Chapter 4

Says What: Research on the Content in Visual Communication

The literature suggests that audiences prefer stories of celebrities, political gossip, and human drama (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). McQuail (2005) explained that this is why the media tend to personalize complicated events in an effort to make them both more understandable and attractive to the target audience.

In photojournalism, human interest is emphasized as one of the most important elements of a news photograph. Joe Elbert, Washington Post’s assistant managing editor for photography, has described a hierarchy that classifies photographs into four categories: informational, graphically appealing, emotionally appealing, and intimate (See Kobré, 1999). The more news photographs manifest emotional and intimate human elements, the higher they are located in this hierarchy. Elbert argues that photo editors should select photographs from the upper end of the hierarchy as often as possible. For example, while informational photos, such as photographs of news conferences, can be important for readers, editors prefer emotional images and, especially, shots of tragedy.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that most studies on visual content have similarly focused on the coverage of massacres, disasters, conflict, or terrorist attacks.

Several studies examined photographic news coverage of wars and conflict. Moeller’s book Shooting War (1989), for example, examined
images of America at conflicts. According to Moeller, photography has created a unique history that has in turn had a major influence on the public’s perception of wars.

Moriarty and Shaw (1995) conducted a systematic analysis of visuals depicting the first Gulf War in three US newsmagazines—Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News & World Report. More than one-third of the images they examined focused on war technology such as smart bombs and new combat airplanes. They argued that the Gulf War was framed as a “mini-drama” because the media’s fascination for technology made news photographs connect easily with science-fiction imagery. They concluded that such science-fiction-like images hindered the public’s ability to understand the actual cost of the war. Griffin and Lee (1995) also examined images in the three major newsmagazines and found that photographs framed the first Gulf War in a way that was congruent with “traditional depictions of the enemy, and presumably compatible with US government and military agendas for characterizing Saddam and the opposing forces, but is at odds with the claims made by American media that they were providing unprecedented, comprehensive coverage of the war” (p. 850).

Visual Coverage of Conflicts and Disasters

More recently, Fahmy and Kim (2008) conducted a comparative visual analysis of the recent Iraq War in The New York Times and The Guardian and found that the two newspapers visually portrayed the war differently. Overall, results showed the more spontaneous or direct coverage of ongoing events were rare at best, and were exclusively found in photographs that ran in the British newspaper, The Guardian. Griffin (2004a) discussed the nature of US newsmagazine photo coverage of the “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan and the military invasion of Iraq. His analysis suggested that newsmagazine photographs primarily serve to establish narrative themes within official discourse. In other words, published photographs most often offer prompts for prevailing government versions of events and rarely contribute independent, new, or unique visual information.