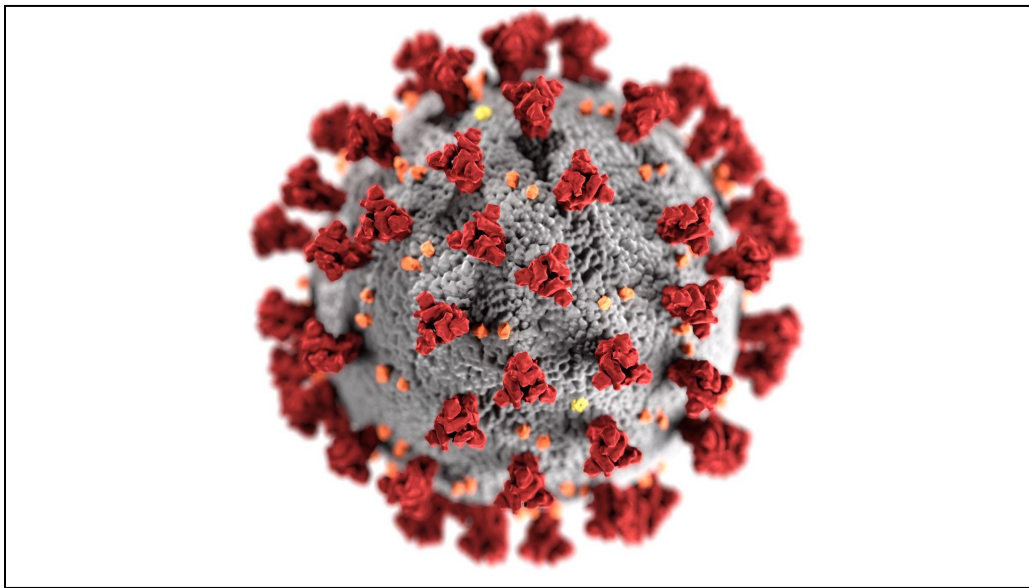
Appendix A. Caption: "This illustration, created at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reveals ultrastructural morphology exhibited by coronaviruses. Note the spikes that adorn the outer surface of the virus, which impart the look of a corona surrounding the virion, when viewed electron microscopically. A novel coronavirus, named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019. The illness caused by this virus has been named coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)." Credit: Alissa Eckert, MSMI, Dan Higgins, MAMS
Source: Center for Disease Control. (2020). Details—Public Health Image Library(PHIL). https://phil.cdc.gov/Details.aspx?pid=23312

Appendix B.1 Minute 1:46 narrator says "foreigners," and the visual switches to this footage.

Appendix B.2 Screenshot at minutes 1:49, 3 seconds after the word "foreigners" is mentioned. Source: Balmer, C. (2020, March 19). *Coronavirus death toll in Italy surpasses 3,400, overtaking China's*. Global News. https://globalnews.ca/news/6702620/coronavirus-italy-deaths-china/

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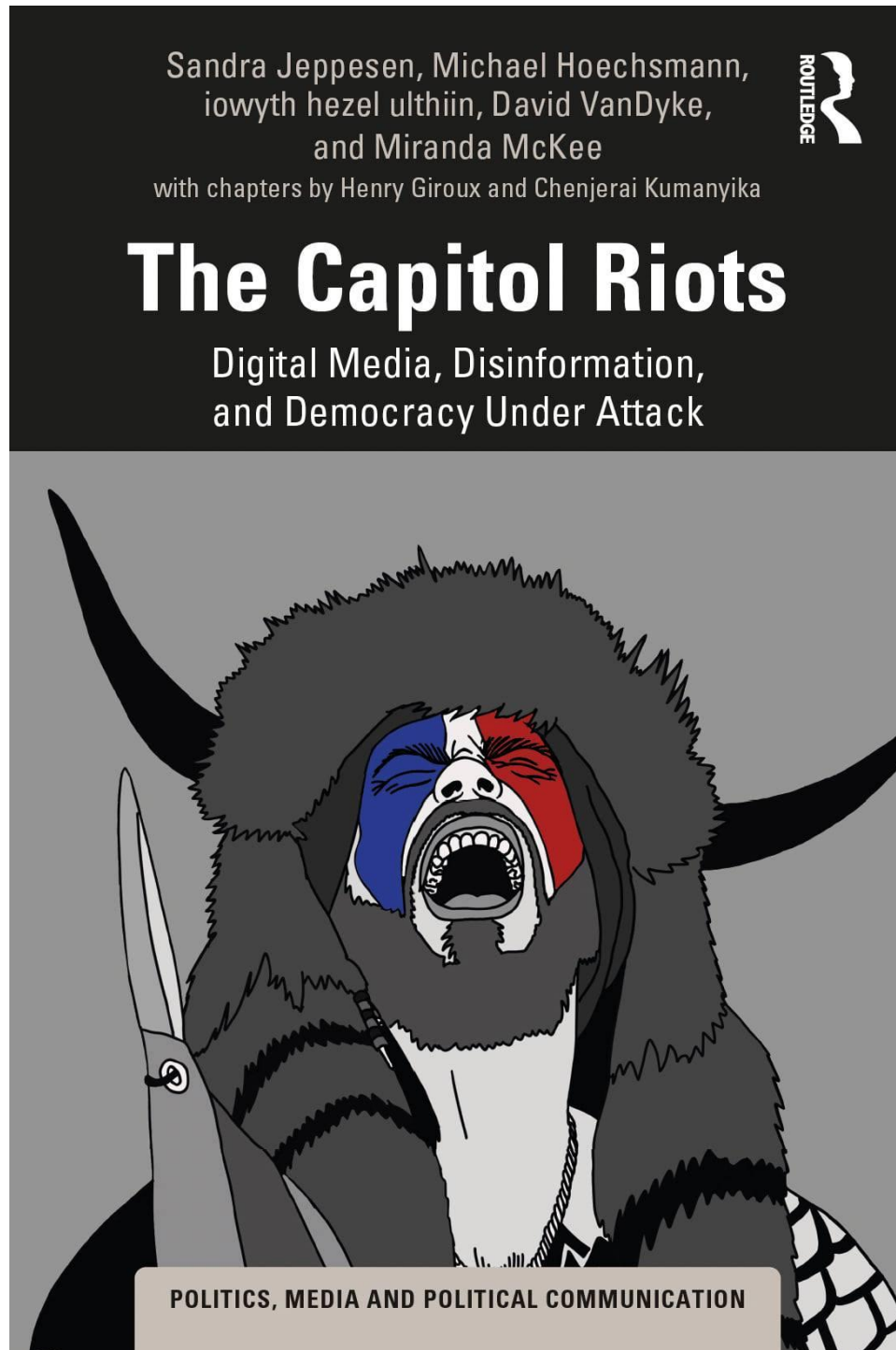
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Chapter 3: The Capitol Riots Book

Cover

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For those not in Washington, DC, on January 6th, 2021, first impressions were shaped by startling imagery, headlines, and looping video footage dominating the online mediascape. News coverage of the events led with visuals portraying a fevered delirium, a cosplayed chaos, with an emphasis on both playful costumes and concerted violence redolent with historically relevant symbolism. ProPublica (Groeger et al., 2021a) would later share an archive of images, texts, and videos shared on Parler by the rioters themselves (see Chapter 5), providing first-person accounts of the events that unfolded, ultimately revealing a disorganized mob with an array of intentions.

In this chapter, we look at two distinct groups who communicated those intentions through visual imagery at the Capitol: first, the self-representation of the rioters, and second, the mainstream media images from photojournalists on the ground that day. The still and moving images that emerged from the Capitol riots tell a deeper story than a mere description of the events. These artifacts present a window into the sociocultural conditions at play for those in attendance on January 6th, with implications for the broader direction of democracy in the United States. The visual documents posted by the Capitol rioters themselves depict a series of performances that may betray an uncertainty within thinly constructed narratives grounded in exhortations to 'Make America Great Again.' In contrast, selected photos captured by photojournalists on the scene lay bare the extent of the existential crisis taking place within the American extreme right.

To read these images, we have various tools at our disposal. We begin by considering the technological developments that have led to the widespread use of photos and video by ordinary

citizens, as well as the cultural context within which the 'social photo' has become a common method of communication. The historical relevance of the camera and snapshot, as well as the recent developments of both smartphones and social media, must all be considered as they each play a vital role in the capacity of a subject to engage in visual-cultural self-representations. In addition to this, critical theory as a subject, from McLuhan (1977) to Berger (1997), paired with recent reflections on social photography from Jurgenson (2019), further assist in the deeper processes of decoding visual symbols. In this analysis, we illustrate how photographs may be understood to both embed and construct the culture within which they are created.

Thus, the rioters' own video footage, uploaded to Parler (Groeger et al., 2021a), depicts violence from an insider's perspective, fraught with uncertainty, confusion and an insistent need to be seen, powerfully paired with symbolism indicative of a significant loss of and attempts to reinstate an identity. In an ironic twist of fate, through the discoverability of social media and the Parler dataset rescued by @donk_enby, the rioters' footage also exposes their identities to scrutiny, simultaneously serving as self-incriminating evidence. Ultimately, a collective roused by Trump's spurious rhetoric led citizen videographers to express, curate, and craft nostalgic themes, as misinformed as they were dangerous.

In contrast to first-hand accounts, photojournalists delivered an outsider's point of view, locating the rioters within a legacy of political history, where riots reveal the contours of the particular contemporary ideologies driving them. While Republicans, including Senator Ron Johnson, attempted to downplay the seriousness of the event, claiming 'This didn't seem like an armed insurrection to me' (Johnson, 2021, cited in Elfrink, 2021), a more critical perspective—visible in the media itself—can delve into and attempt to understand the costumes, posturings, and performances, presenting a sobering reality wherein five people lost their lives.

Of great symbolic import is the fact that, on the day of the Capitol riots, the Confederate flag reached further inside the Capitol building than it ever did during the Civil War. Moreover,

politically speaking, a crowd intoxicated by social-media-driven self-assurance was able to delay—but not prevent—the democratic process of certifying the results of the election, and more importantly for our purposes here, to document their efforts well. The visual documentation of the event itself also, transformed over time from spectacle to evidentiary, as the photographs provided by rioters and journalists alike led to hundreds of arrests, combined with further evidentiary material from surveillance and body-worn cameras, however, these last are outside the scope of this chapter.

The Social Photo

To locate ourselves in contemporary visual culture, we must first consider the trajectory of photography that has delivered us to this moment. Following its inception, the development of the photographic medium and its use originally progressed at a significantly slower pace than that of the technologies and practices of digital photography today. After the first photograph was stabilized circa 1826, a full ten years passed before a human figure was portrayed (Rosenblum et al., 2020). More than seventy years passed again before the first affordable camera was produced—a Brownie by Kodak—democratizing photography with an easy-to-use apparatus (Pritchard, 2015). The invention of the Brownie meant that creating a photograph was no longer reserved for the elite, with the technology now made accessible to a much wider portion of the population. With a quicker shutter speed, the subject matter captured could be more impromptu. The power to document images was finally in the hands of the average family: the snapshot was born.

Approximately 70 years later, the era of digital photography emerged in the 1970s (Estrin, 2015) when cameras became increasingly smaller while simultaneously offering a choice of functions: to save, delete, and/or print the photos captured. These early digital cameras were not incredibly high resolution but began to improve as the cost of the electronic elements decreased (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). By the early 2000s, however,

high-resolution cameras had become a standard feature in internet-connected smartphones (Hill, 2013), adding a new and important function—to share—initially by text or email and eventually via social media platforms as applications for smartphone integration developed (Haridy, 2019). Although Facebook was launched in 2004 at Harvard and always offered an opportunity to upload images, it was later in 2006 when the platform became accessible on mobile devices (Brügger, 2015). Facebook users were able to upload videos from 2007 onward (Brügger, 2015); however, it was Snapchat developers who introduced the concept of 'stories' in 2013 (Etherington, 2013). This short, ephemeral video content proved popular (McRoberts et al., 2017), and Instagram and Facebook eventually followed suit, providing their users with similar functionality in 2016 (McRoberts et al., 2017) and 2017, respectively (Dillet, 2017).

From 2010 onward, both the quality and quantity of digital photography increased exponentially (Haridy, 2019). The rapid development of digital photography technology and its integration with smartphone functionality provided a significant portion of the population with the ability to capture, manipulate, and publish images with a device that they could carry in their pockets. Never before had we been able to capture images, edit them to our liking, and disseminate them instantaneously across the globe to a ready and waiting audience of social media friends. With the rapid uptake of these technologies, everyday communications were no longer limited to text; people could express themselves through both still and moving images that were of increasingly higher quality.

Within current media ecosystems, digital citizens are able to visually communicate with others instantaneously, in large part thanks to the integration of smartphone camera technology with social media platforms. Our digital lives are immersed in what Nathan Jurgenson (2019), a sociologist at Snapchat, defines as the 'Social Photo' which includes 'snapshot photography, personal photography, domestic photography, vernacular photography, networked images, [and] banal imaging' (p. 16). As such, the social photo becomes 'an image not a photograph' (Ritchin,

2009, cited in Jurgenson, 2019, p. 24). For Jurgenson (2019), what makes a photo a social photo is the intention of the author to use it as a form of communication. Jurgenson (2019, p. 41) claims that the social photo is not just a documentation of life, but that 'life itself becomes shaped by the logic of documentation' because social photos are captured with the intent to share on social media.

Through social photography, particularly on video-focused platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat, as well as in Facebook and Instagram 'stories,' a significant portion of the population regularly documents themselves, thus playing a 'lead role,' performing for their audience of followers. Once a social photo is published, the audience is then tasked with evaluating the content within the socio-cultural context that it is received, namely 'the relations between power, identity and reality' that influence both the production and the audience's interpretation (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 26).

In 2020, the pandemic shifted a significant portion of social interactions online due to various states of lockdown, which placed even further emphasis on the documentation online of one's social existence. This factor plays a significant role in shaping the types of photographs and videos that emerged from the Capitol riots—as well as our interpretations of those social photos within the broader cultural context of our time.

Jurgenson (2019, p. 12) importantly points to a momentous shift in the way photography and imaging now function in society with their integration into social media and social uses: 'How we see, what we can see, what both social visibility and invisibility mean are changing.' The way we see and interpret images is shaped by both our history and our socio-technical, political, and cultural context. Social visibility achieved through social media shapes identities, a sense of self, and how we situate ourselves in the world.

Jurgenson's idea here is not new, however. Berger's (1972) powerful work, aptly titled 'Ways of Seeing,' brought to BBC television audiences the practice of decoding visual art by

examining the cultural influences that have shaped the way we see one another from century to century. In order to 'read' visual imagery, we must therefore consider the cultural framework within which it has been created and circulated. Specific to the issue at hand, we must ask ourselves how the socio-technical, political, and cultural contexts all ultimately influenced the imagery that emerged from the Capitol rioters producing social photos.

The Social Media Riot

To culturally situate the imagery emerging from the Capitol riots, we must add to the technological trajectory of cameras described above, a consideration of the sociological trajectory of social media practices, including not just production but also consumption. It is therefore essential to discuss the landscape of audio-visual storytelling that shapes our contemporary digital lives.

While the average American may consume radio broadcasts and cable television from time to time, these are now considered to be waning residual media. Video streaming services like Netflix and video platforms like TikTok and YouTube are no longer emergent media but have become dominant media forms that have escalating daily consumption rates (Koetsier, 2020). Thanks in part to the pandemic, the average time spent consuming online content has doubled, according to a study of over 10,000 people in five countries, including France, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the US (DoubleVerify and Sapio Research, 2020).

Yet, it is not just the amount of media consumption but also the consequent formation of narratives that we must be attentive to. In a recent workshop for writers, Netflix shared a pitch deck that emphasized that the 'hero should be proactive in trying to obtain their goal. Overly reactive heroes are boring' (Mack, n.d.). Linking this to the rally prior to the riot, Donald Trump Jr. was quoted saying, 'You can be a hero, or you can be a zero. And the choice is yours. But we are all watching. The whole world is watching' (Mangan, 2021). The linguistic resonances between how Netflix constructs narratives and how political figures do so is remarkable.

Returning to the Netflix screenwriting pitch deck, under the description of 'key ingredients' for a good story pitch, Netflix stressed that the lead character must have a call to action, a quest to fulfill their destiny, and a need to stand up for themselves (Mack, n.d.). While it is reasonable to acknowledge that contemporary audiences have mastered the willful suspension of disbelief, one must also consider the influence of commercial narratives on the construction of our social realities, value systems, cultural norms, and identities. The individuals and groups who fought their way into the Capitol building similarly were heeding calls to action from Trump Sr. and Trump Jr. alike to stop the steal and become heroes, they considered 'storming the Capitol' to be their quest, and they felt the need to stand up for themselves against a perceived corrupt democracy, and thereby to engage in performances as the proactive heroes in their own narratives.

One compelling 'way of seeing' or interpreting self-produced visual evidence during the Capitol riots, therefore, is to consider this imagery through the lens of performance. The performances of the Capitol rioters began in the lead-up to January 6, 2021. We know that the riot was planned in advance, as Mike German, a former FBI agent specializing in counterterrorism explains,

> It wasn't as if this was a spontaneous gathering. This was an event that had been planned for weeks, and it was very clear in the social media activity and public statements of these militants what they intended to do. (German, 2021, cited in Devereaux, 2021, para. 3)

Even without knowing this, the costumes evident amongst the crowd bear evidence of forethought and preparation. In a visual symbol now synonymous with the Capitol riots, Jacob Anthony Chansley, aka Jake Angeli, aka the QAnon Shaman (see Figure 6.1), is depicted in multiple photographs roaming the Capitol grounds and Senate chamber in full red-white-and-blue face paint, wearing a fur headdress with horns, and carrying a spear-like staff

from which he had hung the American flag. Aaron Mostofsky, an equally prominent figure in mainstream media coverage, as the son of a prominent Brooklyn Judge, was dressed in what appeared to be a full-body fur animal skin, shielded by a bulletproof Police vest.

Researcher in apparel and textile design, Therèsa Winge, spoke to The Atlantic, considering the potential motivations behind these costumes. She argues that they were 'most likely intended to visually harken [to] the spirit of the Indigenous warrior' (Winkie, 2021). The adoption of a quasi-nostalgia for misrepresented Indigenous 'warriors' portrayed in the 1950s and 60s Wild West Hollywood films needs to be problematized, particularly in light of the great replacement theory, which suggests that white European settlers are the so-called 'native sons' and rightful owners of America.

Chansley himself claimed in a 2020 interview that he made a habit of wearing fur, painting his face, and going shirtless with the objective of attracting attention, which he hoped would provide him with an audience with whom he could speak about QAnon and other conspiracy theories (Ruelas, 2021). He did indeed draw attention through his appearance, as did others such as Mostofsky in similar outfits. The initial 'fame' that the media provided through the wide distribution of the visual spectacle subsequently shifted focus and after time gave access to further visual evidence, leading to a more serious, evidential purpose as hundreds of rioters were later arrested. After the riot, when Chansley appeared in court, the US District Judge Lamberth dismissed his claim of innocence, stating that the 'Defendant's perception of his actions on January 6th as peaceful, benign and well-intentioned shows a detachment from reality' (Lamberth, 2021, cited in Shepherd, 2021, para. 12). Not only did many of the rioters perform for an audience, whether it was their own followers, fellow rioters, or the viewers of photojournalistic works, as indicated by Lamberth, the narrative driving their performances seems to have a limited connection with contemporary urban realities. And yet, despite this

disconnect, their actions undertaken in these particular costumes produced very real consequences.

Furthermore, Chansley and Mostofsky were not the only participants donning elaborate costumes. One man crossed through the water of the Capitol reflecting pool dressed from head to toe as George Washington. Others were seen wearing costumes of the American symbol of the eagle, Lady Liberty, Uncle Sam, and more—key signifiers of American power brought to life in idolatrous pageantry, but, like Chansley and Mostofksy, with no clear connection between the costumes, performances, and actions undertaken.

More serious in tone, a significant number of Capitol rioters came dressed in army fatigues, varying from basic camouflage clothing to full tactical gear. Painted faces, flags, and symbols ranging from QAnon, the Proud Boys, and the Oath Keepers, to icons including the Confederate flag and the date, 1776, of the US Declaration of Independence—allowed in-groups to identify one another amongst the sea of protesters. It was clear the rioters wore these symbols with pride, waving matching flags and chanting related slogans. There is a strong sense of identity building that takes place through costume, the demonstration of which becomes visually evident in photographs and videos of the crowd, with strong correlative visual evidence signifying group belonging. This documentation does not come solely from photojournalists who were present on the day, many of whom were at best not welcomed and, in some cases, violently attacked by those within the crowd (Fargo, 2021). Rather, an overwhelming number of photographs and videos were created by the rioters themselves, a behavior and provenance important to consider when evaluating the images produced as indicative of performances of particular identities and actions. Moreover, for the Capitol rioters belonging to militias or gangs and dressed in military gear with insignia, the outfits and symbolic signifiers were not spurious but rather were strongly connected not just to their identities but also to the actions they would undertake linked to the specific political objectives they had in mind.

Visual Documents

Throughout the riot, thousands of videos were uploaded to the online platform Parler, which described itself as a 'Free Speech Social Network' (Parler, n.d.) pre-dominantly used by those whose dissemination of disinformation or hate speech had them kicked off other social media platforms. Although content produced at the Capitol riots was quickly deleted by Amazon (Parler's cloud-hosting service) for inciting violence, ProPublica had already archived over 500 videos, later making this content accessible online (Groeger et al., 2021a). Upon review of this archive, the 'selfie soliloquy' stands out as a key recurring style. Rioters turned their cameras towards themselves, speaking in a self-assured, energized tone. Some described the experience of being tear-gassed or maced, while many others celebrated breaching the Capitol building as a personal and collective victory. In all of these videos, the orator would posture themselves in such a manner that made it clear they were speaking to a perceived audience. These documents were not intended for personal reflection; they addressed a spectator. Thus, the intention to perform—and to be seen performing—has the potential to tell us more about the Capitol rioters than they reveal in their script alone. It provides an interpretive lens for understanding their actions within the context of what one might call–building on Jurgenson–the 'social video,' used in the construction of the trope of a rioter as a form of identity performance.

To understand this drive to perform, McLuhan's reflections on the many uses of media for identity building provide useful insights. Long before social media existed, McLuhan (1994) referred to media and technologies as an 'extension of man.' He argued that 'any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex' (McLuhan, 1994, p. 4). Building from this premise, McLuhan (1994) argued that, just as the wheel extends our legs and thus our ability to move, the phone extends our voice and our ability to speak. By corollary, the computer extends our minds and our ability to think, and digital media as a whole may extend our central nervous system, which controls both the body and the mind (Bobbitt, 2011).

In this way, social media and the social photo or video become an extension of identity, of ways of knowing oneself and of being known. Writing on the topic of the selfie and identity building, Jurgenson (2019, p. 71) argues:

> Photos don't just depict the self but are a procedure for self-knowledge, a mode of thinking about the self. This identity work is deciding to remember something as quintessentially me, a choice, a performance, memorialized within the frame.

Observing the photos and videos that were self-produced by the Capitol rioters means that we are also observing 'the ongoing process of identity construction' (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 71), a performance of the self-under-construction.

If we are to understand the visual content from the Capitol riots as part of a process of identity building, it is also key to consider the specific behaviors portrayed in order to understand the specific identities or selves under construction, particularly within the context and against the backdrop of a violent insurrection. Yet, how may we comprehend the relationship between identity construction and violence? Here, McLuhan (1977, p. 2) provides additional context: Ordinary people find the need for violence as they lose their identities. It is only the threat to people's identity that makes them violent. Terrorists, hijackers—these are people minus identity. They are determined to make it somehow, to get coverage, to get noticed.

McLuhan (1977) further explains somewhat famously that while new technologies have created a 'global village,' the closer people get to one another, the more savage and impatient they may become with one another. McLuhan (1977, p. 3) provides Hitler as an example, who used radio to extend the reach of his voice, building an identity for the 'Aryan' race through unspeakable acts of violence. While there is a significant difference between the horror of Nazi activities and what unfolded at the Capitol riots, the reference provides context to violence when witnessed in its full spectrum, especially in its relationship to identity building. Bringing McLuhan's (1977) point of view into a contemporary setting, we can imagine that the global

village he envisioned now functionally exists in online spaces where people interact as if

shoulder to shoulder. The close proximity that global citizens have to one another influences the

nature of online interactions, and as McLuhan (1977) warned, has the potential to promote a new

source of violence. The contemporary violence of specific identity production has emerged from

within social interactions occurring online.

A subset of white Americans, emboldened by Trump's accusatory rhetoric and

anti-immigration policies, were motivated to carve out identities based on exclusion, elevating

the role of the 'patriot' while simultaneously vilifying the racialized 'other.' Visual documents

and the acts of violence created under the purview of this narrative apprehension appear to

proclaim, 'This is me, this is who I am, I'm important.' One might ask, who else would feel the

need to make such a proclamation, except an individual who feels their identity threatened?

As we know from Chapter 3, corroborated by a report by Pape (2021, p. 19), the rate of

insurrectionists who lived in particular counties was 'four times higher in counties where the %

of non-Hispanic whites had declined the most.' Those who felt their historically privileged white

perspective or identity was being negated by the growing population of non-white others

perceived this as a risk to their identity and social rights; thus, their relative status within an

increasingly precarious social, cultural, and economic milieu was perceived to be at risk. This

perception also drives the tendency not just to believe in the great replacement theory, but to be

fearful rather than welcoming of increasing racial diversity.

The Parler videos further reveal individuals who wished to stake their identities in the

Capitol building itself by placing their flags upon the Capitol grounds, including the floor inside

the building itself, chanting 'Our House,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021b,

00:01) implying that the center of American democracy belongs to them, in other words, belongs

specifically to some citizens to the exclusion of others. The responses of the rioters, as captured

in the visual documentation that they themselves produced, was ultimately shaped by violent outbursts that reflected a larger crisis of identity happening within white, middle-class America.

Although we now know through visual symbols that racist and xenophobic groups like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers were involved in the riots, Pape and Ruby (2021, para. 7) found that 'a large majority of suspects in the Capitol riot have no connection to existing far-right militias, white-nationalist gangs, or other established violent organizations.' The study focused on the first 193 people to be charged with breaking and entering the Capitol building or breaking through the barricades surrounding the Capitol grounds. If these people did not identify with the militias, gangs, and violent organizations, who did they identify with?

From this study, we learn that 'the overwhelming reason for action, cited again and again in court documents, was that arrestees were following Trump's orders to keep Congress from certifying Joe Biden as the presidential-election winner' (Pape and Ruby, 2021, para. 6). Rioters interestingly did not emerge from the reddest or most Republican of states; the same study found that over half of those arrested came from counties that Biden had won, blue or Democratic states, thus it seems they were there to contest their state being governed by Democrats. If the global village that McLuhan (1977) describes has threatened the identity of a segment of the American population, Trump has offered a narrative identity as well as a community within which to belong.

The Curated Riot

We can learn more about the identity that participants in the Capitol riots were attempting to construct for themselves by revisiting the Parler video content. A performance becomes interesting because it is curated for the viewer. The content may be inspired by a true story or entirely fabricated, but in either case, it is purposefully designed to be consumed by an audience. We can learn a great deal by paying attention to the narrative the rioters have chosen to share with their audience, as well as what they unintentionally reveal.

A video shot at 2:35pm ET and uploaded to Parler begins with a man who yells, 'You paid for this' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021c, 00:00), as the group he is a part of enters the Capitol building. As the group ascends a set of stairs that open onto the Rotunda, there is an audible sense of awe and wonder. 'Oh my God,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021c, 00:29), someone says in reaction to the grandiose architecture. In many videos, we hear the crowd chant, 'Our house,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021b, 00:01), and yet, even though the building is, under normal circumstances, open to the public for tours, it seems clear many had never visited before. One man appears visibly emotional in a Parler video shot at 2:42pm ET, almost brought to tears as 'Glory, glory alleluia' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021d, 00:11) is sung by rioters in the Rotunda. Their voices dramatically ricochet and echo through the dome. Inspired to pray, he and others bow their heads together and film themselves from below, their heads appearing as dark silhouettes against the golden dome above (see Figure 6.2). It is visually striking, appearing to be a profound experience for these men. As they prayed, it became clear that by facing down, with their phone camera facing upwards, they were likely gazing upon their own orchestrated silhouettes on the floor, visually echoing what was captured in the video. Toward the end of their prayer, one man flashes what looks to be a hang-ten sign with his hand, confirming they are indeed aware of the curated visual being recorded.

Prayer as an activity was common throughout the day, as were both groups and individuals breaking out in song. Religious rites, the collective singing of the American National Anthem, and the chanting of various ideological slogans taken together reinforced a homogenous identity that served to unite the crowd in a feeling of common purpose. The curated experience thus took on an ethereal, existential tone, as though the rioters were living through a transformative religious experience. Having breached the perimeter, some rioters appeared euphoric. It may be that the act of breaching the Capitol building was able to provide a

temporary sense of validation to those seeking identity, their act of confrontation and transgression a quest that they had embarked upon and somehow miraculously achieved.

At the same time, 2:42pm ET, in another part of the building, a Parler video was shot, following a group of rioters as they aimlessly wandered the halls, clearly unsure of their location or where they should go next. We hear them shout, 'Defend the constitution, defend your liberty,' and, 'Seventeen-seventy-six!' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021e, 00:05 and 00:22) as one man further ahead of them violently kicks each door that he passes. In terms of constructing an identity, their words may have been purposeful, but their actions betrayed an underlying confusion and lack of direction. In an ironic twist, the same video ends with a man forcefully yelling, 'You're afraid of Antifa? Well guess what? America showed up!' while another woman overlaps his voice with her own concern, 'Where's the rest of everybody? There's not enough of us. They're gonna bring the Feds in,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021e, 00:23). Passionate exclamations echoed throughout the crowd—adopted from social interactions both online and in-person—yet no particular rhetoric was backed up by a cohesive and coherent plan that would have given sense or direction to this particular group who had entered into the building, similar to those in the Rotunda who sang, prayed, and chanted in place.

In yet another video uploaded to Parler shot at 3:38pm ET, one man is inter- viewed by another participant outside the Capitol building, as the latter performs the role of citizen journalist (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f). Dressed in camouflage, wearing a Three-Percenter patch, the interviewee explains in great detail how he and 30 others had managed to enter the Capitol building, describing how they were roaming the halls and admitting, 'We had no idea where we were going,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f, 01:13) even though he says that he previously had a tour of the building. The citizen journalist laughs and sincerely exclaims, 'Wow, incredible' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger

et al., 2021f, 01:16). Further into his description, the interviewee says, 'We took the uh, main chamber in there, uh ... uh ... whatever room is under the dome' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f, 03:37) and the citizen journalist replies, 'So we overtook the Capitol.... What do we do now?' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f, 03:44). In this moment they take the role of a direct-action journalist, an interviewer who is also participating in the action (Jeppesen, 2016). The interviewee seems unsure, responding, 'We need another shift to take over,' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f, 03:56) and begins to describe how his group exited the building. He ends by saying that he hopes they 'are able to maintain the momentum' and 'actually get what we came here for' (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021f, 04:13), an objective that he fails to unpack.

Through this footage, we may recognize the passion that accompanies the pursuit of a shared cause, paired with a lack of clarity in the stated purpose of their actions. There is a sense that, rather than a failure to achieve more advanced or coherent political goals, the performance itself was the goal; an identity-building exercise to contest the election's outcome without any other defined objective. By entering the Capitol, rioters answered the call from Trump's speech earlier that day, demanding that they march down to the Capitol and 'fight like hell' (Trump, 2021, para. 4). Mirroring Trump's vague yet defiant utterances, the rioters' actions too became defiant yet disorganized. In the end, the identity they fought so hard to perform remained unformed.

In addition to identity-building performances that seem to lack coherent over-arching actionable objectives, it is essential to highlight the broader theme of nostalgia that permeated the visual and discursive symbolism captured in the video and photographic documentation of the Capitol riots. References to 1776, the Confederate flag, the Betsy Ross flag, and the Gadsden flag all point to a past that the rioters clearly glorify. Trump celebrates this nostalgia with his well-known slogan, 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA), an expression visually evident on

hats, T-shirts, and flags throughout the January 6th rally, march, and riot; a slogan that serves to declare belief in a collective past that was in some way greater than the present. The MAGA slogan clearly alludes to a nostalgic American imaginary, undeniably a period where people of color and women figured much less prominently in the halls of power, underlining the inferred racist and misogynist undertones.

McLuhan (1977) spoke of the dangers of nostalgia, describing it as an indication of having lost one's identity. Speaking of the financial crisis of 2008, Oliete-Aldea (2012) describes an environment that may easily correlate to the collective conditions under the COVID-19 pandemic: 'With no faith in the future, what remains is to hark back to past times where socio-economic relations, if not perfect, were, at least, better defined' (p. 349). Oliete-Aldea (2012) also attends to the idea of nostalgia in times of crisis, emphasizing how the rise of 'this anxiety has provoked a nostalgic search for the shelter of a community' (p. 347). The unpredictable nature of the pandemic has rendered collective visions of the future inaccessible, making it easy to fall prey to the appeal of living in an imaginary past. In the case of MAGA proponents, it is a past in which America is imagined to have been a 'pure white' country, despite the historical truths of colonization and slavery, which are erased in this nostalgic imaginary.

We must, therefore, following McLuhan, attend to the dangers of nostalgia. To provide an example that connects with our current circumstances, consider the story of a collective that was developed in 1915 by an ex-minister who prioritized Christian virtue and patriotic pride. The group intended to be the savior of a nation in peril. Their goals included restricting immigration, bettering government, reverting to the Constitution, improving law enforcement, and increasing allegiance to the flag. This group was the Ku Klux Klan under the direction of its founder, William J. Simmons (Baker, 2016). Baker (2016, para. 9) explains that 'The Klan's message of 100 percent Americanism and restrictive immigration resonated in the 1920s, and their message

gains traction, again and again, every time white Americans encounter social change and shifting demographics.' The current instability created by the pandemic has triggered an identity crisis within white America, and the knee-jerk white nostalgia that Trump has both capitalized upon and intensified manifests itself in the autobiographical visual and discursive content created by the Capitol rioters.

To complete our analysis of the visual documentation that has memorialized the events that took place on January 6, 2021, we must also consider the work of professional photographers on the ground, as these images provide a compelling contrast to the content shared via Parler. While rioters engaged in the social construction and performance of their collective identity through social photos and videos used to communicate their experiences and construct their identities to an audience, photojournalists captured an array of juxtapositions that unexpectedly transpired before them, while, unlike the riot participants, leaving themselves out of the picture.

Take as an example the photo of millennial 36-year-old Adam Johnson (see Figure 6.3) carrying Nancy Pelosi's lectern through the Capitol Rotunda, smiling and waving to the photographer, Win McNamee, who is Chief Photographer at Getty Images. The joy that Adam Johnson expresses as he poses for the photo must certainly have dissipated when he was arrested on federal charges (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021b, 00:01) in large part due to the pictorial evidence presented (Munoz, 2021). Behind Johnson in the Rotunda is a depiction of the Surrender of General Burgoyne, painted by John Trumbull. The painting portrays the surrender of the British General in 1777 during the American Revolutionary War, a significant turning point for the Americans which contributed to their overall victory. As described by the Architect of the Capitol website (n.d., para. 2), 'The scene suggests peace rather than combat or hostility,' a sentiment which stands in opposition to the events unfolding as the Capitol building was being stormed. McNamee's photograph of Johnson thus provides a disturbing juxtaposition:

a rioter gleefully thieving the lectern, itself a symbol of the American democratic process, after storming the building and interrupting that very democratic process, and then posing in front of a visual depiction which represents a key moment in the nation's formation during an event which sees the nation on the precipice of chaos and fragmentation.

The performative behavior of the rioters—and specifically of Johnson in this instance—is particularly incongruent with the visual reality captured in the photo, from both past and present. Despite his gleeful expression, Johnson does not embody peace, victory, or nation-building in this photo, but rather the conflict, chaos, and disintegration of American politics. Further, Johnson willfully and per- haps unwittingly poses for a photo that documents his performance of a fairly serious crime (see Chapter 8) that, one would imagine, in any other circumstances he would never dream of committing.

Another instance in which the images of the historic portraits in the Capitol seem to conflict with the iconography of the rioters is a photograph taken by New York Times photographer Erin Schaff depicting a middle-aged rioter inside the Capitol building resting a huge Confederate flag on his shoulder (see Figure 6.4). Directly behind him hangs a portrait of Justin Smith Morrill, an abolitionist and advocate for higher education who initiated legislation that provided greater access to college for America's working class (Michigan State University, n.d.).

According to Blair, a professor emeritus of history at Penn State, as described to the New York Times, the presence of the Confederate flag inside the Capitol is remarkable, particularly because 'the man carrying the flag faced less stringent security than that encountered by the Confederate soldiers who failed to penetrate Union forts guarding the Capitol' (Blair, 2021, cited in Cramer, 2021, para. 12). In other words, Confederate flags had moved deeper into Washington, DC, on the day of the Capitol riots than they ever did during the Civil War. The man in the photo is now known to the FBI as Kevin Seefried. He and his son Hunter were both

arrested on charges of unlawful entry after Hunter bragged at work about being inside the Capitol

building with his father (del Rio, Goldman, Benner, and Ives, 2021). In a form of foreshadowing,

Seefried's hand is raised to his face as if to shield his shame. He looks in the opposite direction

of Morrill's gaze as captured in the portrait, which aptly summarizes two entirely different,

perhaps opposing, points of view. Closer to the lens and taking up a portion of the right-hand

side of the frame, we catch a glimpse of Aaron Mostofsky. Fur-clad and carrying a stolen shield

from the Capitol Police, his costume emphasizes the absurdity of the moment and strikes a

strange contrast against the all-American-Dad attire embodied by Seefried and also against the

seriousness of the portrait and politics of Morrill.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Johnson, Mostofsky, and Seefried are acting in opposition

to those portrayed in the hallowed halls of power, as indeed power is what they were there to

contest. What is interesting here is how the rioters posed and narrated themselves in relation to

the iconography of the Capitol in contradictory ways, both claiming the house as their own and

purporting to share the political positions of those represented on the walls, posing for selfies

with their arms around the statues while also calling into question and physically interrupting the

democratic process; whereas the professional photographers captured the juxtaposition and

contrast of the rioters' behaviors over and against the historical images and iconography in a

subtle way that reveals just exactly what is at stake in the contradictions.

Conclusion of Visual Analysis

The truth about what happened on the Capitol grounds is multilayered. A visual analysis

of self-generated imagery from the rioters points to a desperate need to be seen, to proclaim

one's identity—at times violently—and to document and disseminate this imagery as part of a

performance of self to an expected online audience. Through the Parler footage, we may begin to

understand the existential crisis being experienced by a significant portion of the population,

those seduced by Trump's nostalgic rhetoric. The performative acts of the rioters reveal a

collective anxiety further heightened by their participation in social media, which threatens their

sense of self and elicits a violent reaction, reflecting McLuhan's (1977) observations regarding

the global village.

The documentation captured by photojournalists on the day helps to both reveal and

construct the multilayered narrative of political history currently being mobilized in the United

States. What we extrapolate through a critical visual analysis is the contemporary socio-technical

context and constructions of the rioters and their relationship to media, both social and otherwise,

which played a central role in the events that unfolded before, during, and after the riot.

Visual documentation from all sources began circulating with a focus on the attention-grabbing

nature of the spectacle before transitioning into a focus on the evidentiary aspect of the images,

admissible in a court of law. At a time when visual storytelling has reached a new peak, the story

of an American identity crisis continues to unfold before our collective eyes.

Figures

FIGURE 6.1 QAnon Shaman aka Jake Angeli aka Jacob Anthony Chansley
*Source: Photo by TheUnseen011101, October 25, 2020, Wikimedia Commons, Public
Domain,* https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jake_Angeli_(Qanon_Shamon),
_seen_holding_a_Qanon_sign_(cropped).jpg, *edited by David VanDyke.*

FIGURE 6.2 Rioters lean forward and pray below the Capitol Rotunda ceiling

Source: Miranda McKee's impression of video still from Parler footage taken January 6, 2021, and Rotunda ceiling photographed by Yael Clusman, Unsplash License, https://unsplash. com/photos/K3YhnnjC5D0, compiled by Miranda McKee.

FIGURE 6.3 Adam Johnson carries the lectern of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi through the Rotunda of the Capitol building, January 6, 2021

Source: Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images News.

The joy that Adam Johnson expresses as he poses for the photo must certainly have dissipated when he was arrested on federal charges (anonymous, 2021, cited in Groeger et al., 2021b, 00:01) in large part due to the pictorial evidence presented (Munoz, 2021). Behind Johnson in the Rotunda is a depiction of the *Surrender of General Burgoyne*, painted by John Trumbull. The painting portrays the surrender of the British General in 1777 during the American Revolutionary War, a significant turning point for the Americans which contributed to their overall victory. As described by the *Architect of the Capitol* website (n.d., para. 2), 'The scene suggests peace rather than combat or hostility,' a sentiment which stands in opposition to the events unfolding as the Capitol building was being stormed. McNamee's photograph of Johnson thus provides a disturbing juxtaposition: a rioter gleefully thieving the lectern, itself a symbol of the American democratic process, after storming the building and interrupting that very democratic process, and then posing in front of a visual depiction which represents a key moment in the nation's formation during an event which sees the nation on the precipice of chaos and fragmentation.

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Note: As per image lisence guidelines, this image presented with the accompanying text on the page it appears in the e-publication.

FIGURE 6.4 Kevin Seefried holds Confederate flag inside the Capitol building, with Aaron Mostofsky in foreground, January 6, 2021

Source: Copyright Erin Schaff/The New York Times/Redux.

According to Blair, a professor emeritus of history at Penn State, as described to the *New York Times*, the presence of the Confederate flag inside the Capitol is remarkable, particularly because 'the man carrying the flag faced less stringent security than that encountered by the Confederate soldiers who failed to penetrate Union forts guarding the Capitol' (Blair, 2021, cited in Cramer, 2021, para. 12). In other words, Confederate flags had moved deeper into Washington, DC, on the day of the Capitol riots than they ever did during the Civil War. The man in the photo is now known to the FBI as Kevin Seefried. He and his son Hunter were both arrested on charges of unlawful entry after Hunter bragged at work about being inside the Capitol building with his father (del Rio, Goldman, Benner, and Ives, 2021). In a form of foreshadowing, Seefried's hand is raised to his face as if to shield his shame. He looks in the opposite direction of Morrill's gaze as captured in the portrait, which aptly summarizes two entirely different, perhaps opposing, points of view. Closer to the lens and taking up a portion of the right-hand side of the frame, we catch a glimpse of Aaron Mostofsky. Fur-clad and carrying a stolen shield from the Capitol Police, his costume emphasizes the absurdity of the moment and strikes a strange contrast against the all-American-Dad attire embodied by Seefried and also against the seriousness of the portrait and politics of Morrill.

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Mapping the Events in Time and Space | Co-authored Chapter

ulthiin, iowyth hezel, McKee, M., & VanDyke, D. (2022). Mapping the Events of the

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Excerpt describtion (pp. 53-54): As the first chapter under the section of *The Capitol Riots*

book dedicated to "Visualizing the Events of January 6, 2021", this co-authored work provides

readers with a summary of the events that unfolded in Washington that day to orient the reader.

This chapter highlights critical moments in the timeline, introduced by a visual overview which I

designed with David VanDyke's support, included below.

Chapter introduction:

      This chapter builds a chronology and geography of the events of January 6, 2021,

synthesizing and critically evaluating existing mappings of the events, including: those produced

by reclaimed Parler videos archived in chronological order by ProPublica; a birds-eye-view map

of the area surrounding the Capitol building with embedded links to geotagged videos from the

rioters, built by Patr10tic; as well as reconstructed mappings produced by mainstream media

outlets such as the BBC, the New York Times, and The Washington Post.

      We attempt to locate and narrate the events moment by moment, following particular key

participants and actions. These will reference media outputs and spaces that include social media

platforms, mainstream news, and niche social media spaces, all of which served to assemble and

curate the events of the day for public consumption. This timeline and event mapping therefore

articulate the chronological and geospatial events of the riots in relation to the protesters'

imaginaries—their imagined relationship to key signifiers such as democracy, freedom,

government and the actions they engaged in—and how these imaginaries were prolifically

expressed both in real life and in the media that day as the events unfolded.

An infographic timeline (see Figure 4.1) provides an at-a-glance overview of the events

of January 6, 2021, from Trump's early morning tweet to the final completion of the vote

certification in the wee hours of January 7th.

Figure 4.1

(Tan, Shin, Ridler, 2021)

Chapter 4: Media Observatory

The UNESCO Chair DCMÉT develops and supports research within the intersecting topics of democracy, global citizenship and transformative education. The Media Observatory investigated online democratic discourse on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and YouTube as part of the *Social Media, Citizen Participation and Education research project*, funded by SSHRC. I synthesized the body of research produced, organizing the content into a report that visually guides the reader. The full document available on the UNESCO CHAIR DCMÉT Website here, I have also included a few slides below.
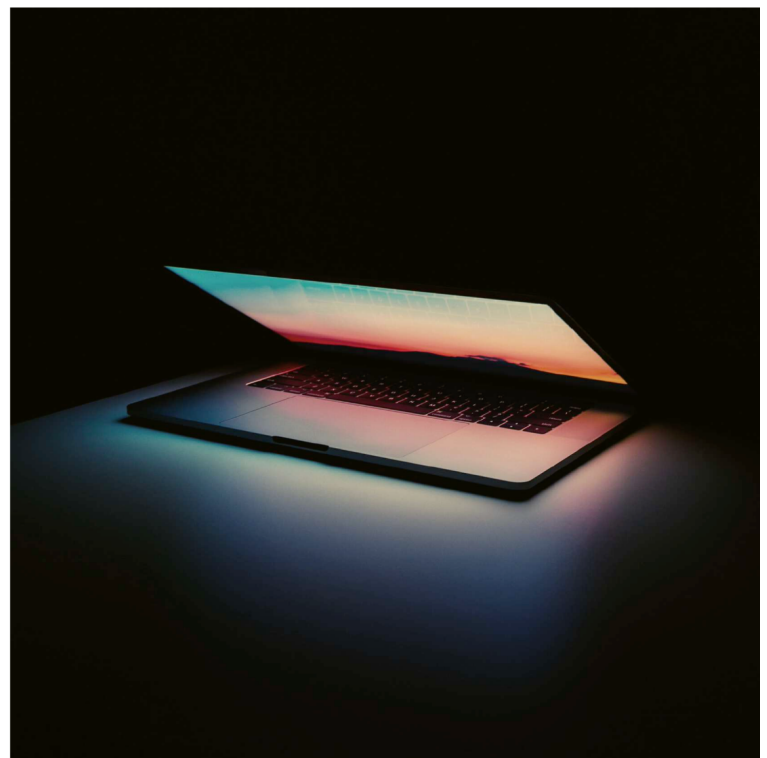
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MEDIA OBSERVATORY

Environmental Scan/Twitter/Hybrid Studies

Capturing an accurate picture of the online democratic discourse of a moment is no small task. In attempting to capture a broad overall picture, for each subject we looked at a selection of popular search results as well linked or hyperlinked sources to investigate a larger interlinked discourse.

Investigations were carried out within popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube. Certain platforms such as Reddit continually appeared to represent fewer extremist positions and articles than platforms like Facebook and Youtube. Twitter appeared to produce a consistently polarizing tone, perhaps due to a greater incidence of mixing which is not found on either Reddit or Facebook. This may be somewhat the result of structural design, mainly due to the existence of groups, pages, and subreddits which tend to collect people around shared views and thus require less conflicts during flashpoints. Yet, Twitter also seems to be a site where the sharing of breaking information flows via non-traditional channels during these same flashpoint events. All in all, news comments sections (both on their websites and on Facebook) were found to be the most toxic and contested spaces with greater incidences of agitators or "trolls" being readily apparent. This may explain the amount of news outlets who have turned off their comments sections, even on platforms like Youtube.

Yet, given the infamy of News comments sections, we would have expected them to be worse than we found them as

there was definite evidence of productive and connecting discourse taking place even in these contested spaces. There incidents in response to "trolls" inciting anger often indicated the longest and most involved conversations but, during such times, a number of counter-agents would be drawn to take part in the conversation. This suggests an attempt to maintain positive and productive conversation in the encounter of hostility and anti-social discourses.

Youtube comments, by and large, contained the least serious comments out of all platforms studied. This could differ based on the importance of the video in question. Comments on this site often take the shape of jokes or pop-culture references. There also seemed to be fewer discussions taking place in separate threads. This might be due to the medium being primarily visual and perhaps those who engage in comments sections, could represent a niche subset.

One thing we did notice when tracking a story across time, was how trends in the discourse could take both surprising and predictable courses as they travelled and were filtered by different informational mediums. For example, news stories reporting on the "Defund the Police" movement led to a general sense of confusion around the purposes of the movement. In response to this, the Canadian mainstream news discourse, made attempts to clarify the purpose (suggesting modes of defunding and restructuring social services rather than police). In educative media spaces there was represented less extreme polarization around the issue. Due to a lack of educative media content in the United States, where mainstream media tended to obfuscate and share distorted information, there were more distinct divisions between "sides". Comments in the data relating to confusion around the term "defund" and its larger implications seemed to correlate with larger counter reactions found in the United States discourse.

"SOCIAL MEDIA SITES, DUE TO THE STRUCTURAL NATURE AS WELL AS THE QUALITY OF THEIR MODERATION CREATE A SORT OF RHETORICAL STYLE THAT IS LARGELY OBSERVABLE ON EACH SITE."

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DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE
ON SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK

More extreme positions expressed
More stratified due to structure of privacy
Communicate via enclosed groups &
Curated friends lists

THE TWITTERVERSE SEEMS TO FOCUS ON THE SHARING OF PHONE-BASED FOOTAGE, WHILE FACEBOOK AND REDDIT FOCUS ON THE SHARING OF ARTICLES WHICH ARE THEN COMMENTED ON.

TWITTER

Speaking to power
Sharing info on breaking events
Quick nature breeds misinformation
Curated friends/groups + trending posts

ON TWITTER, THE QUICK SHARING OF NEW DETAILS CAN SPREAD WITHIN NETWORKS.

Less mixing

[The] existence of groups, pages, and subreddits... tend to collect people around shared views" p. 1

REDDIT

Skews left
Criticized for having orthodoxy
Long-form conversation & posts
Extremist positions captured in closed groups
User base verbally critical of censorship

PLATFORMS SUCH AS REDDIT CONTINUALLY REPRESENT FEWER EXTREMIST POSITIONS ON THE FEED.

YOUTUBE

Contained least serious comment battles
More jokes, pop culture references
Visual heavy, less comments

IN COMMENTARY, AGENTS INCITING ANGER WERE ENGAGED VIA COUNTER-AGENTS TAKING PART IN THE CONVERSATION.

NEWSPAPER COMMENTS SECTION

Often most toxic and contested
Trolls and agitators engage here

6

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Chapter 5: Video Presentation

Linked below is the visual literacy presentation that I have recorded as the final piece of my

Masters portfolio. Running just under 20 minutes, the video contains an introduction to visual

literacy practices, and then explores multiple examples of visual COVID-19 published in the

media. I present six themes which emerged from reviewing visual coverage of the pandemic, it

speaks about the burden of portraying death in public imagery, briefly touches upon the Capitol

Riot and wraps up by speaking about the importance of nuanced visual storytelling. YouTube

video recording of visual literacy presentation available here.
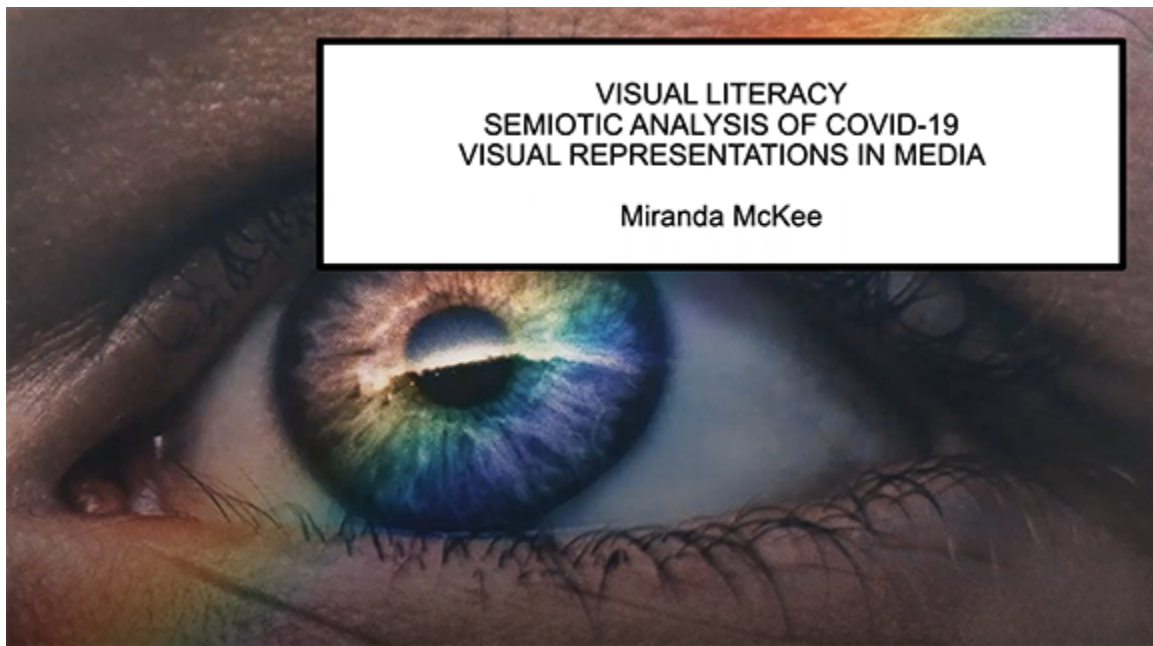
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