

News Literacy Lecturer's Background Pack

Lecture Title: Verification

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(Dean Miller's prelude to the News Fellows' materials)

I've felt in the past that we did not quite capture the degree to which our culture is besotted with images, particularly moving images. Mitchell Stephens, the NYU professor who somewhat famously predicted "*Perhaps we will soon locate our video at sites on the World Wide Web*" seven years before YouTube was created is a pretty smart chronicler of the way TV took over our lives. He's only partly a bemoaner. I'm guilty of confirmation bias in that he expresses my belief that we have not yet seen video's mature form, since it is largely modeled on the ancient formalities of tragedy and comedy. I'm going to try to verify and then use the Steve Jobs remark that the WorldWideWeb was going to be very important...but not as profoundly important as the first time people saw television.

I didn't have access to digital text, so I was reduced to screengrabs from the Amazon.com sample pages. What follows is a set of screen-grabs from the intro and yes it does begin *in medias res* with "*It is...*"

"The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word" by Mitchell Stephens, 1998, Oxford University Press

It is only the opening to a longer program—the first ninety-six seconds of a one-hour 1995 ABC documentary about changes in American churches.* In those ninety-six seconds fewer than two hundred words are spoken—some by the reporter, Peter Jennings, some by ministers and church members. A book or newspaper reader could probably digest twice as many words in that period of time.

Yet those ninety-six seconds, the work of a young producer named Roberta Goldberg, also feature fifty-one different images, most showing separate scenes: churchgoers praying, laughing, weeping and collapsing; a Christian stage show; a congregation joining in aerobics; ministers preaching; ministers using show-business techniques; ministers defending their use of show-business techniques. Intercut are pictures of religious icons, bending and blurring. Three candles are shown blowing out. Additional images are sometimes superimposed. Words from the Bible flash on the screen. Ethereal yet insistent music plays. Cameras dart here and there.

This piece uses techniques that have begun appearing with greater and greater frequency in some of the less prestigious corners of television and film—in promotional announcements, commercials, music videos, title sequences, sports highlights and trailers, and occasionally

in news stories or on public TV. The piece has an almost balletlike beauty, but it is not particularly profound. It is, after all, only the introduction to an otherwise traditional documentary; it lasts less than two minutes. (I will describe other, more ambitious examples later in the book.)

However, this segment of videotape, like its young cousins elsewhere on our screens, does manage to impart a remarkable amount of information and impressions in that short period of time—to the point where the more conventionally edited one-hour documentary that follows begins to seem superfluous. This brief introduction, therefore, suggests that images—fast-cut moving images mixed with some words and music—have the potential to communicate at least as efficiently and effectively as printed words.

Although moving images are gaining responsibility for more and more of our communication, this is a suggestion most of us have great difficulty accepting.

Perhaps it was John F. Kennedy's handsome face or the opportunity most Americans had to watch his funeral. Maybe the turning point came with the burning huts of Vietnam, the flags and balloons of the Reagan presidency or Madonna's writhings on MTV. But at some point in the second half of the twentieth century—for perhaps the first time in human history—it began to seem as if images would gain the upper hand over words.

We know this. Evidence of the growing popularity of images has been difficult to ignore. It has been available in most of our bedrooms and living rooms, where the machine most responsible for the image's rise has long dominated the decor. Evidence has been available in the shift in home design from bookshelves to "entertainment centers," from libraries to "family rooms" or, more accurately, "TV rooms." Evidence has been available in our children's facility with remote controls and joysticks, and their lack of facility with language. Evidence has been available almost any evening in almost any town in the world, where a stroller will observe a blue light in most of the windows and a notable absence of porch sitters, gossip mongers and other strollers.

We are—old and young—hooked. While he was vice president of the United States, Dan Quayle embarked upon a minor crusade against television. It took him to an elementary school in Georgia. "Are you going to study hard?" the vice president asked a roomful of third-graders. "Yeah!" they shouted back. "And are you going to work hard and mind the teacher?" "Yeah!" And are you going to turn off the TV during school nights?" "No!" the students yelled.² When children

between the ages of four and six were asked whether they like television or their fathers better, 54 percent of those sampled chose TV.³

Evidence of the image's growing dominance, particularly among the young, can be found too in my house, a word lover's house, where increasingly the TV is always on in the next room. (I am not immune to worries about this; nothing in the argument to come is meant to imply that my attempt to guide my children or myself through this transitional period has been easy.)

Television began its invasion about fifty years ago. The extent to which it has taken over—familiar as the statistics may be—remains dazzling. No medium or technology, before or after, "penetrated," as the researchers put it, our homes more quickly. It took seventy years before half of all American homes had a telephone. Apple sold its first all-in-one personal computer in 1977; IBM, which began selling computers to businesses in 1952, sold its first personal computer in 1981. It is true that processing chips are now imbedded in our cars and coffee makers; nevertheless, as this is written, personal computers themselves have still not found their way into half of America's homes, and a percentage of those that have made it there sit mostly unused. Yet it took only eight years, after the arrival of full-scale commercial television in 1947, before half of all American homes had a black-and-white television set.⁴ And disuse is not a fate likely to befall a TV.⁴

A television set is now on in the average American home up to, depending on the time of year, eight hours a day—which means, subtracting time for work or school and sleep, basically all the time.† We each sit in front of a TV an average of anywhere from two and a half to almost five hours a day, depending on which estimate or survey you believe.⁵ The average fifth-grader *reports* (they likely are underestimating) spending almost seven times as much time each day watching television as reading.⁶ We are as attached, as addicted to television as we, as a society, have been to any other invention, communications medium, art form or drug.

Recently, it is true, television has begun to seem like yesterday's invention. Digital communications have mesmerized the technologically advanced and have won most of the press. Tens of millions of people have already begun using computers and the Internet to work, send written messages, shop, do research, and explore new corners of our culture—all with unprecedented speed and efficiency. This is certainly impressive. But television, which is less than a generation older than the computer, has already won over humankind.⁷

Reliable global statistics are hard to come by, but the evidence indicates that almost three billion people are already watching televi-

sion regularly, for an average of more than two and a half hours a day, according to one international survey.⁸ That means most of the world's inhabitants are now devoting about half their leisure time to an activity that did not exist two generations ago. Most of the rest are held back only by the lack of electricity or the money to buy a set.

Why? Television's unprecedented appeal rests in large part on the easily accessible, seemingly inexhaustible diversions it supplies. But it goes beyond that. We have not sufficiently recognized the power of moving images. There is a magic in their ability to appear on command in our homes, and there is a magic in them, a magic that may come to dwarf that of other forms of communication.

"The [World Wide] Web is going to be very important," computer pioneer Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple Computer, was quoted as saying in 1996. But then he added, "It's certainly not going to be like the first time somebody saw a television.... It's not going to be *that* profound."⁹ It would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of our new digital communications systems, particularly their likely role in distributing moving images, but video remains the communications revolution of our time.

News Fellows Contributions Start Here

1. A Visual Culture.

Aristotle's Metaphysics -

"All men [sic] by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our sense; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." [Metaphysics A, I (980a) - Ross translation]

Of course you can find Aristotle elsewhere claiming the paramount importance of other senses (touch in De Anima, where he claims that thin-skin is a mark of intelligence, and hearing somewhere else that I can't remember, when he argues that the way bees communicate can't possibly be language since they can't hear and hearing is the necessary sense to be possessed by language users). But the point of noting this remark would be to show that "visuo-centrism" is nothing new.

And Aristotle wasn't first on the scene either. Some degree of visuo-centrism is present in Genesis 1, since the first day is concerned with the creation of light and its distinction from darkness. Light remains a metaphor for knowledge/the conditions for knowledge in Plato's Republic with the analogy of the form of the Good to the sun (in the analogy of the "divided line" to the allegory of the cave).

Perhaps a more incisive critique of the recent development of our culture (one that tracks our flight from books to radio and television, and more recently online video content) is the increasing passivity of our media consumption. Books are still visual, but must be actively read and interpreted. Radio-listening is more passive, but some degree of active interpretation is still present. Less so for TV, and even less so for the internet if we take a key difference of the internet to be that it enables video content to find us rather than us finding it. Most of us "find" online videos because we have received some link to them, and those videos almost always are accompanied by links to still more (anyone who has ever accidentally killed an hour on youtube knows how this works).

2. Nixon-Kennedy Debate of 1960

21 second joke video about why people didn't like the seeing Nixon on TV
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0BdMDhtYfg&feature=related>

Don Hewitt on the 1960 "Great Debates" (5:08)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbdfALM2sLk>

Don Hewitt was there. Offered Nixon make-up. Hewitt believed Nixon refused because Kennedy refused make-up. Kennedy didn't need make-up. Nixon did. Hewitt tells the story.

It is widely held that Kennedy's campaign utilized this medium better than Nixon's. Nixon (the incumbent vice president) had been campaigning on the issue of maturity and experience, claiming to have the edge over Kennedy. However, after the debate, these issues ceased to be

key ones in the election, ostensibly due to the poise Kennedy demonstrated in the debate. Kennedy addressed the television audience directly, while Nixon addressed many of his remarks to Kennedy. Kennedy wore a dark blue suit that stood out from the grey background, while Nixon wore a grey suit that blended in to the background. Nixon did not wear makeup, while Kennedy (though he refused makeup in front of Nixon) did wear makeup. After the first televised debate, Nixon's mother called him to ask if he was sick (suggesting that he did not come off well in the televised images). 4 million made up their minds in the 1960's election based on the televised debates (3 million in favor of Kennedy). While most who watched the debates perceived Kennedy to be the winner, most who listened to the debates on the radio thought that Nixon won.

Those numbers were taken from the video (link provided above). However, here is another corroborating source, which in turn cites a CBS poll for verification

<http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/kc-unbound/kennedy-vs-nixon-behind-scenes-1960>

(Note from Adam Rosenfeld..."Unfortunately, I was unable to find any hard numbers that would inform an analysis of more recent elections - and my hypothesis that the internet amplifies televised debate "gaffes" is, while plausible, not supported by data. An extremely unscientific indicator of this might be the extent to which comedy shows (*Leno, Conan, Letterman, SNL*- which may or may not be a reliable barometer of what is and isn't in the popular consciousness) seize upon these blunders. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any data on this either, though net searches for videos lampooning the examples mentioned yielded far more for the more recent examples (though this, in turn, may be explainable by the fact that web-content skews toward more recent events rather than serving as evidence that older gaffes went less noticed than more recent ones").)

3. Obama-McCain Debate of 2007

The 2008 election saw a similar matchup which McCain's campaign tried to define in terms of experience and maturity, with the claim that Obama, having only served two years as a US senator in comparison to McCain's 25 years of congressional service. While McCain's age spoke to his experience, in televised performances, especially the debates, it was easy for Democratic strategists to portray him as too old (either feeble or senile) in an election where the threat of terrorism made strength (real or perceived) a key quality that many voters were sensitive to. McCain's inability to raise his arms above his shoulders (due to injuries sustained while a POW in Vietnam) and his notorious practice of wandering around the stage in the 2nd televised debate (spoofed that week by Conan O'Brian, Jay Leno, Jon Stewart and Saturday Night Live) reflected poorly on television.

One aspect of contemporary televised campaigning that is very different from that of the 1960's is the ease with which video can be edited and distributed by ordinary citizens online.

Consequently, verbal tic's like McCain's "my friends" can be amplified (to the amusement of some and the chagrin of the candidate) - as in this video from gawker...

<http://gawker.com/5060531/old-man-mccains-friends-very-disappointed-in-him>. Similar rhetorical gaffs and other non-verbal missteps go viral (<http://jezebel.com/5060377/mccain-on-obama-that-one>, or <http://gawker.com/5060382/did-mccain-snub-obamas-handshake>). Compare

this to a similar non-verbal blunder, namely G.H.W. Bush checking his watch in his 1992 debate with Clinton and Perot while an audience member was asking about how any of these candidates can be sensitive to the economic distress of those bearing the brunt of the recession, or Al Gore's audible sigh and headshake in his debate with G.W.Bush. These were picked up and discussed, and likely impacted their respective elections, but, one might argue, were less present in the public consciousness.

4. Viewing Habits in the Age of TiVo

From the Pew Research Center for People and the Press:

"More Americans have the technology to digitally record television programs – 45% now have a TiVo or DVR, up from 35% just two years ago, and nearly double the proportion that had one in 2006. But only 24% of those with a TiVo or DVR have programmed it to regularly record any news programs. This is little changed from two years ago (22%), even though the share of Americans who have a TiVo or DVR has grown."

"One-in-four adults (25%) who have Tivos or DVRs say they program them to record news programs."

"When it comes to newer technologies, 8% regularly get news on their cell phone or smartphone, 7% regularly get news through social networking sites and 5% regularly watch or listen to news podcasts. "

"With the availability of the internet and 24-hour news channels, nearly six-in-ten Americans (57%) say they are the kind of people who check in on the news from time to time, as opposed to getting the news at regular times. That is up from 51% in 2008 and 48% in 2006. The percentage saying they are more likely to get their news at regular times has dropped from 50% in 2006 to 45% in 2008 to 38% today. Young people have long been more likely than older Americans to say they check in on the news rather than getting news on a regular schedule. That remains the case today, but “news grazing” has become much more common among older age groups."

5. Hany Farid

Hany Farid is a Dartmouth College professor who specializes in detecting manipulation of photos.

On his website he has a gallery of photo manipulation and digital tampering:

<http://www.cs.dartmouth.edu/farid/research/digitaltampering/>

Recent article on Hany Farid:

“Hany Farid, Dartmouth Scientist, Says Controversial Oswald Rifle Photo Real”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/05/hany-farid-dartmouth-scie_n_347862.html

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6. 9/11 and the photo of the jumping man.

Esquire did a story on trying to figure out who was the man in the photo of the falling man on 9/11:

http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN

“In most American newspapers, the photograph that Richard Drew took of the Falling Man ran once and never again. Papers all over the country, from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram to the Memphis Commercial Appeal to The Denver Post, were forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography. Most letters of complaint stated the obvious: that someone seeing the picture had to know who it was. Still, even as Drew's photograph became at once iconic and impermissible, its subject remained unnamed. An editor at the Toronto Globe and Mail assigned a reporter named Peter Cheney to solve the mystery. Cheney at first despaired of his task; the entire city, after all, was wallpapered with Kinkoed flyers advertising the faces of the missing and the lost and the dead. Then he applied himself, sending the digital photograph to a shop that clarified and enhanced it. Now information emerged: It appeared to him that the man was most likely not black but dark-skinned, probably Latino. He wore a goatee. And the white shirt billowing from his black pants was not a shirt but rather appeared to be a tunic of some sort, the kind of jacket a restaurant worker wears. Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the North Tower, lost seventy-nine of its employees on September 11, as well as ninety-one of its patrons. It was likely that the Falling Man numbered among them. But which one was he? Over dinner, Cheney spent an evening discussing this question with friends, then said goodnight and walked through Times Square. It was after midnight, eight days after the attacks. The missing posters were still everywhere, but Cheney was able to focus on one that seemed to present itself to him -- a poster portraying a man who worked at Windows as a pastry chef, who was dressed in a white tunic, who wore a goatee, who was Latino. His name was Norberto Hernandez. He lived in Queens. Cheney took the enhanced print of the Richard Drew photograph to the family, in particular to Norberto Hernandez's brother Tino and sister Milagros. They said yes, that was Norberto. Milagros had watched footage of the people jumping on that terrible morning, before the television stations stopped showing it. She had seen one of the jumpers distinguished by the grace of his fall -- by his resemblance to an Olympic diver -- and surmised that he had to be her brother. Now she saw, and she knew. All that remained was for Peter Cheney to confirm the identification with Norberto's wife and his three daughters. They did not want to talk to him, especially after Norberto's remains were found and identified by the stamp of his DNA -- a torso, an arm. So he went to the funeral. He brought his print of Drew's photograph with him and showed it to Jacqueline Hernandez, the oldest of Norberto's three daughters. She looked briefly at the picture, then at Cheney, and ordered him to leave.

What Cheney remembers her saying, in her anger, in her offended grief: "That piece of shit is not my father."

Further in the article, there is another possible man:

"Yes, Jonathan Briley might be the Falling Man. But the only certainty we have is the certainty we had at the start: At fifteen seconds after 9:41 a.m., on September 11, 2001, a photographer named Richard Drew took a picture of a man falling through the sky -- falling through time as well as through space. The picture went all around the world, and then disappeared, as if we willed it away. One of the most famous photographs in human history became an unmarked grave, and the man buried inside its frame -- the Falling Man -- became the Unknown Soldier in a war whose end we have not yet seen. Richard Drew's photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves. The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment."

7. From Vietnam War, Photo of Kim Phuc running down road after Napalm blast.

The photograph was taken by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for the image.

Also, there exist video of a scene that resembles the photo:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oJDaIebZJk&feature=related>

From Wikipedia: "The publication of the photo was delayed due to the AP bureau's debate about transmitting a naked girl's photo over the wire:

"...an editor at the AP rejected the photo of Kim Phuc running down the road without clothing because it showed frontal nudity. Pictures of nudes of all ages and sexes, and especially frontal views were an absolute no-no at the Associated Press in 1972...Horst argued by telex with the New York head-office that an exception must be made, with the compromise that no close-up of the girl Kim Phuc alone would be transmitted. The New York photo editor, Hal Buell, agreed that the news value of the photograph overrode any reservations about nudity."

Thom Steinbeck (eldest son of writer John Steinbeck) served in Vietnam and then returned as a combat photographer. In this interview he speaks about how many of the photographers hoped that with the "right" image, they would stop the war. He expresses his frustration that this did not happen in the following clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qX5HQGEE1p0&feature=related>