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Seeing Is Believing

Timely lessons from communication research in the wake of COVID-19

Throughout its long and storied history, the discipline of rhetoric has documented the power of the spoken and written word. Of late, however, we are being reminded about the rhetorical significance of visual images—that pictures, videos, and other visual works also are part of what Aristotle called the "available means of persuasion." Visual imagery also may provide a good test of whether, as some scholars have argued,1 rhetoric can create reality and truth, a thesis my own research over the past four decades has disputed.2

There is no better example of the power of visual rhetoric than the current coronavirus pandemic devastating our country and the world. And there may be no better illustration of how persuasive resources have the potential to lessen the negative outcomes of this crisis.

For example, many Americans worry whether our leaders at the state, local, and federal levels will begin to more clearly and accurately address the seriousness and magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic in their policies and rhetoric.

The question is, Will the country survive this pandemic with as few fatalities as possible? Put differently, What are the available means of persuasion and how might scholarly research help us?

Worth a thousand words

Perhaps I am naïve but, at the end of the day, the answer depends in part on whether and how the media and photojournalists do their job: to share, no matter how graphic and difficult to view, the horrific reality of what's happening on the ground. From a rhetorical perspective, the more we "see," the better the chances are that those who are cavalier and uninformed will be shocked into a nonpartisan rationality and become accountable for their behavior.

It frequently is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, that seeing is believing. This oft-repeated adage is more than a cliché. Several years ago, Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane Hope, scholars in communication, wrote Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture.3 The book presents a critical perspective that links “visuality” to the academic discipline of rhetoric, helping readers unpack the meaning of visual images in American history and understand the persuasive force of imagery. This research is especially timely and informative today.

For instance, photos during the Vietnam War—including hundreds of flag-draped caskets being flown into Delaware’s Dover Air Force Base on a daily basis and images of soldiers fighting with little success in the jungles—had an enormous persuasive impact. The images resulted in CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, regarded as the nation’s most trustworthy voice, to declare to an audience of millions on February 27, 1968, that the United States could not win the war. These kinds of images also ultimately helped persuade the country, perhaps more than the words of politicians opposing the war, that it was time for American boys to come home.

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Cornell University turned its Bartels Hall gymnasium into a surgical mask-making factory. Cornell employees, community members, and Cayuga Health System staff have been sewing thousands of masks a day for local medical workers and emergency responders.
Similarly, I think—though cannot prove—that photos and videos showing the shocking reality of the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging New York and many other states will hold our leaders’ feet to the fire and turn the tide against ineffective approaches to the pandemic. Put simply, visual images—including photos and graphics—provide a truthful understanding of what is happening. They can also change individual behavior—for example, the widespread “flatten the curve” graph has helped convince people to stay home and take seriously the safety measures needed to slow the pandemic. To be clear, I am not advancing the partisan argument that visual rhetoric will or should change the popularity of public figures. That is a political irrelevancy. However, visual rhetoric might just be what produces policies and behaviors to help us emerge from the pandemic with a lower death toll than originally expected.

It is reasonable to assume that some citizens, elected officials, and political pundits will continue to back faulty and inaccurate policies until they personally see and feel the consequences of the current crisis. Only then will people fully grasp the actual reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the politics surrounding the pandemic are a good test of the argument advanced by scholars in many disciplines that rhetoric can literally create not just perceptions of reality but reality per se. The COVID-19 pandemic offers an example of how at some point, we will learn the hard way that politicians, no matter how rhetorically proficient, cannot conceal or even construct the truth on vitally important issues—that visual rhetoric intrudes, can overwhelm, and can be more persuasive than words. As my own research on communication and epistemology contends, rhetoric is essential to discovering the truth—but it cannot literally create truth.4

Scholars in action
Regardless of the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope this crisis will provoke more academics to follow the lead of Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane Hope by studying the significance of visual rhetoric. Other academic disciplines—including history, political science, and psychology, to name just a few—remain poised and uniquely positioned to help explain what is transpiring in the current political environment. Historians, for example, can
provide perspective, showing us how crises and problems were successfully resolved in the past. Similarly, political scientists can delineate the available institutional mechanisms and resources that might assist government officials in addressing a national crisis. And psychologists can highlight the frailties and tendencies inherent in the human condition that often compromise our response to adverse conditions—responses that, if acknowledged, might be placed in check.

Finally, as I argued in a previous essay in Liberal Education, it is essential for more scholars to leverage their knowledge for social good and to educate the public—to expand their classrooms beyond the walls of academic institutions. For example, in the past few years, the National Communication Association (NCA) has spotlighted how the work of communication faculty informs our understanding of a variety of current political and personal issues confronting the public. NCA’s “Communication Currents” draws on published articles and ongoing research to help the public and press understand the significance and relevance of scholarship to issues in the world. I continue to believe that, if we use our academic research to engage the public, it will be possible to shape and improve public policies. Given the seriousness and complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other problems in the twenty-first century, engaged scholarship is essential.

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