

Political Media Literacy 102

Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

I know it's too long. Most will forget the first paragraph before the second begins. But this is about media and the so called 'digital culture' or as Mark Bauerlein, English Professor Emory University describes in his new book: *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future*. His thesis: technology (and the brain it spawns) does not broaden mental and cultural horizons, it narrows them, especially in the young, our future voters, who float endlessly in an increasingly self-absorbed virtual social universe of blogs, iPods that, like, block out virtually everything else.

"It sounds stupid and everything but like once you like get into it it's really addicting – just like everything. Like you have your song and like you right all this stuff about yourself and like all my friends basically have it. So like we always like read each other's pages and like call each other and like kind of, and like you put like 300 pictures up so ... people's pictures and stuff and comments."

Mid western high school student's
responding to a survey about online social networking.

Catch my drift?

Far from being "neutral" television [media] itself predetermines who shall use it, how they will use it, what effects it will have on individual lives, and if it continues to be widely used, ***what sorts of political forms will inevitably emerge.***

Jerry Mander

The Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television

The whole system is designed to accomplish two things: ***Dumb us Down*** and to ***Keep Us Occupied***. *Dumb Us Down* means engaging the visual and emotional centers of the brain while bypassing or shutting down higher abstract symbolic, metaphoric reasoning capacities. *Keep Us Occupied* refers to the diverting, addictive nature of the experience, regardless of program content. These two basic principles, which are inherent in the delivery system, shift the weight of influence dramatically from issues to image.

Look at how much movement, zing, pop, flash there is in a typical thirty second television logo and compare it to ten or twenty years ago. Engage the startle flight-flight attention reflex by increasing the speed of image change or movement and boost the intensity. That is the governing principle. Media is primarily visual. It is the image not the issue that matters most.

Political Media Literacy 102

Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

The meaning of images communicates instantly - on contact. Intellectual processing and analysis is ponderous by comparison. So much so, especially in a fast-paced visual world, that it is impossible for analysis to keep up. It doesn't try. The next image hits long before the first is digested. The juxtaposition of one image to another creates new meaning, a sexy blond resting on a red Corvette or a black presidential candidate placed in front of a gas pump with prices spinning out of control with 'whose to blame for higher gas prices?' flashing below.

In a media crazed world the line between 'the truth' and 'lies' gets more and more obscure - but it really doesn't matter because the next moment *There Will Be Another Dramatic* explosion to grab our attention and with that - we will forget about the red flag waving. Do this day in and day out and we will forget just about everything we thought we knew as we chase another bouncing ball tossed by media producers and the corporate-political executives who pay them.

All this deeply conditions the global brain to be shallow, superficial, while creating the illusion that we are keeping up. The act of keeping up in a media marinated environment is - by its nature - an exercise in superficiality. The beat goes on and on, louder and louder, deafening, blinding, while creating the impression that we are doing something. In this case the King really doesn't have any cloths. It's all about image, not issues. Most political strategists know this, or should, dating back to the first televised debate between Kennedy and Nixon. Guess who looked better on the screen?

*"In 1980, Richard Wirthlin - Reagan's chief strategist - made a fateful discovery. In his first poll he discovered that most people didn't like Reagan's positions on the issues, but nevertheless wanted to vote for Reagan. The reason, he figured out, is that voters vote for a president not primarily on the issues, but on five 'character' factors; **values; authenticity; communication and connection; trust; and identity.** [In other words image.] In the Reagan-Carter and Reagan-Mondale debates, Mondale and Carter were ahead on the issues and lost the debates because the debates were not about the issues, but about those other five character factors. George W. Bush used the same observation in his two races. Gore and Kerry ran on the issues. Bush ran on [image]"*

Writes George Lakoff for Truthout

John Feehery, a Republican strategist, notes that **facts are less important** than the themes [images] that are forming voters' opinions. "The more the New York Times and The Washington Post go after Sarah Palin, the better off she is because there's a bigger truth [another image] out there... As long as those [images] are out there, little **facts don't really matter.**"

Political Media Literacy 102

Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

For example, a Washington Post-ABC News poll taken Sept. 5 to Sept. 7 found that 51 percent of voters think Obama would raise their taxes, even though his plan would actually cut taxes for the overwhelming majority of Americans. Obama has proposed eliminating income taxes on seniors making less than \$50,000 a year, but 41 percent of those seniors say their income taxes would go up in an Obama administration.

All of this is a scripted, well thought-out strategy. The right panders to image and the left complains that the campaign is not focusing on real issues. The right self righteously accuses the left of all the deceptive little tricks the right is pulling knowing, as John Feehery, Republican strategist, points out that **facts are less important** than images. "**Facts don't really matter.**" The right doesn't care what it takes to win. Winning is all that matters. The left generally, and in politics falsely, behave as if 'how you play the game' matters. In this case, it doesn't. The American public is so deeply conditioned to respond, like Pavlov's dogs, to sensational images that the intellect doesn't stand a chance. Images are concrete, in your face - now. Intellectual analysis is abstract, far too subtle to stand up to the shouting. So they shout.

Image not intellect is the juice that drives mass media and the goal of the system, the network, is to keep us occupied, tuned in, on-line, ask any game developer, so those who run the money can continue to make their deals uninterrupted. Media keeps us endlessly occupied, dazed, half awake, hypnotized, in a word – distracted, not only by the increasingly loud audio and video images but by the pervasive presence of the pulsing box in our lives.

There was a time when pubs were meeting places for conversation, relationship building. A, one, single, in the beginning small TV was brought out for special events. Now the entire wall, often all the walls, are covered with different size screens all screaming different messages at the same time. Hospitals, airports, auto repair shop waiting rooms all have screaming screens. The intellect can't possibly decode and digest the experience. It doesn't try. Real analysis and understanding shuts down and in many cases remains in the semi-off position. *Duck, here comes another image.* Many of us are so conditioned by this hyper-level-stimulation that sitting at home or any room without a screaming screen is uncomfortable. So we leave it on even when no one is watching.

To this pervasive presence and the brain it creates we inject blatant propaganda machines, plain as the nose on our face, the religious right, for example, pounding out their half-truths, Rush Limbaugh, who just renewed his contract for \$4 million dollars, and all the preachers and minions like him, paid entertainers every one, pretending to be journalists, cutting and pasting, rearranging, injecting venom at every snip as if it were objective truth, all screaming 24/7 like Baptist preachers 'with God as their witness!'

Political Media Literacy 102

Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

And we, millions and millions, depend on this intense blather because our lives have become so mediated, so shallow that we hardly know we are alive. Media has become like heron. Slap the wrist, tighten the strap and give me another hit baby – so I know I'm still here.

While behind the scenes all the kings' horses and all the kings' men sharpen their mass-media conditioning skills like a surgeon's knife, consolidating power and control as you and I chase another bouncing ball, rushing blindly to make sense the next superficial spin, half truth or outright fabrication. By the time we figure out we've been had the show has moved on. Old news is no news by design.

Increasingly much of what appears to be news isn't. That's 'ok.' It's all part of the show. Ask Walter Cronkite, Peter Jennings or Bill Moyer. The majority of so called news is scripted, edited, predigested and dished out to actor-reporters like a conductor hands out sheets of music, including the party spin about such things as 911, its predecessor in Oklahoma and so many other 'stories'. Who's the conductor? We are not supposed to ask.

Take for example the female vice presidential candidate. She did not write her convention speech. All the slings and cute little arrows were scripted by the President's public relation [propaganda] team, true experts at mass media manipulation. The cute babe from Alaska is a diversion, an actress, aptly compared to Ronald Regan who was nothing more than a low budget actor himself, and not a very good one at that. But she looks good on screen. - That's all that matters - Casting 101.

The whole show is 'Reality TV' at its best, why, because we don't think the show is a show, the mark of a good script and cast. We are enchanted and have been for years, especially the young who forget about the fake popcorn spilling on their lap.

Those who script, produce and pay for this crap have studied how the system works for over fifty years. Infomercial producers, preachers and all the President's men test and adapt, test and adapt, increasing the percentage of instant purchases with each tweak of the script. The whole thing is a machine and we sit in our rooms, six to eight hours on an average day, and stare, buying just about whatever they flush on the screen and don't even know we are being used. Well done, I say. Well done, indeed applauds Howard Beale, evening anchor for the Network - the movie - 1976.

HOWARD (ON MONITOR)

I don't have to tell you things
are bad. Everybody knows things
are bad. It's a depression.
Everybody's out of work or scared
of losing their job.

Political Media Literacy 102
Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

The dollar buys a nickel's
worth, banks are going bust.
Shopkeepers keep a gun under
the counter, punks are running
wild in the streets, and
there's nobody anywhere who
seems to know what to do, and
there's no end to it. We know
the air's unfit to breathe and
our food is unfit to eat, and
we sit and watch our tee-vees
while some local newscaster
tells us today we had fifteen
homicides and sixty-three
violent crimes, as if that's
the way it's supposed to be.

(This was written in 1976)

We all know things are bad.
Worse than bad. They're crazy.
It's like everything's going
crazy. So we don't go out any
more. We sit in the house, and
slowly the world we live in
gets smaller, and all we ask is
please, at least leave us alone
in our own living rooms. Let me
have my toaster and my tee-vee
and my hair-dryer and my steel-
belted radials, and I won't say
anything, just leave us alone.
Well, I'm not going to leave you
alone. I want you to get mad -

ANOTHER ANGLE showing the rapt attention of the PEOPLE
in the control room.

HOWARD

You've got to say: "I'm
mad as hell and I'm not going
to take this any more. I'm a
human being, goddammit. My life
has value." So I want you to
get up now. I want you to get
out of your chairs and go to
the window.

Political Media Literacy 102
Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

Right now. I want you to go
to the window, open it,
and stick your head out
and yell. I want you to yell:
"I'm mad as hell and I'm not
going to take this any more!"
Get up from your chairs.
Go to the window. Open it.
Stick your head out and yell
and keep yelling -

A few scenes later...

HOWARD BEALE, in an austere black suit with black tie
shambles on from the wings, finds the SPOTLIGHT and
stands there for a moment shielding his eyes from the
blinding light. TUMULTUOUS APPLAUSE from the AUDIENCE.

HOWARD
(erupts into a Savonarola-
type tirade)

This network is now in the hands
of CC and A the Communications
Corporation of America.
We've got a new Chairman
of the Board, a man named Frank
Hackett now sitting in Mr. Ruddy's
office on the twentieth floor. And
when the twelfth largest company in
the world controls the most awesome
goddamned propaganda force in the
whole godless world, who knows what
shit will be peddled for truth on
this tube? So, listen to me!

Television is not the truth! Tele-
vision is a goddamned amusement
park, that's what television is!
Television is a circus, a carnival,
a travelling troupe of acrobats and
story-tellers, singers and dancers,
jugglers, side-show freaks, lion-
tamers and football players. **We're
in the boredom-killing business!**

Political Media Literacy 102

Image vs. Issue

By

Michael Mendizza

If you want truth, go to God, go to your guru, go to yourself because that's the only place you'll ever find any real truth! But, man, you're never going to get any truth from us. We'll tell you anything you want to hear. We lie like hell! We'll tell you Kojack always gets the killer, and nobody ever gets cancer in Archie Bunker's house. And no matter how much trouble the hero is in, don't worry: just look at your watch -- at the end of the hour, he's going to win. We'll tell you any shit you want to hear! We deal in illusion, man! None of it's true! But you people sit there -- all of you -- day after day, night after night, all ages, colors, creeds -- we're all you know. You're beginning to believe this illusion we're spinning here. You're beginning to think the tube is reality and your own lives are unreal. You do whatever the tube tells you. You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube, you think like the tube. This is mass madness, you maniacs! In God's name, you people are the real thing! We're the illusions! So turn off this goddam set! Turn it off right now! Turn it off and leave it off. Turn it off right now, right in the middle of this very sentence--