Visual Propaganda - Theoretical and historical considerations

Dana DRUGĂ
Ph.D Student, MVNIA, Bucharest, Romania
Email - danielad514@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This article proposes a theoretical and historical investigation of visual propaganda and at the same time brings a new conceptualization of propaganda, emphasizing the visual elements and their role in it. Using the specialized literature analysis method, this article highlights the contributions of the main authors to the inclusion of visual elements in propaganda. The visual content of the essential part, whether we mean political, social or economic communication. Their advent of digital communication has made the role of visuals in communication more prominent as people opt for easy-to-understand content and share attention-grabbing images through social media technologies. Consequently, media authorities, government organizations and companies have tried to optimize visual content for effective communication.*

Key Words: *visual, propaganda, images, history.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Visuals are a key component of propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell 2019), (Green 2014). From ancient coins depicting the emperors of Rome, political posters during the First and Second World Wars, to images and videos online, images are used to convey and create "awe and respect" and "a sense of power' (Jowett and O'Donnell, p.327). Thus, the images help to maximize the desired effects, causing strong emotions. In the study of visual propaganda, the way of organizing and presenting images to convince the public about a certain subject in the attention of society takes priority. At the same time, several studies discuss the concept of framing or framing theory. This refers to the ability of communicators to present a certain issue in such a way as to influence the interpretation and understanding that the public will have on the subject being discussed. The basis of framing theory is that the media focus attention on certain events and then place them in a field of meaning. In other words, the image is presented from a certain angle that allows to persuade the audience (D. A. Scheufele 1999), (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007), (Melki 2014).

2. DISCUSSION:

The turn of this century saw an evolution in visual content analysis and a continued focus on visual representations of war and conflict (Griffin, 2010). Visual content analysis methods are related to visual framing, the role of visual motifs, and presentation in problem framing. Increased attention is being paid to images in political news and their role in framing candidates and electoral issues (Grabe and Bucy, 2009.) Photographs and videos produced online offer new and less restricted avenues through which images influence public perceptions. , while the mass media continue to use images to symbolize and reinforce official narratives and public and foreign policy positions (Perlmutter, 1998).

Online visual content can highlight political opinions, reactions, information and important events on the international stage. The increasing presence of visual content from established social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, requires the study of visuals and social networks from this visual perspective. Also, the image has great social and political power – especially the digital image, which can lead to political and social actions in a much shorter time than classical ones (Harlow 2014). For example, the Arab Spring (see Rane and Salem, 2012); the Spanish Los Indignados movement (see Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2013); Occupy Wall Street (see Gautney, 2011); The Umbrella Revolution (see Kaiman, 2014).

In the last ten years, academic work on propaganda and persuasion has turned towards the analysis of the visual, with several authors examining – and demonstrating – the ways in which visual arguments can be made (Cheles 2010). A visual argument is an argument made primarily through images that are intended to persuade the audience to believe

or do something (Groarke 2002). Consequently, the empirical and analytical focus has been expanded from the analysis of verbal discourse to include visual elements (Richardson and Wodak 2009).

Anthropological and archaeological research shows that before speech (organized language) communication was visual. Primitive man communicated non-verbally through gestures and signals, although sounds – shouting and drumming, for example – were also important. Tribal man created and developed masks, war cries, and threatening gestures both to frighten his enemies and to impress his friends (Taylor 2003, 19). Margaret Mead, an anthropologist of the interwar years whose studies in Samoa and New Guinea address the behaviour of primitive peoples, believes that visual symbols were used for very specific purposes (idem). Toby Clark, in Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century (1997) believes that images are capable of conveying information quickly and evoking deep emotions in viewers.

3. ANALYSIS:

Although there are numerous studies and researches on visual propaganda (Basilio 2013), (Winkler and Dauber 2014), (Goldstein 2009), (Seo and Ebrahim 2016), (Baines, O'Shaughnessy and Snow 2020), (Kłagisz 2017), (Schwartz and Gölz 2021) in the consulted works no specific definition of visual propaganda was found, except for the definition proposed by Holzer (2015) who considers that visual propaganda refers to "the use of modern visual means for the specific purpose of influencing attitudes among the population ". We believe that Holzer's approach is too vague in relation to the specifics of propaganda and its objectives, so we propose another definition, approached by Romanian professor Mihai Milka, specialist in political and communication studies. The innovation consists in the fact that we adapted the proposed definition to the specifics of visual propaganda :

Visual propaganda represents the process through which, through the use of specific visual means (films, photographs, images, symbols, monuments, paintings, events) "there is a transfer of messages with content, usually ideological, from an initiative center (individuals, social groups, organizations, political parties) to a mass of individuals, groups or global societies, bringing about at the level of the latter changes in the sphere of opinions, attitudes, social and/or political actions, providing based on values, criteria of appreciation , models of thinking and behavior, as well as inculcated beliefs, motives for action in order to achieve certain interests and determined goals that emanate from the initiators of the propaganda and are made aware, to a greater or lesser extent, by those who are under its influence, as being their own" (Milca 1981, 111-112).

I chose this definition because it highlights the fundamental characteristics of propaganda as a total social phenomenon, not only with an emphasis on the political side, highlighting the complex conceptual nature of visual propaganda and marks the causal link between who?, what? and how?.

From a historical perspective, the analysis of visual propaganda was addressed by Gareth Jowett, in the Visual Communication of Propaganda chapter of The Concise Encyclopedia of Communication. The researcher believes that the development of visual propaganda throughout history has been achieved taking into account two characteristics: the desire to disseminate the message to an increasingly wider audience; second, to disseminate this message as quickly and effectively as possible. At the same time, the researcher analyzes the development of visual propaganda in relation to historical and technological developments (Jowett 2015, pp.493-394).

In the ancient world, where communications were severely limited by distance, visual propaganda was initially limited to monumental displays associated with official places of power, such as palaces and temples, where there were large architectural structures, statues, obelisks, engravings and other elements visuals, used as a means to establish a sense of power, social order and hierarchy. As transportation and communications improved, new methods of visual propaganda emerged as a means of creating and maintaining a sense of unity and stability in distant regions. In particular, the use of coins with images of rulers and state symbols was extremely effective as a means of conveying the importance of the state in people's lives (idem). Similarly, during the Ancient Roman period, coins were an important means of visual propaganda through which images of Rome were spread throughout the Roman Empire. For example, they were used to publicize the military and diplomatic successes of the emperor Augustus (Taylor 2003, p.45). Also, Cull, Culbert and Welch consider coins to be a form of visual propaganda (2003, p.91).

During the First World War, film and photography were used systematically as tools of visual propaganda for the first time (Holzer 2015). In 1914, the propaganda methods used by the state were still largely based on text. In the first months of the war, official attempts to influence public opinion were limited to dictating the choice of photographers to be sent to the front and the selection of photographs to be published through accreditation and censorship measures. The first war photographs to be printed in the press were thus taken by photographers traveling to the front on behalf of newspapers and magazines, and not on behalf of the army (idem). After 1916, all belligerents intensified their visual propaganda efforts. For example, in January 1917, the "Photo and Film Office" appeared in Germany, which was to ensure the supply of photographic propaganda material for the press and to facilitate the production of propaganda films.

Regarding recent research on visual propaganda that refers to the post-World War II period, researcher Cora Sol Goldstein analyzes in Capturing the German eye : American visual propaganda in occupied Germany (2009) the methods used by the US to democratize Germany of the West after the Second World War. The work highlights the political climate of Germany between 1945 and 1949, and the confrontation between the United States and the USSR. During this period, the American occupiers actively competed with their Soviet counterparts for control of Germany's visual culture, deploying films, photographs, and fine arts while censoring images that contradicted their political messages. Goldstein believes that visual propaganda is as important as verbal messages. Images are often more effective than words in capturing the viewer's attention and triggering emotions. In visual representations, the audience assumes that what they see has already happened, that it exists, that it is true. Visual images are extremely important in interpreting the environment, shaping how we view ourselves and others (Goldstein 2009, pp.2-3).

Griffin (2015, p.1646) believes that visual elements constitute the earliest forms of religious and political propaganda. Mass-produced posters, photographs and films enhanced the emotional impact of visual propaganda, particularly in the years during and after the First World War. The power attributed to visual images lies in shaping and manipulating the viewer's perceptions. Belief in this power fueled the use of images in political propaganda. For example, Cull, Culbert and Welch (2003) believe that Theodor Herzl and members of the Zionist movement pioneered the use of visual propaganda. The aforementioned authors claim that Theodor Herzl believed it was essential for people to "think in pictures." The earliest visual materials of Herzlian Zionism were the postcards and delegate cards produced for the event dedicated to the First Zionist Congress (p.190).

4. Forms of visual propaganda :

The poster. Until the 15th century, apart from coins, there was no means of duplicating images on a large scale. With the development of printing, it was possible to produce visual materials as well as texts in large quantities and in transportable forms. The development of metal engravings represented a significant breakthrough in the development of visual propaganda. At that time, the image, often accompanied by text, could be widely distributed as sheets or pamphlets. These visual imprints were intended to elucidate current events for the common man, focusing largely on religious or political themes. This new form of visual communication determined a new profession, that of engraver-artist. For example, Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) was a master engraver whose work was of enormous help to Martin Luther's propaganda campaign against the Roman Catholic Church. These early propaganda prints were sold on the streets and were widely distributed and were the precursor to the extensive use of printed matter in the development of propaganda techniques in the modern era.

Photography - The advent of photography in the 1830s created an entirely new possibility of increasing the effectiveness and emotional impact of visual propaganda. By the 1860s, the use of photography as a dramatic illustration of the horrors of war or the plight of impoverished populations had become a form of propaganda, despite the fact that such photographs were often staged as a means of influencing public opinion (Jowett 2015, p. 494). Since the 19th century, the most famous researchers in the field of propaganda, Harold Laswell (1927), Jacques Ellul (1965) have written about the relationship between propaganda and photography. Likewise, Naomi Rosenblum's (1997) A World History of Photography presents the history of images in the print media, not only from a technological perspective, but also from the perspective of the use of photography in propaganda.

By the early 19th century, photographs could be mechanically reproduced in print, and between the two world wars, illustrated magazines such as the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung and Münchner Illustrierte Presse* in Germany, Vu in France, Picture Post in the UK and Life and Look in the US they provided the public with mostly visual news. Photography proved to be a particularly powerful propaganda tool in the hands of experienced photographers such as Robert Capra, Dorothea Lange or Heinrich Hoffman. Heinrich Hoffman's images of Adolf Hitler contributed greatly to Nazi iconography, being present in almost every home in Nazi Germany.

Today, the use of photographs continues to be a major weapon in the propaganda arsenal, but the digitization of photography and the potential for image manipulation has created both the potential for greater "agitatory creativity" and a growing distrust of the pictorial image as an indication of " reality".

Films - Propaganda films were produced to influence people's opinions or behavior, often by providing deliberately misleading content (Oza 2020). As early as the 1890s, films were shown in British and American cinemas for propaganda purposes (idem). During the First World War, cinema was so popular with international audiences that films became an integral part of the "official" propaganda activities of most governments.
Other forms of visual propaganda include symbols, events, visual arts, body language.

5. Visual propaganda from the perspective of the development of new technologies and the Internet :

The Internet provides important channels for propaganda, as well as easy access to information, often enhanced by visual images and audio. Thus, the digital communication environment changes the propaganda activities. The Internet provides direct and global access to the target audience at no additional cost, enabling media transfer (Jowett and O'Donnell 2006, p.367). Thus, propagandists take advantage of the different effects of communication modes on recipients because, for example, images evoke more emotions than text (Smith-Rodden and Ash 2012). In the article dedicated to visual propaganda in the online environment, Dauber and Winkler (2014) refer to the use of the online environment as a tool to propagate the message because it is an anonymous, safe and cheap space. From the analysis of the article, it appears that visual propaganda can manifest itself in the form of videos and films on YouTube.

Recent works address the subject of visual propaganda in relation to new technologies and the development of the Internet. For example, some studies analyze images on Facebook in the context of military conflicts (Seo and Ebrahim 2016), (Seo 2014), other research investigates the concept of dark visual propaganda from the online environment (Hashemi and Hall 2019) or visual propaganda from the perspective of extremism and terrorism (Baele, Boyd and Coan 2020). Walsh believes that visual propaganda has a manipulative effect, so that the public acts in accordance with the will of the propagandist. Also, in times of conflict, visual propaganda is particularly widespread and effective (Wintour, 2014, p. 238).

Hansen (2011) attributes to the visual a specific character of "circulability and ambiguity" (p. 55). "Circulability" refers to the fact that images spread rapidly around the world and throughout social consciousness. In the age of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, images can spread globally in seconds. Another dynamic, particularly effective for propagandists, is that human beings are now exposed to graphic images they have no intention of seeing. Anyone can open social media and see an image that triggers emotions. Therefore, "the possibility of seeing – even if one chooses not to see that image – is itself an important aspect" (Hansen 2011, p.57) of visual propaganda. In the context of the above, Stocchetti, (2014) investigating the concept of digital visuality, believes that technology facilitates the use of visual communication for political propaganda (p.3). Moreover, digital technology only facilitates the use of images, increasing the political and military value of visual propaganda.   The social meaning of images and the political effectiveness of their use depend on the nature of the ideology and the quality of the organization involved in the struggle, respectively (p.13).

According to Bryder (2008), the content of visual propaganda has meaning not only in a cognitive or semantic sense, but also in an emotional and evaluative sense. It implies that there is an individual or a group that gives meaning to visual messages and that such a message has a political connotation, because it aims to persuade the public in issues related to the objectives of a state. In general, people do not determine the meaning of an image in a contextual vacuum without recourse to prior experiences. Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) state that, at a psychological level, the mental schemas we have can be determined and activated by the frames through which the media present issues, events and people. The central idea, valid both for researchers in the field of visual studies and for the public, is that the interpretation of a visual element involves more than the image itself.

Given the ongoing neurobiological research into how the human brain works, often reacting initially emotionally before consciously considering rational arguments, it is imperative that contemporary audiences are visually literate. Digital technologies create a need for visual literacy, as today one can easily modify/create photos or videos on the Internet. Understanding the nature of images, how they convey a message and have meaning, how they can present arguments are essential knowledge for all contemporary social media and internet users (Fahmy, Bock and Wanta 2015, p.90).

6. CONCLUSIONS:

Visual elements content is an essential part of communication, whether we refer to political, social or economic communication. The emergence of digital communication technologies has made the role of visual elements in communication more prominent, as people opt for easy-to-understand content and share attention-grabbing images through social media channels. Thus, the images help to maximize the desired effects, causing strong emotions. In the study of visual propaganda, the way of organizing and presenting images to convince the public about a certain subject in the attention of society takes priority.

REFERENCES:
1. Alper, Meryl. 2013. "War on Instagram: Framing conflict photojournalism with mobile photography apps." New Media Society (SAGE). Accessed Februarie 4, 2022. doi: 10.1177/1461444813504265.

2. Brantner, C., K. Lobinger, and I. Wetzstein. 2011. "Effects of Visual Framing on Emotional Responses and Evaluations of News Stories about the Gaza Conflict 2009." Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 88 (3): 523-540. Accessed March 4, 2022. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/38282220/Effects_of_Visual_Framing_on_Emotional_Responses_and_Evaluations_of_News_Stories_about_the_Gaza_Conflict_2009-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1649324905&Signature=MBONkCfQ4RGHlo~KgbIg06Snjs32XwK5OcmL0EOS3EUdFS.

3. Bryder, Tom. 2008. "Conceptual elements for a theory of visual political propaganda." Psicología Política 37: 101-117.

4. Cheles, Luciano. 2010. "Back to the future. The visual propaganda of Alleanza Nazionale." Journal of Modern Italian Studies 15 (2): 232-311.

5. Domke, David, David Perlmutter, and Meg Spratt. 2002. "The primes of our times?An examination of the 'power' of visual images." Journalism 3 (2): 131-159. Accessed March 4, 2022. http://www.davidperlmutter-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/2002.-Domke-Perlmutter-Spratt.-THE-PRIMES-OF-OUR-TIMES-Journalism.-3-2-2002.pdf.

6. Fahmy, Shahira, Mary Angela Bock, and Wayne Wanta. 2014. Visual Communication Theory and Research: A Mass Communication Perspective. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

7. Green, Leanne. 2014. "Call to arms." Index on Censorship 43 (1): 45-49. doi:10.1177/0306422014523380.

8. Groarke, L. 2002. "Toward a Pragma-Dialectics of Visual Argument." In Advances in Pragma-Dialectics, by F. H. van Eemeren, 137-151. Willersey: Vale Press.

9. Harlow, Summer. 2014. "Social Media and Social Movements: Facebook and an OnlineGuatemalan Justice Movement that Moved Offline." New Media & Society 14 (2): 225-243.

10. Jowett, Garath, și Victoria O'Donnell. 2019. Propaganda and Persuasion. 7th. Londra: SAGE.

11. Melki, Jad. 2014. "The interplay of politics, economics and culture in news framing of Middle East wars." Media, War and Conflict 7 (2): 165-186.

12. Perlmutter, David, and Gretchen Wagner. 2004. "The anatomy of a photojournalistic icon: marginalization of dissent in the selection and framing of 'a death in Genoa'." Visual Communication. doi:DOI: 10.1177/1470357204039600.

13. Richardson, J.E., and R. Wodak. 2009. "The impact of visual racism: Visual arguments in political leaflets of Austrian and British Far-right Parties." Controversia 6 (2): 45-77.

14. Scheufele, Dietram A. 1999. "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects." Journal of Communication 49 (1): 103-122.

15. Scheufele, Dietram, and David Tewksbury. 2007. "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models." Journal of Communication 9-20.

16. Seo, Hyunjin, and Husain Ebrahim. 2016. "Visual Propaganda on Facebook:A Comparative Analysis of Syrian Conflicts." Media, War & Conflict 9 (3): 227-251. Accessed February 3, 2022. https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/27615/Seo_2016_VisualPropaganda.pdf?sequence=1.