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Approaching Protest with Affect: An Analysis of the Images Spread by News Media During the George Floyd Protests

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APPROACHING PROTEST WITH AFFECT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGES

SPREAD BY NEWS MEDIA DURING THE GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS

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by

Kenneth Ward

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
    College of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Kenneth Ward, and entitled Approaching Protest with Affect: An Analysis of the Images Spread by News Media During the George Floyd Protests, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: November 10, 2021

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Florida International University, 2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

Kenneth Ward

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Luke Thominet Major Professor

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the characteristics of images that are most prevalent in news media coverage of the George Floyd Protests during 2020. To do so, I have examined gallery images from nine different news source which cover the gamut of the entire political spectrum.

Through my research, it was determined that the characteristics found in the images correlated greatly with the political leanings of the publication, with right-wing publications far more likely to depict scenes of meaningless violence, and left-wing publications far more likely to show linguistic messaging and images of group solidarity.

In conclusion, my research shows that affective responses to visual stimuli greatly determines whether an image circulates on a particular news media publication, and suggests way social justice activists can use affect and visual rhetorics to spread their message.

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Introduction

What are the qualities of an image that make it resonate? Of the innumerable images of protest that exist in the public discourse, there are always some iconic images chosen through public discourse to effectively represent a movement, a time, or an ideology. If activists could use principles of rhetoric to create more resonant, powerful images, this would undoubtedly be advantageous to social justice efforts. While this task is complex and filled with variables, this study seeks to illuminate some of the driving forces behind image circulation, determine what characteristics cause an image to capture the public Zeitgeist, and achieve broad media circulation. To do so, I will be looking at the images of the protest movements of 2020 to determine what photographic tactics best aided in the circulation of images and show what lessons can be learned from the circulation of these images by social justice activists moving forward.

As WBUR in Boston puts it, 2020 was a year defined by "Pandemic. Politics. Protest" (WBUR, 2020). Tensions regarding the mistreatment of Black Americans by law enforcement, along with global uncertainty regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, boiled over into a period of social unrest. During the protests that occurred during the summer of 2020—from here on referred to as the George Floyd protests—images captured the experiences and emotions of a rising social movement.

While this event was far from the first massive protest movement documented by boots-on-the-ground photographers, the George Floyd protests were notable for the instant distribution of images due to social media platforms (Won, 2017), the overwhelming influence of citizen journalists (rather than professional photographers), and the dichotomous environment between people on the ground and people who chose

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to stay at home for various reasons (many due to pandemic-related health concerns). Due to the mass circulation of web-based media, the images from these protests were both far-reaching and easily accessible. Every news outlet in America took part in the mass distribution of photography from these protests, and undoubtedly, they had a key role in the global perspective on the Black Lives Matter protests and movement as a whole (Edrington, Gallagher, 2019).

Photography as a medium has historically brought attention to dozens of protest movements internationally. It has shown the empowerment of subjugated individuals railing against injustice, and it has highlighted the suffering of oppressed ethnicities and social classes (Carrol, 2021). Conversely, photography has been used by people in power to disparage and demean protest movements as "violent, unruly and destructive" (Ali, 2017). Considering the rhetorically potent nature of photography, and the immense affective response photography evokes in the general population, agents have often used photography to make political gains and to demonize oppositional factions. (Ali, 2017).

The affective, emotionally powerful nature of photography has been observed by scholars for many decades (Edwards, 2012; Sontag, 1977; Barthes, 1981), and burgeoning theoretical studies like New Materialism have broached into the subject of digital circulation (Gries, 2015). In this project, I utilize concepts of affect theory to analyze the circulation of digital imagery by focusing a lens on the George Floyd protests of 2020. To do so, I have collected the images posted on the most widely visited news websites spanning the entire gamut of the American political spectrum, and developed a coding system for their common photographic elements. By examining the elements of

each photograph, I have analyzed what elements these media sources use to evoke affective responses, whether negative or positive, in their respective audiences.

My analysis confirms that within the United States, the rhetorical battle lines drawn between left-leaning and right-leaning media extends to the way these news sources show photographs of protest. Affect is a powerful force in the circulation of images, but the ways that left-leaning and right-leaning media sources evoke affect is fundamentally different. Because images evoke strong affective responses, it is my argument, then, that affective responses determine whether a protest image will circulate, and more specifically, that different news sources on the political spectrum will value different affective responses when choosing which protest images to circulate.

This work is designed to potentially help social justice efforts, by cataloguing elements which potentially form successful, widely circulated protest imagery. Moving forward, activists should consider the ways that the images they circulate evoke affective responses in their audience. While there are always oppositional elements which seek to debase protest movements, and misinform the public through evoking fear and paranoia, it is important that activists for social justice bring context to the forefront. As my work shows, meaningful slogans, along with visual rhetorical cues help frame affective experiences, which then serve as motivators for action. (Demos, 2019). This study is designed to inform activists for social justice efforts, as well as to aid in academic research focused on digital rhetorics, visual rhetorics, and affect studies.

To begin, I review the literature on circulation, digital and visual rhetorics, and affect. Then, I use content analysis to show that by using qualitative data, it is apparent that different affective responses to protest imagery influence the ways in which images

circulate through the media. I also get into the specifics of how the different political ideologies of news sources affect the types of affective responses evoked by the images of protest they circulate. Finally, I discuss the results of this analysis, examine the practical and academic implications of my research, and propose ways that this research can be used to benefit social justice efforts moving forward.

Literature Review

Research on protest photography pulls together concepts from many different sub-disciplines in the field of rhetoric: circulation studies, digital rhetorical studies, and affect theory all play an important role in the development of my methodological system and subsequent analysis. Using my analysis and prior work in these fields, I posit that there may be a more concise approach to affect social change through the circulation of digital images.

The concept of visual rhetorics serves as a foundational piece to my study. In particular, I am indebted to Roland Barthes's conception of the *punctum* and *studium* (Barthes, 1981, p. 25-27). This distinction is defined as "... the general basis of that subject's presumed interest for an average viewer (the studium), and whatever that photograph may contain that engages and—Barthes's verbs—'pricks' or 'wounds' or 'bruises' a particular viewer's subjectivity in a way that makes the photograph in question singularly arresting [the punctum] ..." (Fried, 2005, p. 539). Barthes's conception of the *punctum* informs much of the processes by which I approach the rhetorical analysis of my data set. This is often characterized as the element of a photograph which captivates the audience, and as Barthes puts it, "a detail which overwhelms the entirety of [a] reading… [the] intense mutation of… interest" (Barthes,

1981, p. 49). Scholarly work has noted how the subjective perception of the *punctum* is invariably tied to ideology and affect. Jenkins (2012) notes "Barthes's *punctum* as an instance of sharp or punctuated affection and his elucidation of the experience in *Camera Lucida* as its translation into the subjective—emotion, reason, language." The "presubjective" (Jenkins, 2012), affective response to protest photography informs much of the analysis performed within this study.

Beyond visual rhetorics, affect theory is the primary theoretical frame for my research. According to Claire Hemmings, affect "broadly refers to states of being, rather than to their manifestation or interpretation as emotions. For psychoanalysis affects are "the qualitative expression of our drives, energy and variations... are what enable drives to be satisfied and what tie us to the world" (Hemmings, 2005). Since, as Hemmings and others have noted, affect is the primary motivator in the human psyche (Demos, 2019), it could therefore be viewed as the visceral intuitive force that drives the intensity of one's reaction to a photograph. Furthermore, it is the affective power of photography on the individual that often creates the environment for broader social change. The embodied nature of affect is further defined by Seigworth and Gregg (2011) as "those intensities that pass body to body… in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (Gregg, Seigworth, 2011, p. 1). Elsewhere, Gregg has observed that affect is the "actions of bodies that forces [us] to feel" (Gregg, 2011, p. 263). In this study, I explore the embodied experience that drives the psychological consumption of images and specific elements in images that evoke the intensities and resonances previously touched upon by Gregg and Seigworth.

Furthermore, I will build connections between affect theory approaches, visual rhetorics, and circulation.

Exploration of the rhetorical power of protest photography and its effect on public discourse has been examined for decades. Some scholars have noted the expansion of protest photography into the digital sphere and its ability to motivate and affect political actors, due to the omnipresence and accessibility of protest photography on digital platforms. Thus, there is a need to acknowledge the value of a public discourse revolving around the digital circulation of protest photography. In this vein, Cram et al. (2016) note that

> … contemporary protests… produce an extraordinary number of digital photographs, captured by professional photojournalists, activists, everyday citizens, and police surveillance. In turn, networked spectators encounter images of protest that circulate well beyond the locales in which they are produced, becoming part of a global public discourse that generates worldwide linkages between specific protest tactics, performances of dissent, and confrontations with authority. (p. 1)

In other words, the circulation of digital protest photography directly contributes to global social justice efforts. As opposed to other times in history, protest movements are no longer primarily localized, and protests in one region of the globe can precede and influence others. One example of this is the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest movement inspiring the #AllPapuanLivesMatter movement in Indonesia (Westerman, et al., 2020). Cram, et al. also note the implicit borderlessness of digital image circulation and the affect that images of protest from different global locales can evoke in others, creating a

rhetorical discourse based primarily on struggle against authority devoid of nationalistic or ethnocentric concerns.

Other work has focused on the way that digital information systems—and digital circulation—can either inform or deconstruct anti-racist ideologies. As Sarah Laiola notes, "information systems of language and vision [are] those that (in)form the ideology of race." Focusing specifically on the Black Lives Matter protest movement, Laiola states "BLM's efficacy comes as much from its identification of institutional racism in policing as from its insistence that blackness (a visible color that semiotically marks race) be fundamental to lives that matter and that the matter (the material) of blackness be fundamental to life" (Laiola, 2018). Therefore, it stands to reason that the material concept of blackness informs digital rhetorics revolving around Black Lives Matter. To study the photographic rhetorics of the BLM movement, or more specifically the George Floyd protests of 2020, one must consider the race and implicit bias in the affectual perception of individual photographs. Scholars have noted that while images of Black people have never been more circulated, there are no technical fixes to racism (Kahn, 2018). Largely, this has much to do with the way Black figures are represented in media discourse by different agents. Thus, while advances have been made in the visual representation of Blackness in the digital sphere, more digital circulation does not necessarily equate to advances in anti-racism. When regarding the implicit bias of the consumer, one must also consider the implicit bias of media publications and the photos they choose to share.

Recent scholarly work has emphasized the role of virality in the circulation of digital images. In her work centering on the virality of the Obama Hope image, Laurie

Gries argued that there are limitations to focusing solely on print-oriented images, and the necessity to expand our understanding of the ephemeral nature of images to the digital sphere (Gries, 2013). Gries subsequently developed an "iconographic tracking" method to study how images move, "identify[ing] patterns and trends in an image's shifting form, medium, genre, location, collective engagement, and consequentiality" (Gries, 2013, p. 339). While Gries provides a framework for the tracking of rhetorical circulation, other studies have sought to explain why digital rhetorics circulate.

Some sources have noted the presence of economics and ecologies within networks of digital circulation. For example, Eyman (2015) translated Marxist ideas of circulation and Bourdeau's conception of *cultural capital* into the digital environment, noting the use and exchange-values by which we can view the circulation of digital objects. Objects hold even perhaps more rhetorical value when circulated digitally, according to Eyman, due to an increase in the object's exchange value. Eyman states "The production of digital objects endows them with use-value, but the motivation for production is grounded in the subjective exchange-value that is garnered through the distribution and publication (and ultimately circulation) of the texts" (Eyman, 2015, p. 91). When viewing any digital object, its subjective exchange value is garnered through the breadth of its circulation. Its rhetorical capital broadens as more people view, interact with, and share it. Eyman also emphasized that the circulation, and subsequent virality of images is based on a complex web of relationships between human and nonhuman actors. While there is a confluence of factors that cause a digital image to circulate, there is ultimately an interaction between "audience/reader," 'speaker/writer," and "communication/text" (Eyman, 2015, p. 93) that must be considered in the circulation of

images through the media. While there are nonhuman actors at play in the circulation of digital protest images—search engines, webpages, etc.— the relationship between publisher, text, and audience is still ultimately human.

One qualitative approach to understanding why images circulate in the digital environment was broached by Ling, et al, who composed a grounded theoretical approach to qualify the characteristics of "memes" which cause them to go viral (Ling et al., 2021). Based on their findings, they summarize that there are explicit visual characteristics of memes that lead them to be more viral (Ling et al., 2021). Through their research, they found "that certain features like the scale of an image, the presence of characters, of facial emotions, and of poses are particularly indicative of virality" (Ling et al., 2021). Expanding on this premise, there may be certain themes, attributes, or elements that contribute to the virality of other images, such as protest images, which can be discovered through further research.

Other research has noted the role of affect and visual rhetorics. The scholars Deluca and Brunner coined the term *affective winds* to describe the "movements of images, ideas, and groups of people" specifically in the digital sphere. They argue that affective forces can be shown through "panmediation," or the inescapable plurality of visual imagery. According to panmediation theory, images are both rampant and have affective forces far beyond that of language alone (Deluca; & Brunner 2016). In this study, I will use the concept of affective winds to analyze the circulation of protest imagery and observe how affective forces play a role in this circulation.

Finally, due to the particulars of the George Floyd protests, and the obvious implications of race and systemic inequities exposed through the protest movement, my

research will draw upon CRT (critical race theory) and systemic racism theory (Davenport, et al., 2011). Authors such as Malcolm James help contextualize modern-era digital media studies and the intersections between CRT and digital rhetorics. According to James (2020), "Through the networked media environment, the fascistic and racist ideas of these various actors spread. As they spread, the networked media environment's tendency to decontextualization and continual reinterpretation means bits of digital debris get scattered about. Some of these are 'racial debris' – fragments of digital material left behind for racist reconstruction" (p. 2372). It is important to understand and take note of how images portraying Black power and the fight for civil rights can be reappropriated for otherwise insidious means (those that are fascistic and racist in James's words). Thus, any findings must inform the continuous, evolving nature of political rhetoric, and the ability for anti-racist projects in rhetorical theory, of which this study seeks to be, can be transfigured into their anti-thesis by nefarious actors.

While there is a body of work focusing on the reasons why certain types of digital media achieve a level of circulation, and even work done on the visual rhetorics of protest images, there have been none so far published on the images that emerged from the 2020 protests. It is my goal to connect the elements of circulation theory and the *embodied* nature of affect. I will use methodological approaches which draw from Gries and Ling in part, but which also derive from a grounded theoretical approach—as defined below in the Methods section—to formulate a theory of image circulation analysis, which can add to the literature surrounding digital image circulation. More than this, this project seeks to inform and aid anti-racist activism, and its literature, with the hope that further

research can be drawn from this study which will discover the means and aims to use

digital rhetorics for the explicit cause of fighting for civil justice.

Methods

This study analyzed images posted on nine major news publications that had

posted galleries pertaining to the George Floyd protests. All of the galleries were

published between May and August 2020. I used conventional content analysis to build a

model by which to analyze characteristics of these images and discern trends from the

qualitative data set.

1. **Data Collection**

In my study, I am analyzing gallery images from nine news web

publications. The aims of this project will be twofold: 1) To analyze the characteristics

of images that may contribute to their publication and 2) To determine whether left-

leaning, centrist, or right-leaning political leanings influence the characteristics displayed

in circulated protest images. Furthermore, drawing upon affect theory, I analyze what

effect affective responses to images may have on individuals of various political leanings.

Understanding the inherent nature of the media echo chamber that many Americans live

in today (GCF Global, 2021), it is valuable to take note of what characteristics of images

may evoke particular affective responses in consumers. The publications used in this

study are CNN, NPR, AP, Vox, the New York Times, Fox News, the BBC, the Deseret

News, and the New York Post. The image galleries from these websites contained an

average of 70 photographs each, for a total of 556 photos. To create a more manageable

sample size with proportional representation from each site, I randomly selected five

images from each publication using the Google Random Number Generator (RNG.)

Because all of the images I am using are derived from galleries, I have used the Google Random Number Generator to provide a number between one and fifty. Once the number is generated, I refer to the webpage to find the matching image within the gallery. This method has been chosen to emphasize arbitrariness and objectivity among image selection, granting the implicit political bias of the news sources being used.

The news sources used in my study were chosen explicitly to show a range of political leanings, and to highlight the possibility of political bias leading to which images are chosen for publication. To ensure a wide spectrum of political variability, I relied upon the AllSides Media Bias Chart. According to the parameters of the AllSides Media Bias Chart, this left me with three left or center-left sources—CNN, Vox, The New York Times, three centrist sources—BBC, AP, NPR, and three right or center-right leaning sources—the Deseret News, the New York Post, and Fox News (AllSides). The AllSides Media Bias chart uses a multi-step, involved methodology to derive their results, driven both by independent researchers and community feedback and opinions on media bias (Sheridan, 2021). It is worth noting, however, that Allsides was created by former Republican political aides (Evangelista, 2012). Thus, while I am deferential to AllSides's interpretation of the political leanings of various sources, it is simply to avoid any personal bias. Because AllSides is a well-known and accessible media bias chart which for the most part resembles the structure of other media bias charts, it serves the purpose of this study.

2. **Content Analysis**

To develop my study, I have used a content analysis approach to compose a methodology for research. Based upon Hsieh and Shannon's definition of summative and

manifest content analysis, my project used the methods of "identifying [,analyzing,] and quantifying certain words or content in text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of the words or content..." (Hsieh, Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). Hseih and Shannon lay out a specific methodology, deemed "conventional content analysis" that researchers can use for their studies, and one which heavily influenced the creation of my content analysis protocol:

> … researchers can combine or organize this larger number of subcategories into a smaller number of categories… Next, definitions for each category, subcategory, and code are developed. To prepare for reporting the findings, exemplars for each code and category are identified from the data. Depending on the purpose of the study, researchers might decide to identify the relationship between categories and subcategories further based on their concurrence, antecedents, or consequences. (p. 1279)

The approach I have developed uses a coding system like the one described by Hseih and Shannon to analyze the data collected from the web publications to create a methodology which seeks to discover if there are factors within images that are more likely to lead to their mass distribution. These factors are not chosen arbitrarily but are based upon common markers that can be found in a plethora of protest images.

While all the George Floyd protest photographs generally take place on city streets, and all of the protest images take place during the Summer of 2020, there are variable factors which can be examined more closely to determine what characteristics can be seen most often in the photographs published by these online news sources. I

coded for the presence of each of the following characteristics in each photograph in the sample:

- *Violence*: The photograph showed aggressive actions or damage to humans or property.

- *Peace:* The photographs showed images of peaceful protest, or human beings engaged in non-violent or aggressive acts.

- *Wide shot:* The photographs are taken from a distance, showing a wide swath of the environment.

- *Close-up:* The photographs are taken at close proximity to a subject.

- *Individual(s):* The photographs include one, or two individuals at most, as long as the camera lens was primarily focused on the faces and bodies of the individuals and not a larger crowd.

- *Group/Crowd:* The photographs include a group of people. Individuals are not easily discernable in these images, and the focus of these images is on a gathering of people.

- *Slogans/Linguistic Messaging*: The photographs include slogans printed on signs, t-shirts, flags, etc. The slogans must be easily legible and focused within the frame of the photograph.

- *Political Iconography:* The photographs include political images, including flags, symbolic gestures (the black power sign, the "hands up don't shoot" gesture, police iconography, etc.)

The full list of images and their corresponding characteristics can be accessed in the appendix (p. 25) Originally, I included other coded characteristics including time of

day, presence of famous figures, and others, but found there was no discernable or notable difference between any of the images concerning these specific codes.

Results

A total of forty-five images were analyzed, all stemming from media sources which span the entire political spectrum. For each side of the political spectrum, fifteen images were analyzed using the coding system outlined in the previous section. In the sections below, I will discuss the results of my analysis and the notable differences between how the different ideologies of web pages affect the types of images they share.

1. **Content Analysis Results**

Below is a table reflecting the coding of each data set. I have laid the data points out side-by-side to reflect the noticeable differences reflected between political ideology and the types of characteristics displayed in the protest pictures. For each political stance, I will describe the median picture to clarify what the data set reveals an average protest image would look like on a given right, left, or centrist news website.

Table 1

Characteristics of Protest Images

Characteristic			
	Left wing	Centrist	Right wing
Violence	1	8	13

Peace	14	7	2
Wide-shot	5	5	11
Close-up	10	10	4
Individual(s)	5	11	2
Group/crowd	10	4	13
Slogans/Messages	7	9	2
Pol. Iconography	6	5	10

2. A Median Image of Left, Right, and Center Image Galleries

While there are certainly differences and distinctions in the photographs displayed on right-leaning, left-leaning, and centrist websites, certain themes stand out as typical, and repetitive depending on the political stance of the news source.

The average left-leaning photo is a peaceful celebration focused on a crowd of people but with a relatively close focus. Many, but not all, also include some sort of linguistic messaging or slogan, typically on signs held by participants. In most left-leaning photos, a symbolic gesture is on display, whether it is a crowd of protestors brandishing raised fists, fireworks firing above the head of cheering protestors, or hands clapping out of a window in solidarity with protestors marching in the streets below. Often the protestors are seen in states of calm and stillness, reflecting mourning or anguish for the loss of George Floyd's life, and the loss of life for many others.

The average centrist photo is normally centered on an individual, engaged in a pose showing political defiance, raising their fist high in allusion to Black Power

symbolism, kneeling to allude to Colin Kaepernick and the NFL protests against police

brutality, raising their hands in reference to the "hands up, don't shoot" chant, or with

their hands across their throat symbolizing Eric Garner, and his tragic utterance of "I

can't breathe" before his death at the hands of the New York Police Department. This

image is just as likely to show acts of violence as it is to show displays of peaceful

protest, but there is often a linguistic message attached to the image, a context which

grounds the photo and informs the audience what message the protestors in the photo are

trying to get across.

This stands in direct contrast to the types of images shown in right-leaning media.

The typical right-leaning image shows the violence, unruliness, and destructiveness that

is often referenced rhetorically by oppositional figures trying to deride the legitimate

concerns of Black Lives Matter protests (Ali, 2017). Violence in these images is

decontextualized, people are often seen attacking property and sometimes other human

beings. Fire is a consistent theme—especially flaming police cars. Of the fifteen images

pulled from right-leaning news sources, four of them show police cars on fire, and ten of

them show police activity of some kind, framing the protest as a struggle between two

opposing sides, that of the protestors and that of the police. This is in sharp contrast with

left-leaning and centrist media images where police are only shown in three of the thirty

total images analyzed in the data set. Oftentimes the faces of the protestors are obscured

or hidden from the camera's eye. The scenes are normally chaotic, and rarely does the

audience understand what is happening and why the people in the image are acting in

such violent ways.

3. How Violence is Shown

Analyzing the results of the study, there is a high degree of variability between the depiction of scenes of violence depending on political leanings. In left-leaning media images, there was only one scene that was classifiable as violent: in the CNN Gallery, there is an image of a Wendy's franchise location burning, with people standing around watching. We only see the backs of the people, so all of them remain anonymous. There is a large, bright burst of flame in the upper right corner of the picture which serves as the focal point of the image. It's immense brightness contrasts with the severe darkness of a dimly lit street. Interestingly, the protestors are not engaged in an act of violence at this moment. Rather they are captured by the camera looking still, gawking at the massive flame erupting into the night sky (CNN).

While this image does not depict person-on-person violence, the images of anonymous protestors surrounding a burning building is more indicative of what we see in right-leaning media images. A total of thirteen images of the fifteen taken from right-leaning sources depict images of violence, whether they be person-on-person violence, arson, or property damage. An example of this is seen in the Fox News gallery. Three young Black men are centered in the image, kneeling in front of a burning police car as black smoke rises behind them. All three men have their middle fingers raised in an act of defiance against authority. Two of the men are wearing surgical masks typically seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, but one man stands out. His mouth and eyes are covered completely by a white bandana, emphasizing his anonymity and alluding to the cultural association of bandanas with gang violence. The tendency to portray the protestor as an

agitator, a "thug," or a provocateur is commonly seen in right-leaning protest images (Fox News).

As one might expect, centrist sources tend to split evenly over depictions of violence, with acts of violence being shown in eight of the fifteen images taken from centrist sources. Often though, even when showing acts of violence, centrist news sources weave a narrative of meaningful struggle in the images they show, and better serve to contextualize the events that are occurring. A great example of this is an image from NPR, which shows a woman receiving treatment from fellow protestors for pepper spray which has clamped her eyes shut. To the right of her, an anonymous hand holds a spray bottle filled with milk, and we catch her in a moment of intense agony, her mouth agape. While this moment shows the woman's suffering, it also has the strange quality of resembling a baptism. The mix of affective intensity, ideological associations, and context makes this photograph very moving. While this image shows the aftermath of a violent act, it does more than portray violence as a meaningless, chaotic, and senseless act. By seeing this woman's suffering, the audience is reminded of the stakes protestors willingly go through to fight for a cause which they view as just. It also is one of the only pictures in the data set showing a protestor as a clear victim of violence. In right-leaning photos, demonstrators are generally shown as adversarial, and never portrayed as vulnerable or victimized.

4. How Peace is Shown

If the defining characteristic of right-leaning protest images is depictions of violence, left-leaning images are far more likely to show moments of solidarity, unity, and togetherness among protestors. An example which highlights the vast difference

between how left-leaning sources and right-leaning sources portray protestors is one image drawn from CNN. In this image, we see a gang of police officers on bicycles, sitting at ease. A young Black boy is shown walking up to one of the officers, offering his hand in a "fist bump" gesture. The White police officer is smiling at the boy and returns the gesture. This is in stark contrast to right-leaning images which solely show police and protestors at war with one another. While there are only two pictures of children taken from the data set, both pictures are taken from left-leaning sources. The appeal to affect is apparent, as most individuals are affected by images of children, but it stands in sharp contrast to the fear/paranoia affect evoked by right-leaning images.

A noteworthy difference between the way that centrist and left-leaning images show moments of peace is the focus on the individual. Over half of the centrist images analyzed show an individual as their focal point. These individuals either tend to be in moments of anguish or mourning, or displaying symbols of protest, like the Black Power symbol or kneeling. In left-leaning sources, there is a much greater focus on crowds, on vast swaths of people coming together in solidarity, and in the anonymity of the protestors. Even in moments where an individual is the focal point of the image, the message of the individual becomes more important than the affective reaction to their body language. An example of this is in a New York Times image where a protestor holds a sign reading "WHITE SILENCE IS VIOLENCE" which covers their entire fire. The effect of this is that the message draws the audience in wholly, and that the individual holding the sign is less meaningful than the message the sign displays.

5. Crowds vs. Individuals

While there isn't a distinct difference between right-leaning and left-leaning sources, centrist sources are far more likely to focus on individuals. Eleven of the fifteen images chosen from centrist sources prominently feature individuals. Centrist images are far more likely to frame the protest movement as the struggle of certain individuals against an unjust society, rather than a collective movement. Whether engaged in violence or acts of peace, centrist sources show that each angry mob or peaceful group is composed of individuals motivated to evoke change in some way.

While left-leaning and right-leaning sources do not differ greatly in tendency to show either groups or individuals, it must be noted that right-leaning sources are far more likely to show groups and individuals acting in riotous or violent ways compared to left-leaning sources. Groups in left-leaning sources are also far more likely to be shown in acts of celebration, solidarity, and peaceful protest than in right-leaning sources.

6. Linguistic Messages and Political Iconography

While this isn't necessarily a dichotomy like the two previous entries, there are distinct ways that we see different political ideologies display these two codes. left-leaning and centrist sources are significantly more likely to show linguistic messages in their images. The messages include "BLACK LIVES MATTER", "WHITE SILENCE IS VIOLENCE", "BLACK LIVES OVER WHITE FEELINGS", "BEING BLACK IS NOT A CRIME", "THIS IS NOT A MOMENT, IT'S THE MOVEMENT", "JUSTICE". and far more. Almost all of the messages are fully capitalized and placed on nondescript, white or brown poster boards. It is clear that the message on the signs is not designed for garish aesthetics, but instead is designed to be strong, terse, punchy, and immediate.

Centrist and left-leaning sources both contextualize the meanings of the protest by including a variety of protest images showing the signs of protestors in full view.

On the other hand, right-leaning sources are much more likely to depict scenes of meaningless, contextless anarchy. Of the fifteen right-leaning sources analyzed, only two had linguistic messages. right-leaning sources were also more likely to display political iconography, although a different kind of political iconography than that of left-leaning sources. Whereas left-leaning sources are far more likely to shown symbols of resistance such as raised fists and kneeling protestors, right-leaning images are far more likely to include political icons such as uniformed police and Americana. The depiction of police and protestors engaging in violence with police was far more common in right-leaning imagery, depicted in eight of the fifteen images analyzed, as opposed to two of the thirty centrist and left-leaning images analyzed. Right-leaning images also have a stronger likelihood of showing burning/damaged police cars and flags (American or "Trump 2020"). Protestors in right-leaning images tend to be either engaged in acts of violence, or otherwise enraged. In several images, there is only police/police iconography depicted. These images are totally devoid of protestors or their messages. Often the Barthesian "punctum" will highlight property damage, displaying protestors as mere bystanders or witnesses to chaos.

Discussion

Much like the semantic battle that revolves around coding a demonstration as a "protest" or a "riot" falls along political lines—a cursory search of "George Floyd riots" on Google brings up a wide swath of right-leaning news sources discussing rioting, looting, and more criminal acts from 2020—so does the circulation of imagery fall along

ideologies. While my project originally was designed as a non-partisan study to see if there were characteristics of protest images that lead to their success in circulation, the results of my study showed that protest image circulation, at least in the modern era, cannot be devoid of political bias.

While it wouldn't be fair to say that these images fall along binaries, the results indicate that there is a strong correlation between the political means of the protest and the way the protest is depicted by media sources. Although studies indicate that 93% of Black Lives Matter protests have been peaceful (Mansoor, 2020), the tendency of right-leaning media to predominantly focus on acts of violence, chaos, and destruction must be noted.

Knowing the work that scholars and activists have done to acknowledge the power of protest photography in the digital age to spread awareness of social justice causes, the inverse is also true. CRT scholars have noted the tendency of nefarious actors to spread racist and fascistic ideas across digital networks (James, 2020), but disinformation and misrepresentation of protest movements is not limited to the dark corridors of InfoWars and 8Chan. Media sources also invariably tell a narrative through protest photography and represent protest in a way to reinforces the implicit bias shared by their audience. Research into implicit bias informs the idea of automatic attitude activation which is a concept researcher have used to understand the "nuances of modern racial prejudice" (Payne, 2015). Studies on automatic attitude activation have shown that "people's spontaneously activated thoughts often seemed to differ from the attitudes they consciously endorsed and expressed on traditional survey measures" (Payne, 2015). In other words, while audiences of center-right and right-leaning media sources may not

explicitly endorse racist ideals, the spontaneous affect of fear, paranoia, and dread evoked

by images of violence, chaos, and destruction will undoubtedly have psychological

ramifications and alter perceptions of the validity of certain protest movements. The

dichotomy established between conceptions of "rioter" and "protestor" are not new, and

some elements of this binary have shown up in protest movements throughout history.

Noting the conservative opinion regarding the protest movement organized by Black

Britons in the early 80's, John Benyon noted that right-leaning interpretations of the

protests "focus[ed] upon law and order rather than social disadvantage or political

power… and perceiv[ed] 'rioters' to be representing the most disreputable aspects of

society" (Simon, 2019, p. 168). While much of the rhetoric spread around protest

movements has historically been verbal, digital networks have both increased access to

information and hard data, as well as access to disinformation and decontextualized,

derogatory narratives about protests.

     One way to reinforce decontextualization, and to spread narratives of 'violent

riots' is to remove linguistic messaging. In the images derived from right-leaning

galleries during my study, the absence of linguistic messaging is conspicuous. It is highly

unlikely that by chance right-leaning images display violence in a meaningless fashion—

i.e. devoid of any content or messaging. Silvan Tomkins's work on affect shows that

"human emotions… function as our primary motivational system" (Demos, 2019). It can

be observed that often right-leaning media appeals to innate affect, those characteristics

such as "fear/terror, anger/rage, and distress" (Demos, 2019).

     The tendency of centrist and left-leaning media to focus on both the physical and

linguistic expression of individuals is also emblematic of an appeal to empathy, grief,

disgust, sadness, and other emotions. Tomkins's work indicates as well the "contagious[ness]" of affect (Demos, 2019), and when gazing upon the expression of an individual in a photograph, the emotion they present is often contagious to the observer. It cannot be understated, then, that to remove individual emotion from photographs in place of chaotic scenes of faceless violent crowds is a deliberate appeal to fear.

Noting Eyman's conception of cultural capital, the use-value of images in the digital age is defined by their virality, their ability to reach as many users as possible, and to evoke a response from these users (Eyman, 2015). left-leaning and centrist journalistic images often seek to contextualize protests, and provide images meant to move their audience to act, or at least understand and sympathize with the plight of the protestors. While this can be seen as a humanistic undertaking, it is not enough to completely drown out the antagonistic narratives that right-leaning media sources weave around protests.

Conclusion

Knowing that innate affect is such a strong indicator of motivation, social justice works must consider that oppositional work will appeal to innate affect in lieu of logical or thought-provoking messaging. Social justice efforts must use their photography to similarly appeal to affect, whether this be fear, grief, joy, excitement, etc. While getting the message of equity and anti-racism to stick is the goal of much social justice work, there must be ways that visual works can do this through the appeal to innate affect. In other words, perhaps messaging is not enough, and fear of tyranny, systemic racism, brutality, and injustice must be depicted through photography to appeal innately to observers unmoved by thoughtful messaging.

However, there are ethical considerations that should be considered when purely attempting to appeal to consumer pathos and immediate affective reactions. While innate affective appeals to fear, anxiety, dread, and others can motivate action, they are not always effective rhetorical strategies for bringing about meaningful, peaceful social change. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on enacting mobilization through grief, it is important for advocates to contextualize the goals, desires, and means by which activists pursue their causes. By displaying political symbology, linguistic messages, and images of peaceful group solidarity, activists can appeal rhetorically to consumers and do so in an ethical manner. Because the affective response is powerful and immediate, activists using photography should perhaps consider grabbing the attention of consumers through affect, and elaborating on their causes through contextualizing messages.

This study shows that context and messaging are not meaningless, and that among left-leaning and centrist media sources, political messaging, whether verbal or symbolic, does get circulated and does affect people. While the immediacy of affect will always play a role in the perception of images, it must be the effort of social justice activists to enforce messaging and spread awareness. Though attempts will undoubtedly always be made to deride protests from those who wish to quell them, digital networks are a powerful tool that can be utilized to motivate, mobilize, and influence people to change and act in a way that helps create a better society.

Despite the variety of media now available for consumption in the digital age, photographs will continue to be circulated, shared, and published daily, and those photographs that show protest do make a difference and stick in the minds of audiences.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that must be addressed in this work. For one, there are characteristics beyond those I listed which may have a powerful impact on observers. While I lumped in political signifiers like policemen in uniform, black power symbology, and flags as "political iconography," each of these visual images may have a different appeal to different people. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to affect, but clearly different types of political iconography appeal to different sects on the political spectrum.

Future Work

Future work on protest photography and affect should focus on the ways that oppositional photography can appeal to consumers across political divides. Understanding some of the affective tactics that these publications use, there may be possible ways that affect can be used for positive change, and to persuade viewers with opposing viewpoints to see perspectives from the other side of the political spectrum. How can, for instance, a New York Times photographer appeal to a Fox News consumer, and vice versa? What are the affective principles that change minds and hearts? This would be interesting territory to explore for future research.

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Appendix

- **Images used for content analysis:**

  https://docs.google.com/document/d/10GKHxZDjME_gZMLBNZB-

  K8g7JcD2JqTKn3BgsjpXNh4/edit?usp=sharing

- **Tables used for content analysis:**

  https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/132E1CwEf5eXgFHlVwaJmdDn-

  745VAQUGJin3wGs_kfU/edit?usp=sharing