

RESEARCHING NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPHS: REVEALING THE PREVAILING PARADIGMS

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ABSTRACT

Photographs play a dominant role in newspaper reporting of current affairs. As a news item, a photograph complements the written word. Where the accompanying news story is missing, the caption elaborates on the essence of the photograph. A review of the dominant journals in media and communication studies will indicate that research on photographs has been somewhat limited. The lack of published research on newspapers' photographs should not be misconstrued as a lack of interest among researchers to study this phenomenon. This paper seeks to communicate the contrasting research methodologies employed by researchers in studying newspaper photographs. The findings indicate two dominant paradigms in studying the various photographs published by newspaper: positivism and interpretative. The positivism paradigm reduces photographs into categories and quantifiable numbers to account for the amount of images printed in the pages of a newspaper. Images of importance are those that can be observed, measured and quantified. The interpretative paradigm looks at photograph within the dichotomy of nature and culture.

Keywords: media representation, photo journalism, media bias, journalims ethics, photo editing

INTRODUCTION

Photographs are popular among the general public. With the advent of digital cameras in the last couples of years and as an added-on feature on latest line of cellular phones contributed further to the popularity of photography. With the price of digital cameras dropping even further and knowing that everybody loves to take photos, we should be forgiving ourselves for thinking “doesn't everyone have a digital camera yet?”

Though this maybe the case we would expect newspapers, as a printed media would catch up with the trend of publishing photos with the discovery of the photography. The *Daily Mirror* in the UK was the first to print photographs at the turn of the 20th century. The use of photographs by print media did not become commonplace till the end of the First World War. It was not until June 1919 that photograph as a vital means of communication was fully acknowledged. This is some 39 years after the feasibility of printing a half-tone block, reproducing light and shade by dots of different sizes and densities, alongside type had been demonstrated by Stephen H. Horgan through the publishing of the New York *Daily Graphic*.

Press photographs were a rarity during the First World War. Photo reporting in the modern sense only began in mid-1920 with the introduction of Ermanox camera and ultra rapid plates. Among the fathers of modern photojournalism were Erich Saloman, Felix H. Man and Wolfgang Weber. The increasing status of photojournalism was made possible with the contribution of many outstanding photographers among others, Henri Cartier-Bresson who made photo-reported visits to Spain and Mexico. Robert Capa won undulying fame with his war photography.

Photography was discovered in 1826 when Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, a French army officer captured the first images on a *camera obscura* or Latin for “dark chamber”. They exposed a metal plate coated with a layer of bitumen to the image in the *camera obscura*. The light hardened the bitumen, which was washed away to reveal the fixed image. Niépce called his discovery “heliography” or sun drawing, thus photography was born. The first photographic image captured by Niépce was a rooftop scene.

Joseph Niépce later team up with Louis Daguerre in 1830. Daguerre further developed the field of photography in France with the passing away of Niépce three years later. Daguerre discovered that an almost latent image could be developed using mercury vapour. He used mercury vapour to treat the metal plates coated with silver salts. This greatly reduced the exposure time from roughly eight hours to between 20 to 30 minutes.

Although Niépce was the first to fix image by chemical means, Johann Heinrich Schulze, a professor of anatomy at the University of Altdorf, discovered the light sensitivity of silver nitrate. In 1727, he published a paper indicating that the darkening of silver nitrate was not due to heat but to light.

The term photograph was first used by a UK astronomer Sir John Herschel who read a paper “On the Art of Photography” to the Royal Society accompanied by 23 photographs in 1839. He was the first to use the verb to *photograph* and the adjective *photographic*. Later he used the term *negative* and *positive*. He is said to coin the term *snap-shot* some 20 years later.

Prints of photographic images captured on silver nitrate were not possible until the method was discovered by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1841. Later Frederick Scott Archer discovered *collodion* or wet-plate process which further improved the photographic process by using gelatine silver bromide emulsion. The discovery of celluloid in 1861 by Alexander Parkes was what made the popularity of photography to grow by leaps and bounce. The invention made possible the production of roll film and this was commercially produced by Eastman Company, in the United States from 1889. By 1902, Eastman the manufacturers of Kodak, were producing 80% and 90% of the world output.

Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (1965) who co-authored *A Concise History of Photography* wrote: “No other medium can bring life and reality so close as does

photography and it is the fields of reportage and documentation that photography's most important contribution lies in modern times." Photography and photojournalism today proved powerful agents in the awakening of social conscience. See picture 1. The scene shows protestors lying on the ground in front of the Tak Bai Police Station as Thai policemen and Thai army personnel handcuff them on 24th October 2004 .—Utusanpix.

Picture 1



PARADIGMS IN RESEARCHING PHOTOGRAPHS

It is ironic that research on newspaper is mostly concentrated on the printed or written words when the most striking aspect of the print media is photographs or the visual element. A photograph is selected for print on the front page because it is said to have the ability to arrest, hold, persuade, implant an idea and give specific information about a news event. Kobre (1980) wrote that people look at picture three times more often than they read the average news story. A photograph tells a condensed, concise story that readers can instantly and easily recognised. Pictures alone do not tell the story. Pictures need words, otherwise readers or viewers will not know who is in the picture or when, where, or why the news event took place. (See picture 2). Picture 2 is a story on the front page of *Utusan Malaysia* showing the action taken by the Thai military to apprehend protestors near the Tak Bai Police Station, on October 24th, 2004.

Picture 2



Thus, the focus on written words by mass media researchers is not surprising and it is related with the method of study employed by researchers to study newspapers. Content analysis is the prevailing mode of inquiry to study the use of photographs by printed media. Positivistic or quantitative content analyses start with the ability of social scientists to directly and objectively access empirical data from the social and natural reality. It is limited by the fact that its strength lies in its ability to objectively, systematically and quantitatively studies the manifest content of communication. Social reality is said to be real and waiting to be discovered. It is independent of human consciousness.

Positivists have always argued that social sciences use the methods of natural sciences. Keat and Urry (1975: 25) argue that “there (can) be only *one* logic of science to which any intellectual activity aspiring to the title of ‘science’ must conform (emphasis in original).” Positivists are quick to point that they differentiate themselves from the research act. Positivists argue that need to suspend their belief, even though, temporarily while doing research. The suspension of belief takes in the form of hypothesis testing. The null hypothesis is subjected to systematic doubt and the respective merits determined through the exercise of reason and disciplined observation.

Content analysis proceeds by defining relevant variables, or dimensions, and then on each variable, distinguishes the values, which yield categories of content that can be observed and quantified. Each variable should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. To conduct a study on published photographs by the print media using the positivistic paradigm, Brechen-Kirkton (1981) asserted that it is best to analyse photos in terms of subject matter. Tsang (1984) provided a systematic way of analysing the subject matter of photographs: 1) the photograph was observed to determine its subject and country of origin. 2) if the subject and information of the country could not be determined directly, outlines were read, and 3) if there were still problems in determining the subject and country, the article was read.

The use of cutlines to determine the subject and country has been proven valid following research by Kerrick (1959). Kerrick found that in many circumstances, picture cutlines did influence reader’s interpretations of photographs. Kerrick (1959: 188) wrote: In short, if the picture and caption are similar in original meaning, these element-meanings are added together in the combinations to produce a more extreme judgement.

The dominance of research on the printed words leaves an impression as though the medium of newspaper is *unimodal*. This is contrary to what newspapers editors’ belief. They acknowledged that a newspaper appearance is an important factor operating in a competitive market (Pasternack and Utt 1983). Hall (1981) in arguing otherwise suggests that while the printed text in modern newspapers is still important but photographs when they appear, add news dimensions of meaning to a text. Photograph as Hall justly pointed out “represents a *truncated version* of (our) cultural code (emphasis in original).” See Picture 3. The photograph shows Thai army personnel tying protestors caught at the Tak Bai Police Station on October 24th, 2004. Look at the facial expression of the Thai army in the foreground. The picture is taken from *Utusan Malaysia*.

To understand the representation made in a particular image, newspaper readers in a given society will have to be endowed with the codes to decode or read the expressive features of the photographed subject. This is necessary so because a published photograph is communicating a dynamic and fluid meaning that transcends the linguistic sign, bringing together the agency, process, reception and effect of meaning. Thus, the expressive features of the chosen photographs require readers to resolve a set of gestural, non-linguistic

features (signifiers) into a specific expressive configuration (signified), which is cultural and not technical in nature. The code allows us to distinguish an expressive pattern with a richer set of signifying cues. These socially located meaning systems are the means by which people bring their social context to bear upon the decoding of a given media text, and in this case photographs. These codes are learned and not inherited. Hofstede (1991: 5) posits that it “is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (emphasis in original).”

Picture 3



Look at picture 4 taken from BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk). It is a long shot showing an airliner slamming into one of the World Trade Tower in New York on September 11, 2001. The other tower is burning after it was hit by another airliner earlier. Images of the attack on the World Trade Tower building have now been used to symbolise “terrorism”.

Picture 4



Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argues that written text in newspapers is *multimodal* in form and the rise of multimedia documents has caused mass media researchers to see that written text published by newspapers is actually not *unimodal*. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 39) said:

A written text similarly, involves more than language: it is written on something, on some material (paper, wood, vellum, stone, metal, rock, etc.) and it is written with something (gold, ink, (en)gravings, dots of ink, etc.); with letters formed in systems influenced by aesthetics, psychological, pragmatic and other considerations; and with a layout imposed on the material substance, whether on the page, the computer screen or a polished brass plaque.

Photographs published in newspapers are carefully selected from a widest possible alternative choice. Editors in selecting of photographs for publication may or may not crop photograph to emphasis certain points or aspects. With the advent of computer technology, editors have the ability technically to contrast, colour or alter some aspects of the photograph without ever to shoot again an image. This is made possible with various photo editing softwares that are readily available in the market.

Barthes (1977) was first to point that in a photographic shot of an object the distinction between connotation and denotation is apparent. Denotation refers to the mechanical reproduction on film of the object at which the camera is pointed. Connotation is the human process that relates to the selection of what to include in the frame, of focus, aperture, camera angle, quality of film. In other words, denotation is what is being photographed while connotation is how it is being photographed.

Photographs that appear in newspaper “has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation” (Barthes 1977: 19). When a photographer shoots an image, he or she makes a selection of visual information that is determined by his or her technical and aesthetic skills, personal views and experience, together with a set of social and cultural values. It is this that determines how images are perceived and responded to by the viewer.

Reading of photographs should not be seen as an autonomous activity because it is actually produced from other texts too. The interpretation that a particular reader generates from a text will then depend on the recognition of the relationship of the given text to other text. Thus, a photograph of a politician published in a newspaper may yield more meaning or further levels of meaning, if it is interpreted, not simply as a representation of its subject, but rather through a frame constituted by other photographs of the same person (possibly in widely different situations), speeches made by him or her, newspaper reports and comments on him or her, and even cartoons lampooning the politicians.

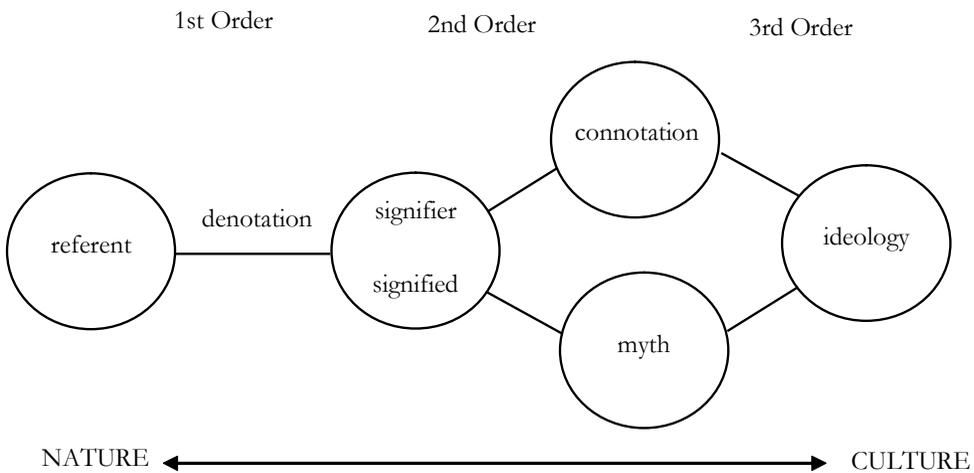
To conduct a study of this nature, researchers will have to invoke the interpretative method and use a different type of lens to study the prevailing social milieu. Researchers employing this method seek to understand responses that occur in an individual in a communication. Paradoxically the responses that is said to occur within the individual is actually not individualised but is shared across members within a culture or subculture. Connotation occurs when the denotative meaning of photograph is made to stand for the value-system of the culture or the person using it. Sharing of subjective responses is referred to as intersubjectivity and this occur at the second order of signification or connotation. Intersubjectivity is an important mean in which culture affects its members.

The first order of signification as systematically model by Barthes (1968) describes relationship between the signifier and signified within the sign. Barthes refers the sign and its referent in external reality as denotation. For example, a photograph of a lecture hall in a university would denote that particular building. The word “lecture hall” denotes

a purposely-built building where lectures are conducted within an educational setting. This first photograph could be taken using a colour film and shot with a soft focus making the lecture hall appear to be a happy and conducive place for study. A second shot could be taken using black and white film and shot with a hard focus, which makes the lecture hall, appear to be cold and inhospitable.

While the two photographs could have been taken momentarily apart, the denotative meaning of the image would stay the same but the connotative meaning has been altered. Connotation shows the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture. In this sense, the interpretant is influenced as much by the interpreter as by the object or the sign. It is in the appearance or the form of these photographs lays the differences.

Diagram 1: Barthes's Order of Signification



The second order of signification or connotation occurs when the denotative meaning of the sign is made to stand for the value-system of the culture or the person using it. It then produces associative, expressive, attitudinal or evaluative shades of meaning. The form of the signifier then determines connotation: changing the signifier while keeping the same signified on the first order is the way to control the connotative meanings.

The myth, which is also, the second order of signification is referred to by Barthes to a chain of concepts widely accepted throughout a culture. It is by which members conceptualise or understand a particular topic or part of their social experience. This concept should not be used in the layperson's sense of a "false belief" but in the anthropological sense of "a culture's way of conceptualising an abstract topic." Myths are conceptual and operate on the plane of the signified while connotations are evaluative, emotive and operate on the plane of signifier.

Connotations and myths of a culture are manifest signs of its ideology or the third order of signification. The way that the varied connotations or myths fit together to form a coherent pattern or sense of wholeness, that is, the way they "make sense" is evidence of an underlying invisible, organising principle or ideology.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Marrying both approaches is both plausible and could be classified as post-positivism but inherent within such a research endeavour is an ontological approach that is still within the domain of positivism. Researcher of this nature employs interpretative methods to assist social scientists in determining the meanings and purposes that people ascribe to their action. The employment of interpretative methods to assist in the researching of a phenomenon is unavoidable because currently available methods of social sciences do not allow researchers using the positivistic method to comprehend reality perfectly.

The widespread use of photographic elements in multimedia documents and in websites of newspapers offers vast opportunities for research to be done in this area. In discussing the differences and similarities between both paradigms, I hope I have been able to make it more manageable. It is an attempt to provide an easy path towards understanding the competing paradigms. In doing so, I am reminded by Morgan (1983b: 41) who said that “classification and simplification can aid understanding, but if interpreted too literally, they exert a confining or diversionary hold on imagination as interest in the classificatory “map” replaces interest in the “territory.”

In this paper, I am not trying to promote either the positivistic paradigm or interpretative. Both approaches have its merits and demerits. As researchers, we should be able to appreciate whatever methods we choose to work with. The chosen method will determine the type of questions we will pose, how we assess the relevance and value of different research methodologies. It will also influence how we construct the research outputs. We are well aware of our underlying epistemological commitments while doing the research act but also in our readings.

As researchers we will be called to make judgement at one time or another, especially when we are confronted with reading a thesis or refereeing an article submitted to a refereed journal. The different methodological design should be viewed like the many varieties of fruits available worldwide. We would have to be accustomed to the taste of each fruit. Locals may find the “durian” fruit as mouth-watering but Westerners may be turned off by its strong and pungent-like smell. We should not discard something as worthless just because we do not understand or comfortable using it. We should learn to appreciate and understand the various research alternatives available.

In communication, we are reminded by Berelson (1952: 13) who said that “communication content is so rich that no single system of substantive categories can be derived to describe it.” In other words, researchers should be able to appreciate the contributions that different strategies can make to social research. We should accept that methods are just tools used by researchers. We should as the title of the book by Morgan (1983a) move *Beyond Method* and relish the potential of unleashing different kinds of knowledge offered by the different methods.

NOTES

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