Visual media literacy and ethics: Images as affordances in the digital public sphere
by Mary Angela Bock

Abstract
This article argues for the adoption of an affordance model for media literacy. Media literacy efforts have largely evolved separately from visual literacy programs, neglecting the role of the photographic image in the digital public sphere. The hyper-visuality of media today demands closer attention to visuals in media literacy efforts because individuals cognitively process images differently. Images are more emotionally powerful and memorable than words. For these reasons, visual communication cannot be treated in parallel with words. Conceiving of visuals in media as artifacts used by messengers instead of independent messages supports media literacy’s goals of helping individuals navigate today’s digital environment. While such an approach is not the only way to understand images, the affordance paradigm cultivates discourse that supports media literacy. Rooted in the constructivist paradigm, the affordance frame serves as a bridge between photographic indexicality and contingency.

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Introduction
In the days following the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in early 2021, many social media users encountered a video of a man in an airport wailing, “This is what they do to us! [unintelligible] They called me a f--ing terrorist and they want to ruin my life.” A woman who identified herself as an airline representative is seen trying to calm the man down just as the clip ends. The video was shared more than 15 million times and edited into several compilations with the #NoFly hashtag as evidence of the consequences for participating in the Capitol riot. Yet although the man was wailing about being labeled a terrorist, apparently he had not been denied boarding for his participation in the Capitol insurrection. According to the woman who made and originally posted the video, he was denied his seat as a result of a dispute about wearing a mask. While some Twitter users attempted to correct the record and clarify that the man had not (at that time, anyway) been listed on a no-fly list for rioting, it hardly mattered. More than 15 million people already believed it to be so. His emotional outburst was taken at face value, overwhelming the accuracy of the original post.

The episode perfectly captures the essence of visual information online. Few social media users consider the polysemic nature of images, nor the way image meaning changes according to contextual cues. The visual record of the scene above simply shows a man waving his arms and shouting, which offers multiple interpretations. For various reasons, his emotional outburst, the ease with which social media enable misrepresentation, and the shock of the events of 6 January 2021 presented a perfect storm for inaccuracy.
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The evidentiary strength of images, both still and moving, is considerable and can be credited with changing public discourses about race, justice, and inequality in many parts of the world, and as a result, has overshadowed other dimensions of visual communication. In the case of the shouting airport man, social media users who tried to correct the record were fighting a losing battle. Users saw what they wanted to see and, even as of this writing, a video recording of the event remains erroneously captioned on YouTube (Morris, 2021). The case illustrates the complexity of visual interpretation. What difference would it make if we could not hear the man yelling? If a professional journalist had recorded the scene? If we were able to see just a bit more of what happened immediately before or after the man’s outburst? The average social media user is not a visual philosopher, and this is just one example of the way image use can lead to confusion, misinterpretation, or outright misrepresentation.

How can democracy endure in a hypervisual media environment when there is so much room for misinterpretation? How can deliberation proceed without a common set of facts, even with apparent photographic evidence? Hariman and Lucaites (2016) asserted that a new way of thinking about images is essential in the digital age, one that contends with the malleability of image — or “radical decontextualization” — and democratic accessibility [1]. Along with other contemporary photo theorists, they argued that complaints about photography being a mere illusion or inadequate to the task of influencing social change must be met with a new paradigm that considers the importance of the image to citizenship.

In this article, I make a contribution to that end, not with a call for increased media literacy, for that case has been well-made, but with a suggestion for a way visual communication might better be presented in media literacy efforts. In this age of misinformation, disinformation, and the media’s unceasing demand for the public’s attention, media literacy has been touted as an essential component for building citizenship skills in the digital age. The typical media literacy program, however, tends to omit the specific nature of visual communication, lumping word and image together for the sake of guiding users in ways to assess the credibility of information and news sources. I offer instead a theoretical construct that shifts the emphasis from images as messages to images used by messengers. This subtle change of wording has big implications for how we think about visual communication and its epistemology for public deliberation in the digital age. This model situates images as affordances, which emphasizes the role of human action in all communication.

Not every image is used for a civic message: some are works of art designed to please the eye, some are personal mementos, and some serve as records, such as the photograph I keep on my phone of the specific filters that fit my furnace. This article contends with photographic images used in the public sphere, whether news, social media, or other public-facing media. For the most part, I use images not retouched nor manipulated as my primary examples, but the theoretical framework I offer here can be used to combat the problems of digital deception and visual misinformation.

I argue that images serve as communicative affordances for message creators and that discourses of image affordance are more conducive to promoting ethical image production and deployment. This conception can foster a new way of talking about visual information that, when phrased more colloquially, would encourage the audience to think of images not as messages but as tools for messengers. The media literacy curriculum, particularly as applied to images, needs to more carefully reflect the constructivist perspective by emphasizing the role of human beings in the construction process, instead of just saying that messages are “constructed.” To lay the foundation for this proposal, I first review the way media literacy curricula tend to incorporate visual communication, why images need their own ethical considerations, and the value of affordance theory to visual communication.

Media literacy

The role of online misinformation during the 2016 election in the U.S. and the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened urgent calls for media literacy. Just what media literacy entails, however, and how it should be taught remain under debate. Außerheide (1993) offered the field’s foundational definition in a report to the Aspen Institute: “A media literate person ... can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media” [2]. Hobbs (2021), one of the field’s strongest proponents and researchers, expanded the definition with a list for the essential components of media literacy, summarized as “the ever-changing set of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind required for full participation in a contemporary media-saturated society” [3]. Media literacy curricula tend to present students with strategies to analyze the credibility of messages, to consider the motives of message creators, and to craft their own media projects (Christ and De Abreu, 2020; Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2013). Potter (2013), another leading media literacy scholar, took a cognitive or reception approach, arguing that the “purpose of developing media literacy is to give the person greater control of exposures and the construction of meaning from the information encountered in those exposures” [4]. Support for media literacy curricula started long before the arrival of the Internet (boyd, 2014). The rise of disinformation on social media has intensified demand.

While many media literacy texts advance a multipronged approach that includes media creation and ethical reflection, the reception paradigm emphasizing audience decoding remains central. Media is situated as something that requires the audience to take a defensive posture, protecting itself from bias, excess, and misinformation. Even though media literacy experts conceive of consumers as active members of an audience and not passive recipients, a look at the curricula finds an emphasis on critical reception, an approach that may have backfired. As boyd noted during the 2018 SXSW EDU conference, one of the key elements of media literacy has been turned on its head by operatives who have “weaponized” the concept, manipulating it for devious and disguised efforts to undermine public trust (Wan, 2018). Expecting the audience to assess message bias...
may stoke only cynicism, not understanding. As a remedy for this boomerang effect, boyd has suggested that “bias” should be interrogated through an epistemological lens rather than something to be avoided (Wan, 2018).

In her work on social media practices of teenagers, boyd showed how the emphasis on sources, instead of practices, undermines the larger goals of media literacy. The teens she interviewed consistently told her that they were not allowed to cite Wikipedia in their high school research papers (boyd, 2014). They used Wikipedia as a source anyway, hiding it from their teachers, who seemed oblivious to the way the crowdsourced site works. Worse, she found, teachers would tell students that Google was an appropriate research tool, without regard for the fact that Google is a search engine, not a knowledge repository, that uses a proprietary algorithm to deliver results and reward advertisers (boyd, 2014). By focusing on source credibility rather than media construction, these high school teachers not only lost their own credibility with students but undermined their efforts.

This emphasis on reception is further complicated by images. Visual communication scholars have been calling for specialized literacy in their field since the 1970s, when a group of like-minded researchers created the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) and established an annual conference (Bradent and Hortinf, 1982). Early definitions of visual literacy often stressed both interpretation and creation, such as this one from Heinich, et al. (1982), which described it as “the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages”[5]. Other pre-Internet definitions suggested skills, competencies, strategies, or aptitude (Dondis, 1973; Schamber, 1987). Messaris (1998) drew from his own canon of text from 1994 to suggest that a visually literate person needs to understand the peculiarities of visual texts, namely, “the analogical relationship between images and the concepts for which they stand and the implicitness of the connections established through visual syntax”[6]. Later, Messaris and Moriarty (2005) argued that visual literacy must go beyond traditional notions of conventional literacy and provide viewers the ability to interpret and create, for example, by “promoting a greater experience in the workings of visual media coupled with a heightened conscious awareness of those workings”[7].

Despite the continued work of the IVLA and the establishment of visual communication divisions in primary academic organizations, there seems to be scant interaction between visual literacy and media literacy scholars. In Media literacy in a disruptive environment (Christ and De Abreu, 2020), not one of its 18 chapters is devoted specifically to visual communication. Hobbs’ (2021) recent and ambitious textbook covered audiovisual texts and multimedia without contending with the unique qualities of visual communication. Hobbs, however, does not discount the role of the visual; she coauthored a text for multimedia librarians to foster media literacy through film and video (Hobbs, et al., 2019). In summary, media literacy efforts do not ignore visual communication as much as they treat the visual as a language parallel with the verbal, when it is anything but, while tending to focus on the reception effects of traditional mass media research. Important, practical approaches to media literacy in this critical reception paradigm — high school teachers trying to guide their students to credible information, infographics that chart liberal and conservative news sources, and step-by-step guides to critically assess a particular message — are used at the expense of Hobbs’ other recommendations, such as ethical reflection and media creation. The visual literacy approach, while laudable, neglects the task at hand by teaching art history, visual language, and aesthetics without confronting the immediate problem. Namely, the need in today’s digital ecology for everyone, whether professional or amateur, to have a better understanding of how to effectively, responsibly, and ethically use images.

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**Images are special**

The human brain processes images more quickly than words. Images can trigger human emotions more quickly and persuade more powerfully before words have a chance to be considered. They trigger the brain’s ‘fear and memory centers more powerfully (Barry, 1997; Williams and Newton, 2007). As a result, images serve as mnemonic objects in both the public and private spheres (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Katriel and Farrell, 1991). Yet seeing has forever been conflated with knowing, despite the capacity for perception to trick us. Nonverbal cues dominate our conversations, and certain facial expressions are not only universal but perceived more forcefully than language (Ekman and Friesen, 1975; Knapp, et al., 2014). This conflation of vision as knowledge is partially rooted in human biology, what researchers have called “visual primacy” or the “picture superiority effect” (Barry, 1997; Williams and Newton, 2007).

A photograph’s power is rooted in the difference between vision and perception. Vision describes the way the eye receives stimuli, but the brain is what interprets shapes, shadows, and movement, constituting perception. The human brain attaches a name to what it sees and determines its significance. What the brain perceives as “real” is particularly complicated by photography because seeing comes before interpretation, and what is depicted in an image feels real before it is interpreted as just a photo (Barry, 1997). Dual processing theories, such as the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), have long influenced media effects studies and seem especially well-suited to studying the effects of visuals (Pett and Cacioppo, 1986). According to the ELM, humans process most information peripherally unless they are motivated to use a “central” processing route for more careful cognitive work. Brain imaging research suggests that brain pathways for image and word cognition may very well be physiological (Barry, 1997). According to cognitive scholars, images travel through the brain using a different neural path than words, that is, visual perception is theorized as a two-step process involving more than one section of the brain. Whether or not dual processing is rooted in physiology, the ELM is important for considering how message variables influence deliberate or “central” cognition, how images play a role in coordination between the peripheral and central routes, and how a subject’s motivation to learn more can be inspired by a photograph.
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Neurobiology may hold the key to understanding why images operate this way. Research suggests that mirror neurons, which react to nonverbal cues of other people, affect our cognition, with implications for the way we experience imagery (Kilner and Lemon, 2013). Merely seeing video of other people dancing can stimulate parts of the nervous system associated with dancing; subjects viewing images of emotional displays often reflect that emotion with a brief change in their own facial expression. Voters are influenced by photos of politicians’ nonverbal expressions (Grabe and Bucy, 2011; Laustsen and Petersen, 2016). Brief exposure to portraits of people of other races or genders during an Implicit Association Test (IAT) can cause subjects to make judgments that reveal hidden biases (Nosek, et al., 2013). IAT measures how the brain responds quickly to an image and may even counteract a person’s conscious desire to not be racist or sexist.

Using eye-tracking technology, researchers have found that visual cues guide the way newspaper readers scan a page or screen (Bucher and Schumacher, 2006). When faced with a mixed message in which the words say one thing but visuals cue another, visual primacy dictates that we will believe the image (Cappella and Jamieson, 1994; Gibson and Zillmann, 2000). When images match the words that describe them, the resulting message is more memorable (Levie and Lentz, 1982; Lang, 1995). For example, Wanta and Roark (1994) found that when a photograph is properly associated with a story, experimental subjects recall the story better.

Even individuals who believe they are “visually literate” are susceptible to image power. Experiments have shown that such subjects still have a hard time detecting fakes and are influenced by photo manipulation in ads (Lazard, 2015; Lazard, et al., 2018; Nightingale, et al., 2017). Visual primacy’s power overrules reminders to viewers that advertising images are enhanced (Lazard, et al., 2018), or that they can be misleading (Cappella and Jamieson, 1994). Visual primacy is particularly problematic because of the way stereotypical images are and have been historically circulated in mediated culture; such images are particularly durable (Hall, 1997; Lester and Dente Ross, 2003).

I detail here the unique way images operate in human cognition not for the sake of a biology lesson but to underscore the need for additional reflection in visual communication. Because images have such an emotional and, therefore, persuasive impact, they are more memorable and can perpetuate — even cement — stereotypes. And because they affect human thought faster than words, images clearly ought to be treated with greater care in media. Yet images are more likely to be taken for granted and carelessly employed in the digital public sphere.

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**Images are “slippery”**

A photograph contains indexical information from the moment of its creation, but its significance and meaning rely largely on context, or the way it is used in a message (Sekula, 1984). This is nothing new to photographic theorists. As Zelizer (2006) pointed out, images have a “chameleon-like effect, by which they take on the attributes of their destinations as they move onward” [8]. Such mutability, or what Hariman and Lucaites (2016) have called “radical decontextualization” [9], has accelerated in the digital environment. In my own work, I have suggested that the erosion of the institutional and technical “gates” for image use in the digital age allows users to download, manipulate, and distribute an image with breathtaking, tornado-like speed (Bock, 2021).

Social media users can now easily deploy “radical decontextualization” for misinformation and propaganda. Politicians can share improperly contextualized images online to make a partisan argument in ways that are misleading, as when Texas U.S. Senator John Cornyn tweeted an image during the COVID-19 pandemic depicting Democratic lawmakers huddled without masks, although the image was from 2018 (Ramirez, 2020).

The careless use of images can be traced all the way to incunabula, as observed by Eisenstein (1979): “There are many examples of early printers frugally using a few prints to do service for many diverse purposes” [10]. Such a statement could easily describe the situation today, as news organizations increasingly use generic stock photos to illustrate stories instead of images made by a visual journalist for a particular story (Aiello, et al., 2017; Burrell, 2014; Frosh, 2001). Recontextualizations can be careless and rooted in stereotypes: Zelizer (1998) found that magazines often mismatched images of Nazi concentration camps without regard for the camp mentioned in an article. News organizations regularly misidentify people of color in captions (Blancaflor, 2019; Mohdin and Waterson, 2020; Peck, 2019). When written without adequate consideration, news captions can present ideological frames that cast Black people as criminals and white people as sympathetic victims, even when facing the same disaster (Ben-Porath and Shaker, 2010; Johnson, et al., 2011). Stock photography practices, which have burgeoned in online media, can misrepresent issues or perpetuate stereotypes (Arielli, 2019; Massey, 2017). Each of these examples illustrates the problems that occur when images are uprooted from their contexts of creation and recontextualized in new messages.

While this may seem disastrous for long-standing critiques concerned with photography’s indexicality, or representations of the “real,” it discounts the way photography has always been somewhat “unreal” for its framing, selection, and optical distortions. Ritchin (2013) pointed out that image indexicality could help tell stories even more convincingly when woven into narratives than a series of images alone. The ability to share images directly with other social media users has fueled citizen activism around the world, notably in the United States, for the sake of police accountability. Sharing meme images, like Vermont U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders mittens meme seriously thought the senator had worn his parka to the beach, for a portrait with the cast of *Friends*, or in a Zoom background for my online class. Certain images invite use and reuse for the sake of deliberation, for example, the poignant news photo from 2015 of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, the toddler who drowned during his family’s flight from the Syrian civil...
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The problem is not that images travel quickly, nor that they are imperfectly indexical, nor that they are also artistic objects, but that their mutability is so often abused in presentation. Online media producers are encouraged to add images to posts to attract attention, a boon for the stock industry, but to the detriment of accuracy and clarity in the glut of infotainment. Visual journalism is a human practice, requiring a person working with a camera; its embodiment imbues documentary witnessing with its moral strength (Peters, 2001). Yet news organizations have historically concealed the constructed nature of photography, heralding instead the technology of the camera, while perpetuating naïve realism. Journalists themselves have fallen prey to naïve realism, in part because camera indexicality resonates so perfectly with the notion of an “objective” truth and also because of the profession’s historic logocentrism (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001; Lowrey, 2002; Zelizer, 1995). The erasure of the people behind the photos and videos produced is problematic not just because it creates a caste system in the newsroom (as offensive as that is), but because it denies the constructed nature of visual news and how photographers and videographers make numerous optic, narrative, and physical choices to construct visual stories.

The rise of citizen journalism has inspired some news organizations to pay more attention to the contingency of visual meaning. News discourse surrounding police use-of-force videos, for example, has started to address the epistemological strength and limits of images as evidence. Police have also started to use language that reflects the constructivism of affordance theory, without naming it as such, of course (Bock, 2020a). As more video enters the public sphere, whether from security cameras, cop-watchers, or spontaneous smartphone users, news organizations are taking greater care in describing what is or is not depicted. Major news organizations like the Associated Press already have procedures in place to vet contributed visuals, and the New York Times has a unit devoted to what can only be labeled as video forensics (Norman, 2020).

Yet journalism’s grasp of the memetic, emotional, and even subliminal dimensions of visuality remains tenuous. In 2020, the Washington Post agreed to settle a lawsuit over the way it covered an encounter between then–high school student Nick Sandmann and Omaha Nation Elder Nathan Phillips (Wulfsohn, 2020). The Post based its World Wide Web story on video from social media with a headline that was less judgmental than the original tweet but nevertheless assumed Sandmann’s emotional state: “Teens mock Native American elder on the Mall” (Washington Post, 2019). When Sandmann and his supporters pushed back publicly, revisions piled up as journalists seemed to suddenly discover that visual media must be interpreted in context and that no single camera’s perspective provides a full perspective (Bogost, 2019; Jensen, 2019).

Interestingly, while some commenters discussed Sandmann’s facial expression, none of the mea culpa considered whether the first critical headlines might have been inspired by the power of mirror neurons and nonverbal communication. Sandmann’s facial expressions in the original video are going to produce an emotional response on viewers, but watchers, or spontaneous smartphone users, news organizations are taking greater care in describing what is or is not depicted. Major news organizations like the Associated Press already have procedures in place to vet contributed visuals, and the New York Times has a unit devoted to what can only be labeled as video forensics (Norman, 2020).

Images are useful

Students in my classes are discouraged from using the tired cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words,” not only because it is a cliché but because it is simply not true. Some images are worth more and some are useless. The mutability of images across contexts and the anchoring power of language means that an image cannot replace words, and words cannot replace an image. Because visual information is not the same as text, it needs to be considered for its role in any particular recontextualization. Visual literacy might examine the image itself, the blending of its indexicality and aesthetics, but media literacy is enhanced when the visual component of a message is considered for its unique contribution: its affordance to a message. I rely here on the concept of affordances as first presented by psychologist James Gibson [11] to describe the connection between objects in the environment and the way humans use, and therefore define, objects. Conceiving images as affordances for the sake of media literacy incorporates the indexical and aesthetic nature of photography and the role of context in meaning-making.

Photographic images can be thought of as discursive affordances in that they can illustrate, help to prove a point, or persuade. They are things to be used in our messaging: powerful yes, but highly dependent on the synergy of context. In his important contribution to the constructivist paradigm, Gibson (2015) wrote:

An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. The affordances of the environment are facts of the environment, not appearances. But they are not, on the other hand, facts at the level of physics concerned only with matter and energy with animals left out. [12]

Affordance theory has been extended to a wide range of inquiries, from education (Dalgarno and Lee, 2010) to mobile technology (Schrock, 2015) to the psychology of addiction (Miller, et al., 2020). Conceiving images as affordances is beneficial because it accounts for how a photographic image is simultaneously indexical and contingent, and it serves as a reminder that messages with images are constructions. When a photographer or videographer records a scene, the resulting image offers the affordance of the
camera’s technical accuracy. Subsequently, the image can be used in a message to truthfully testify, persuade, inform, and explain. Affordance theory emphasizes the role of human choice and embodied interaction with the lived environment. It is profoundly useful for thinking about photography. McGrenere and Ho (2000) helpfully summarized the three properties of an affordance in Gibson’s theory:

1. An affordance exists relative to the action capabilities of a particular actor.
2. The existence of an affordance is independent of the actor’s ability to perceive it.
3. An affordance does not change as the needs and goals of the actor change.

A digital photograph exists within the capabilities of most social media users, it exists whether or not a user perceives it, and it does not change as the user’s needs change. Gibson’s concept, therefore, incorporates the two primary dimensions of image epistemology: indexicality and context.

As a constructivist concept, affordance theory supports the exploration of message framing, what Entman (1993) defined as the process by which certain facts or ideas are shown and others are excluded “in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe” [13]. Photographic images are doubly framed in their moment of creation, when a photographer “frames” reality with the camera and when the image is framed in discourse (Bock, 2020b; Coleman, 2010; Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). The affordance model of artifacts used by messengers emphasizes the latter but does not ignore image creation. The way a message is constructed or framed offers insight into ideology by avoiding the impossibility of determining “bias” or “objectivity” and focusing instead on human decision-making. Such an epistemological shift would encourage news organizations to be more transparent about how photographers work, enabling viewers not to assess whether they like or dislike a particular publication but to make an epistemological judgment based on the way a story was constructed.

Today everyone is a photographer, and millions of people are learning to edit videos for TikTok, play with Bernie Sanders memes, or add their own captions on Instagram. The audience is already participating in visual message construction. People know what it is, so there is no room for naive realism in today’s digital public sphere. An affordance model for visual literacy shifts the conversation away from technology and toward human decision-making and the ethics reflected by those decisions.

Visual literacy in the digital age

Consider this paradox:

Citizen videography is changing the world. The 2020 protests against police abuse in the United States, which spread internationally, are only the latest illustration of the power of visual evidence, in this case, a video clip documenting the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Citizen videography is irrelevant. The development of deep-fake technology, coupled with misinformation campaigns in a highly fragmented media environment, undermines the evidentiary value of visual documents. In the wake of the police abuse protests, some social media users suggested that George Floyd’s death had been faked.

The solution to this paradox lies in the understanding of how digital images serve as communicative affordances as part of constructed messages, with an emphasis on ethical practice. For media literacy to address the demands of visual literacy, curricula need to move away from the reception paradigm’s source-credibility model to a constructivist paradigm. This does not mean that media literacy efforts need to adopt an arcane philosophical language, but it does demand that we consider visual communication separately from words, and it does require a new way of talking about images in media. Messaris (1994), Messaris and Moriarty (2005), and other visual literacy proponents have pointed out that providing individuals with knowledge of aesthetics and visual syntax has tremendous value, but such efforts only add to an already crowded curriculum. The affordance framing proposed here does not replace the visual literacy approach but instead offers a way of talking about images that can advance the myriad goals of media literacy.

Adopting the affordance model for visual communication holds several advantages for media literacy efforts. First, it deemphasizes reception approaches that categorize sources as biased or unbiased, liberal or conservative, and instead centers the epistemological choices made by a messenger. Second, reframing images as affordances recognizes how everyone in the digital public sphere uses images and shares responsibility for what is online, whether they are amateurs or professionals. Everyone can be held responsible for their use of images in messages. Third, the affordance approach supports the valuable “making media” component already advocated in key media literacy efforts. A fourth advantage is that the images-as-affordances approach cultivates ethical reflection in essentially moral terms. That is, if images are useful objects for
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The affordance model does not reject a source out of hand, nor does it condone naïve realism, but instead encourages viewers to consider the role of human decisions in constructing messages using images. The second dimension described above, which grants the viewer agency for considering the truthfulness of the message, places responsibility on that user for their own ethical decision-making. Third, because the viewer is likely to have a smartphone, as there are an estimated six billion mobile users globally (Bugel, et al., 2020), the viewer will have a tacit understanding of how the video was shot, where the creator was standing in relation to the action, and so on. The affordance model emphasizes the role of human agency in the creation and posting of the video, thereby encouraging the viewer to consider whether the posted message used the video honestly. In the case of the airport video, some commenters noted that the original post provided accurate context, but subsequent iterations postings about this “slippery” clip did not (GrammarGirl, 2021).

As a practical matter, media literacy projects emphasizing critical analysis would do well to separate out visual elements for their specific contributions to a message. For instance, one media literacy site suggested that viewers ask what techniques are used to “attract and hold attention” [14]. Given the different ways the visual, verbal, and aural operate in any message, a better question would be, “What visual, linguistic, or musical techniques are used to hold attention?” Leaders of media literacy groups might consider more deeply what is unique about the visual as they formulate recommendations.

That is a long journey to conclude that not everything on Twitter can be trusted, but it better explains why and when to trust messages on social media. It provides the viewer with a more nuanced way to assess a message by considering how the messenger used imagery. Commanding users to simply ignore everything on social media is simplistic and hardly helpful in the twenty-first century. Lists of “biased” or “partisan” news sources similarly do not give users the tools for assessing much of what circulates in the public sphere, especially when visuals are included. Conceiving this tweet as a video used by a messenger, instead of a self-contained document, provides viewers with a more complete understanding of how to assess the message and what they ought to do about it—in this case, to not pass along something that may not be true.

Conclusion

The U.S. population now spends most of their waking hours with electronic media, 12 hours a day, according to a Nielsen (2020) report. Much, though not all, of that media offers visual messaging, and much of it is designed to persuade, sell, or titillate, not ethically inform. Interestingly, while media literacy campaigns are usually aimed at the young, it is older people, the ones most likely to vote, who are more susceptible to media hoaxes, disinformation, and misinformation. After all, they spent decades in a regulated mass media environment that required fairness and sanctioned liars and mischief-makers (Guess, et al., 2019). Media literacy efforts must not be aimed only at those in school but spread through senior centers, community groups, and even churches, and these efforts simply cannot ignore what is unique about visual communication.

This proposal extends the work of photographic theorists who suggest that photography has an important role to play in public deliberation (Azoulay, 2008; Hariman and Lucaites, 2016; 2007). Photographic images are artifacts with complicated epistemologies distinct from other forms of communication. As Hariman and Lucaites (2016) wrote, “There is no universal language of photography, but interpretation is never entirely local, and it is an important basis for communicating with others about what might be held in common.” [15].

Images, whether still or moving, are emotionally powerful, memorable, and cognitively processed faster than words. Images “feel” real even when they are not and will trump verbal messages when in competition. Visual meaning is largely, though not entirely, contingent; and changes in caption, presentation, space, and time will affect the way an image is understood. The two communicative modalities, verbal and visual, operate in entirely different ways in human cognition, and media literacy efforts that treat images as parallel to words are bound to falter.

This article has proposed that media literacy advocates adopt an affordance model of discourse that presents images as useful to messengers instead of as messages. The
propose does not add additional material to any particular media literacy program, nor does it dismiss the value of visual literacy training. Instead, it challenges media literacy advocates to present images as affordances for messengers to emphasize the role of human action in all communication. This might seem like subtle wordplay, but advocacy efforts in other realms have succeeded through such linguistic reframing, as with the reclamation of the word “queer” or the decision by the Associated Press to use the phrase “undocumented” instead of “illegal” to describe humans who have crossed the border without necessary paperwork. Conceiving images as affordances advances media literacy efforts while recognizing what is cognitively unique about visual communication and how it bridges image indexicality and contingency. The affordance model serves the goals of media literacy advocates, which in turn serves the goals of anyone concerned about the role of images in today’s digital public sphere.

About the author

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Notes

1. Hariman and Lucaites, 2016, p. 44.
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