

UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE OF THE WRITTEN PRESS NEWS

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Abstract: The press of the 20th and 21st century has been dominated by photography, as it has managed to transform the reader from a passive receiver of information into an eye-witness. Photography has been therefore considered a “universal language”, “a message without a code” (Roland Barthes), capable of facing the ever higher challenges of a globalized world. Nevertheless, it has been proven that the final message is never only a visual one, but a blending of both the visual and the linguistic message accompanying all press photographs.

Keywords: News, reader, message, text, image.

The written press news is nowadays much more than a simple presentation of information: the modern written piece of news is rather similar to the TV or internet news. Under the influence of the latter, the modern reader expects not only to be informed when reading a newspaper, but also to be able to see what he is told. This is why nowadays, newspapers try to make the most of the use of photographs, colours and other means of attracting the reader’s attention. Therefore, one of the most representative characteristics of the modern newspaper – be it a broadsheet or a tabloid – is the more or less extensive use of press photographs.

Nevertheless, one must not forget that, despite it being a very much used and a very efficient means of drawing

attention onto the piece of news in question, the photograph is but an “accessory”: vital, but insufficient. This is mainly because, in spite of the fact that photographs do create a discourse (by means of the frame, colour, light, composition etc.), in the end, the photograph does not state anything. It is the text that always accompanies any press photograph that provides the necessary context for the correct understanding of the visual message.

By “accessory” one does not understand something that we could do without. On the contrary, photographs play a key role in the process of selection operated by the modern reader who nowadays rather “browses” through the newspaper in order to decide on the articles of interest. It merely signifies that the visual message is but the starting point in the interpretation and understanding of the final message.

Roland Barthes was among the first to consider that the visual message is a “universal language”, a “message without a code” and that the text is a “parasite” meant to give the image one or several secondary meanings, either explaining it or enriching the message it conveys. He argues that we can understand the photographic image without resorting to any code, as in order to understand images, we only need knowledge of a very general kind. For example, in order to understand the image of an advertisement for pasta, one only needs to know what an image is, a tomato, pasta etc.

However, this perspective ignores the fact that there is a series of factors that influence to a large extent our understanding of images, such as: the previous text/image reading experience, the cultural background etc. People belonging to different cultures will have a completely different perception of the same photograph. For example, an Arab and a European will perceive the diagonal lines in very different ways, due to their previous reading experience: to the European, a diagonal line going from the left down corner

to the right up corner of the photograph will suggest optimism and positive feelings, while to the Arab, used to reading from right to left, it will appear to be going downwards and will associate it with pessimism and negative feelings. The same thing will happen when it comes to colours: in the European cultural tradition, white symbolizes purity and freshness, while in Asia, it is a sign of mourning. Moreover, each reader will approach the paper with their own set of codes and for this reason even people belonging to the same cultural or social group will interpret a photograph differently, depending on profession, age, sex etc.

Therefore, despite the fact that people around the world may recognize the situation and objects presented by a photograph in much the same way, they will understand and perceive them differently, depending on culture, tradition, reading experience etc.

However, the same piece of news can still be understood in the end in much the same way, due to the linguistic text accompanying the press photograph, which is much less influenced by such factors and therefore, much more adequate to convey the information intended. Moreover, Paul Almsy considers that in any photograph there is a series of abstract elements that cannot be visualized and which therefore need to be provided to the reader linguistically, either in the text accompanying the photograph, or by means of five types of “legend”: the *complementary legend* (when? Where?), the *explanatory legend* (precise explanation as to the subject of the photograph), the *evocative legend* (which supports the conclusion reached), the *narrative legend* (which narrates in great detail the event visualised in the photo) and the *quoting* (which quotes one or two statements of the person portrayed in the photograph).

Another much debated issue related to press photography is whether or not photographs can lie, that is to say, whether or not processed photographs can be used in

order to manipulate truth. This debate originates mainly in the fact that, as indexical signs, photographs are perceived as being an objective recording of reality. Nevertheless, despite its declared aim to be objective, and despite the fact that it is an iconic and indexical sign (Ch. S. Peirce), press photography is inevitably characterised by subjectivity – both at the level of its production and at the level of its reception. We may not forget that it is a mediated reality, and as such, it cannot claim to be perfectly objective: a photograph is but a moment in time and it reflects the photographer’s view of the events, while press photographs also reflect the paper’s view of the events (due to their positioning on the page, to their size, etc). Moreover, the perception of press photographs is highly influenced by a series of factors over which we have no control. First and foremost, there are the physical limitations of the human eye which cannot possibly focus on more than two to three details at one time. This is why our attention will be inevitably drawn by a few details that are disposed along the so called “lines of force” which means that we will focus on the objects that the photographer has considered to be relevant enough so as to occupy this privileged position. All in all, one can safely state that photographs cannot possibly be considered “objective” means of recording reality, in the first place.

The first to take this subject into discussion was Gustave le Bon, who, in 1895 in his *Psychology of the masses* describes the photograph as a means of manipulating the mind, as he argues that the masses can only think in images and can therefore be influenced through the use of photos, as they tend not to differentiate between what is real and what is not. Of course photographs can be processed and altered and the stunning advance in technology of the past decades (digital photography) makes it all more difficult to tell which photograph is genuine and which has been processed, and, therefore, nowadays, photos can also reflect something that is

not real. However, this is quite a simplistic way of looking at this.

On the one hand, the credibility of the image-index can be questioned if it presents something that is out of the reader's depth, that is if it presents something which the reader has no previous experience of. This is one of the situations in which even a genuine, unaltered photograph can be perceived as a fake. Moreover, if the photograph – as well as the text accompanying it – is found in a place which is not considered credible (a tabloid or advertisement for example) – its 'veridicity' will also be questioned.

On the other hand, there is the confusion people make between *authentic* and *true* when it comes to discussing photographs. One must not forget that the notion of "truth" is not an attribute of the photograph. It cannot possibly be true or false – it can only be authentic – that is to say it can reflect reality - or not. A photograph that no longer reflects reality is not necessarily false if the text accompanying it does not claim that it does. Therefore, the photograph becomes false not when it no longer reflects reality, but when the linguistic message associated to it continues to support its analogy with it.

One can therefore conclude that the final message of the written press news may be misleading and manipulative, but not only as a result of the use of one photograph or other, but as a result of the overall meaning conveyed semiotically and linguistically.

All these support the idea that in order to understand the message of the written press news one must not only adopt a semiotic perspective, but a linguistic one as well, as the overall message is conveyed both in the visual and in the linguistic discourse. Of course, these discourses do not always go hand in hand. Most often the visual message supports the linguistic one, creating a stronger impression on the reader, but it sometimes denies what is stated in the text and leads the reader into believing that whatever was said should be read between the lines and questioned. Whatever the case, the final

message we, the readers, get in the end, is a result of decoding both text and photography.

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