

The Increased Emphasis on Visual Imagery over Aural Messages Via Mass Mediated Communication Technologies

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Abstract The evolution of television and the new communication technologies, especially those associated with the internet, have resulted in the visual domain receiving much more emphasis at the expense of the aural (hearing) domain. This report addresses the increased emphasis on visual imagery over aural messages as it relates to U.S. Army cultural initiatives in varied contexts. As we move to being a more visually oriented society, via web based and new communication technologies, aural forms of communication that generally have more emphasis on critical thinking are being displaced by the visual domain that stresses more imaginary associations. Thus, the visual dominates at the expense of the aural and the imagination presides over critical thinking. Familiarity with this phenomenon will benefit those seeking to enhance Army cultural understanding in that increased emphasis on the visual domain results in dilution of critical thinking about cultural variables when visual images have significant impact upon the development of such cultural awareness. Illustrations regarding the aforementioned will be drawn from military contexts and general societal scenarios as well. As such, the reader should be able to recognize how the visual domain is gaining more and more emphasis, at the expense of the aural domain, and how this has been occurring incrementally over time.

Keywords: *visual imagery, aural messages, mass mediated technologies*

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1. Introduction

This report offers speculations with regard to the increased emphasis on visual imagery over aural messages as they relate to U.S. Army cultural initiatives in varied contexts. Such speculations are based on fundamental assumptions. Historically, common cultural variables have focused on race (typically linked to physical features) and ethnicity (typically linked to cultural practices). As we move to being a more visually oriented society, via web based and new communication technologies, aural forms of communication that generally have more emphasis on critical thinking are being displaced by the visual domain that stresses more imaginary associations. Thus, the visual dominates at the expense of the aural and the imagination presides over critical thinking.

Much Army cultural education is conveyed via visually oriented technologies. For example this occurs with web based instruction and, to a lesser degree but still substantial, with materials used in traditional classrooms. Therefore familiarity with this phenomena will benefit those seeking to enhance Army cultural understanding in that increased emphasis on the visual domain results in dilution of critical thinking about cultural variables when

visual images have significant impact upon the development of such cultural awareness.

A central premise with the aforementioned position is that, as we proceed through stages of the information age, there has been an increased emphasis on visual messages at the expense of aural messages. For instance, the internet technologies are more visual than aural and this has refashioned our rhetorical grammar in subtle ways. These changes do not occur suddenly without warning. Rather, they fade into reality little by little, day by day. One can periodically assess the progression of various phenomena and see commensurate developments related to this increased emphasis on the visual, the decreased relevance of the aural and a series of side effects related to this evolution.

In this report I will focus on situations in the U.S. culture overall to illustrate phenomena that are relevant for those working with Army cultural programming. In doing so I will draw from examples in mass media in general but am particularly sensitive to internet based domains that impact the development of cultural understanding within formal education constructs and in society overall.

I will also draw from my personal and professional experiences related to my military years of service. I spent 30 years (1977-2007) working in the military intelligence community as an Air Force officer. My final 14 years (1993-2007) were as a reserve attaché to China and the

preceding years were with Special Operations Command/Pacific (SOCPAC). I have continued my work in the military/cultural domains of the Department of Defense, as a civilian, since 2007.

In *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* Lisa Nakamura (2008) stresses “experiences of the image are now defined by their mediation by machines. The Internet is a visual technology . . .” (p. 202) and she goes on to assert “Digital visual capital is a commodity that is not freely given to all; as has always been the case with capital of any kind, it must be negotiated and at times actively seized by those to whom it would otherwise not be given” (p. 206-207). Thus, meanings evolve through a process of negotiation and renegotiation.

As such, consumers of mass mediated messages are active participants with the creation of meanings associated with such messages via interpretive processes. “Meaning is not ‘received’ in a unidirectional flow from elsewhere: the audience creates and recreates it” (Hansen, 2008, p. 111). Hansen goes on to use advertising as an illustration by stressing “advertisers have to tap the reservoirs of social and cultural knowledge maintained by audiences, and transform this material into the message” (p. 111).

His emphasis on advertising works well as an illustration. As a more specific genre of illustration one can observe how the increased emphasis on visual imagery is clearly manifested in presidential campaigns. My primary observation regarding such scenarios is that candidates are able to present rhetorical claims via visual images that are not substantiated by fact or sound/narrative. Such meanings can be conveyed at abstract visual levels and consumers will receive the meanings as intended to varying degrees but there is minimal accountability required because claims are not explicitly defined in verbal terms. These morphed representations are one step beyond the diluted political meanings conveyed via verbal sound bites. Thus, truth in such political representations becomes less and less of a standard for evaluation by the consumer of such messages.

A key premise in this process is that technology is not neutral. In *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World*, Arthur Hunt (2003, p. 14) states “Contrary to popular thinking, technology is not neutral. When Johann Gutenberg introduced moveable type in the fifteenth century, a whole new world opened up—liberty, freedom, discovery, democracy. The printing press allowed ideas to be put in black and white so that anyone could analyze them. To a great extent, America was born out of a print-oriented culture.”

Hunt contrasts the founding days of U.S. culture with the present day. “One distinguishing feature of the postmodern era is that human beings gain their knowledge of the world through pictures. The image has replaced modernism’s dependency on the written word” (Hunt, 2003, p. 189). He stresses that this scenario should give us reason to worry. “There is a big difference between processing information on a printed page compared with processing data conveyed through a series of moving pictures. Images have a way of pushing rational discourse—linear logic—into the background . . . Reason is replaced by emotion” (Hunt, 2003, p. 21). The matter of emotion replacing reason is a central idea of this report.

2.Method

My work with the military has provided me ample experiences that illustrate the significant role of visual phenomena in the formation and evolution of our cross-cultural understanding (and misunderstanding). What I convey below are typical observations from varied time periods. Taken together, they exemplify how visual images have a significant impact on how we come to understand other cultures and how such impressions have ramifications for our functioning.

During the late 1980’s and into the early 1990’s my military assignments focused on projects related to SOCPAC and, as such, I was sent to the USAFSOS (United States Air Force Special Operations School) for various courses of instruction. USAFSOS became part of Joint Special Operations University in the mid-1990s. While enrolled in the “Cross-Cultural Communication” and “Asia-Pacific Orientation” courses I became known to the USAFSOS staff given my civilian background with related phenomena. I was brought onboard as an adjunct faculty member with them and worked on those two courses and similar areas of their curriculum. These experiences brought me into contact with numerous cases where the visual aspects of their curriculum were overriding other areas.

A typical example involved Air Force members who were newly assigned to bases in South Korea. They would often attend the “Cross-Cultural Communication” and “Asia-Pacific Orientation” courses near the time of their departure from the U.S. They would be exceedingly interested in the courses in that they’d never been to South Korea. Thus I had the opportunity to work with very motivated students and observe how much impact the visual aspects of our curriculum had on their learning.

Our courses stressed a variety of lectures, presented via verbal channels, but the most potent elements of such presentation were the visual images that were conveyed to illustrate what was presented aurally. These images prompted far more inquiry, dialog and lasting impressions than meanings conveyed verbally or via the written word. The images seemed to offer more opportunity for reflection and interpretation. Some of the student interpretations were accurate but sometimes they would be inaccurate extrapolations.

My work with USAFSOS students was in an academic context and over time I experienced consistent impressions that reinforced the strong role of the visual domain in the learning process. Though I was pleased to have this opportunity to observe this phenomenon, and talk to students about my observations, I was poignantly aware that this was a classroom environment and needed to be understood in that light. Overall, it showed me how cross-cultural orientation to a culture could be helpful to Americans going overseas. My follow-up with such military members evidenced that their limited cultural understanding was a stumbling block but, over time, they were able to learn about the host culture and eventually function effectively. That is, they typically were not expected to perform in a hostile environment and had time to get familiar with the culture under non-threatening circumstances.

My follow on assignment, that placed me in China, provided me the operational environment I was seeking.

In 1993 I was assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China and worked there in that capacity until my retirement in 2007. It was a DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) billet and it put me in consistent contact with Chinese culture. I had taught in China in the mid-1980's, as a civilian, so I had ample context for working in that environment and having a firm understanding of U.S.-Chinese cross-cultural exchange of meanings.

One of my functions was to serve as an intermediary for U.S. delegations that were visiting China (often for the first time) whereby I'd help promote meaningful relations between U.S. individuals/organizations and their Chinese counterparts. In this role I was able to study cross-cultural exchange on various levels and consistently witness how important visual images were with this process.

3.Results

A typical illustration involved a packet of materials we (at the U.S. Embassy) sent to a visiting delegation before their arrival. It contained photographs that stressed various facets of life in China. The purpose of this packet was to orient the delegation to China before their arrival in-country so they had a context for understanding Chinese culture. Without such a minimal orientation we found they could come into their Chinese cultural experience with very little understanding about the culture and ripe for having inaccurate perceptions.

After the delegation arrived and had engaged in meeting their Chinese counterparts I noticed some of the U.S. visitors did not eat the food presented to them during meals with the Chinese. This confused me because Chinese food tastes very good and it is nutritious. The Chinese noted this behavior and I perceived it to be an impediment to our delegation's functioning so I pursued the matter with the Americans. I came to find out it had to do with one of the visuals we had distributed to the visiting delegation prior to their arrival.

This particular visual showed a butcher in a Chinese open air market, located in rural China, as he prepared to butcher a dog for consumption. There were a pile of dog carcasses nearby. It was meant to convey that not all food consumption practices are universal (that is, we don't commonly eat dog meat in the U.S. but it does occur in rural parts of China). The text that accompanies this photo clearly conveys that the consumption of dog meat is not common in cities but it can be recognized as occurring in rural areas and, overall, such phenomena illustrates how cultural practices (such as diet) can vary.

Regardless of the text, some of the U.S. delegation clearly interpreted the visual in a manner that resulted in them believing they might be served dog meat. Thus, they chose to bring their own food to eat during their short visit to China. When they confirmed my suspicion about the inaccurate conclusion being associated with the dog butcher photograph, and I could assure them that they would not be served dog meat, they still elected to eat their own food. The lasting impact of the visual clearly trumped the factual information I was presenting to them.

Earlier in this report I described the USAFSOS students I had worked with and how they were not expected to perform in a hostile environment and had time to get familiar with the host culture under non-threatening

circumstances. My work in China, working in an operational environment, did give me reason to consider how challenging it could be for service members to enter into a foreign culture under hostile conditions and be expected to work in such a confusing context. Little did I know that I would experience that very scenario and learn firsthand about how relevant visual images are in the creation and evolution of such cross-cultural perspectives.

On September 12, 2001, the morning after the September 11 attacks, I received a phone call from the Defense Intelligence Agency advising me to be prepared to report for duty within 72 hours notice. I prepared my household for my coming absence and that process went smoothly. I had been assured that, under such a recall, I'd be going to China and working there. I knew what I'd be doing and who I'd be doing it with. We'd rehearsed such a recall many times at the embassy so, although the recall would be disruptive, I had a solid handle on what I was going into.

When the mobilization phone call came I was ready for departure. Ironically I had been preparing for a temporary assignment in China in support of President Bush traveling to China for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. DIA instructed me to report to Washington for in-processing but I suggested to them that I go on to China, help with the Bush visit, and then in-process at the embassy and start work immediately. It was at that point the scenario changed dramatically.

To my utter surprise I was informed I was going to be assigned to Islamabad. I responded there must be a mistake and that I had never even been to Saudi Arabia. He indicated that wouldn't be a problem since Islamabad is in Pakistan. Proof positive, in my mind, that I knew nothing about Islamabad (I didn't even know what country it is in). This was alarming news to me in that a significant aspect of my functioning as an attaché is based on my familiarity with the host culture. I knew nothing about Pakistan.

The DIA caller then indicated I was being pulled from China and moved to Pakistan given that I should have familiarity with Pakistan since it shares a border region with China. I assured him that this was a false assumption but resigned myself to the assignment and prepared for departure. It was decided I would go to China to help with the Bush visit and then proceed on to Pakistan from there after Bush departed China.

I threw myself into learning all I could about Pakistan. A daunting task. I started this undertaking in Ohio and studied all I could via local libraries and the internet. I left Ohio amid the chaos that was going on during the days following 911 (uncertainty, anthrax mailings, military buildup etc.). When my wife and young son took me to the airport I had no idea when I would see them next.

After arriving in China I spent as much time as possible on the internet to learn about Pakistani culture. I spent time in the embassy library to see what they might have as well. During this time period I clearly recognized I was experiencing what many troops experience when they enter into a foreign culture and need to be able to function within that uncertainty.

The scenario was disorienting for me. I was 46 years old, a Lieutenant Colonel and had been assigned at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing for eight years. Until September 11, 2001 I had the general impression that my future with

the military would be fairly routine. Instead, I found myself preparing to work in a hostile culture that I knew very little about. This was further complicated by the reality that a significant part of my role was to perform based on my familiarity with that culture.

As I consumed all I could about Pakistan I recognized that I was formulating impressions via two avenues: written information and photographs. The former was more literal and easy to grasp (i.e. don't show the soles of your feet, don't ask Pakistani men about the women in their lives etc.). I did the cross-culturally competent thing and tried to watch for common themes in such guidance.

The latter was much more vague but had the strongest lasting impression on me. That is, the photographic images presented visual depictions that my imagination tended to interpret (more often than not inaccurately). Thus, I had a series of beliefs about Pakistani culture and people and I knew I was on thin ice regarding accuracy. In addition to this, I was seeing mass media reports daily in the *South China Post* that conveyed violent demonstrations in Islamabad in relation to the movement of large numbers of U.S. military into the region. These photographs were, at best, unsettling.

I realized most of my Pakistan impressions were based on assumptions I had conjured via my seeing visual images. I could fully understand how confusing this must be for U.S. troops preparing to enter a hostile environment and having limited awareness of that culture. I made a note to follow-up on study of this phenomena (the visual overriding the aural) because I could see my experiences were bearing that out. One of the interesting variables I recognized was that the aforementioned thought processes did not occur because somebody was manipulating my impressions for some type of gain.

Much of what I have addressed thus far are scenarios where there is no intentional manipulation of meaning. That is, the message source does not have a goal in persuading the message consumer to believe or act in a specific manner. Equally relevant, however, are situations where the message source does have an agenda regarding persuasion of the message consumer. Such illustrations are plentiful in advertising, politics and international relations.

4. Discussion

I clearly observed this visual versus aural phenomena during the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign. Whether it is a visual of George W. Bush standing among the remains of the World Trade Center or a visual of John Kerry standing with his Navy comrades from the Vietnam era, there is a meaning conveyed in each case that goes beyond what words can describe in a short amount of time. The same holds true for visual representations, that don't even include the candidates, whereby values are alluded to via the visual claims that are conveyed. As such, impressions are made but the literal imprint is not vivid enough to be rationally analyzed.

Similarly, the role of visual images have had a growing impact on the evolution of U.S. foreign policy. In the early 1990's the visual depictions of dead U.S. military personnel, who'd been killed by bands of militants in Somalia, being dragged (practically naked) through the streets among cheering crowds had a vivid impact on the

U.S. public mind. The damage was swift, broad and deep. A reticence regarding U.S. intervention in the region was quickly manifested at numerous levels of U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives.

The revelations exposed in the photographs of the interrogation techniques used in Iraq by U.S. military personnel in 2004 underscores the potent impact of visual images in affecting the direction of U.S. foreign policy. Rhetorical meanings are presented on a variety of levels (logical, emotional, spiritual, etc.) that are subject to interpretation, with varying degrees of intensity, by the world community. There are high degrees of political representation in this phenomenon, and corresponding high degrees of relevance, in that the negativity of such visual images can easily be interpreted by all segments of the world community without regard for interpretive sophistication. Again, the damage is swift, broad and deep.

Matheson and Allan, in *Digital War Reporting* (2009, p. 147), stress "What distinguishes war imagery in a digital culture is the speed with which such images are transferred." They explain that this type of conveyance results in a unique type of visual genre whereby a single image can evolve through a series of interpretations and meanings. "In a process which appears anarchic to politicians and journalists alike, these pictures are trophies of war one moment, entertainment the next, then pornography and finally evidence of the 'truth' of war, among other possibilities" (p. 147).

For instance, most Americans were troubled by what was depicted in the photographs of U.S. military personnel abusing Iraqi soldiers and private citizens. Photographs of a U.S. military female dragging a naked Iraqi male around on the floor with a dog chain attached to his neck almost goes beyond what one can conjure regarding high degrees of cruelty with psychological and physical abuse. As troubling as the photographs are to the U.S. audience, one should consider the cross-cultural interpretation of such depictions in that region of the world where the male is dominant and nudity (even among same sexed individuals) is far more restricted than in the U.S. The image of Americans as decadent infidels is reinforced and expounded upon in vivid ways regardless of the explanations and trials that prosecute the abusers.

The channel through which such images are conveyed is a factor that is gaining more prominence. "The Internet's unique ability to create linkages to multiple documents beside the image itself—including other images—allows us to glimpse the possibility of a future where there is some degree of liberation from the stranglehold of narrow conglomerate media" (Gross et al, 2003, p. 20). This phenomenon points to evolving realities with interactive channels of communication. "The power of audiences has long been recognized, but the Web allows audiences to explore and react, to interact, in ways that were either infeasible or not easily achieved in the past" (Gross et al, 2003, p. 21).

One can observe many examples of such images that have lasting negative impressions on the world stage. Reynolds and Barnett (2003), in a book chapter titled "America Under Attack: CNN's Verbal and Visual Framing of September 11," stress visual images "lack explicit prepositional syntax . . . when we use verbal language to communicate we use certain types of syntactic devices to make propositions . . . Since images lack this

explicit prepositional syntax, a viewer's ability to make sense of a series of images is based on other cues" (p. 88). They exemplify other such cues as being how images are edited, framed and presented contextually for viewing (p. 89).

Their finding is conveyed that "CNN created a powerful visual and verbal frame . . . [that] told and showed viewers that the events of September 11 comprised an act of war so horrific that immediate military retaliation was not only justified but necessary" (Reynolds and Barnett, 2003, p. 101). Their corresponding conclusion regarding CNN's verbal and visual coverage is fairly critical. "In this case, CNN provided an example of how the media was complicit in narrowing, rather than broadening, meaningful discourse about America's response to the events of September 11, events that had real human consequences then, now and likely into the future" (p. 101).

The aforementioned CNN illustration conveys a negative finding with regard to visual (and verbal) messages. At the same time, there are neutral and positive images that are conveyed as well. For instance, the affluence reflected in the U.S. standard of living is a common "soft" message that is consistently perceived visually around the world. The consumer of such messages may be looking at an advertisement for American toothpaste but the lifestyle of those Americans (and their station in life) is interpreted as well. These are subtle visual images. Nothing needs to be explained.

The aforementioned phenomena are more common and more vivid as we experience continued growth of the new communication technologies via the growth of the internet (which is a visual platform for meaning conveyance often at the expense of our aural sense). The explosive growth of internet mediums have further underscored the increased relevance of the visual messages in comparison to audible messages. The internet, in its present form, is primarily a visual domain. It is an advanced illustration of how "the eyes have it."

This opens the door for usage of sophisticated rhetorical devices to be used via new forms of visual grammar. However, such usage (or representation) can only be applied by political constituencies that have the financial means to pursue such ends. This leads to an under-representation of significant segments of our society. The Ben Franklin adage still applies: "Freedom of the press only applies if you own a press."

Sonja Foss clarifies that "not every visual object is visual rhetoric . . . three markers must be evident for a visual image to qualify as visual rhetoric" (Smith et al, 2005, p. 144). She goes on to explain the image must be symbolic (involve a system of signs), evidence human intervention (ie. in the creation of the image), and there must be a presence of an audience that is an intentional recipient of the image (p.144).

The impact of the visual nature of the new communication technologies, and subsequent new channels of communication, in turn affects historically basic channels of communication. With the increased emphasis on visual imaging within the proliferation of new communication technologies, and corresponding new channels of communication, there is an impact on our more historic basic channels of communication that have existed since the beginning of humanity (that is, basic use

of our five senses). Mass media theorist Marshall McLuhan warned of this when he described how forms of mass media convey meaning in and of themselves aside from the explicit meanings that senders seek to present. As the rhetorical means of communication are modified then, in turn, what it means to be human is ultimately modified.

McLuhan stated that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (Thornham et al, 2009, p. 24). Hence his finding that the medium is the message. "After three thousand years of explosion . . . we have extended our central nervous system . . . abolishing both space and time . . . we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness" (Thornham et al, 2009, p. 27).

Many areas of life are going through redefinition with these rapid technological developments we are living through. I am focusing on mass mediated venues but there are many other parallels. For instance, the mass production of Viagra (to enhance sexual performance) is serving to redefine the sexual experience for a significant segment of our population. Until recent times, the decrease of sexual relations among most aging people was observed to be a natural (even expected) phenomenon but in the future, because of the development of such sexual enhancing drugs, the sexual experience will be seen as something involving chemical enhancement. It will improve the experience for many but it will concurrently change the experience and redefine our societal understanding of that experience.

These types of developments are not necessarily cause for concern but they are landmarks that should be noted and recognized for what they are. It seems that every technological gain also involves the potential for a corresponding loss. To not acknowledge these gains and losses, and what they mean for us as individuals and as a society, leaves us at the mercy of larger forces that can derail our quality of life (on small and large scales).

Thus, in returning to my initial premise, as we have an accelerated emphasis on visual culture we will have a corresponding emphasis on visual aspects of the human condition. Life will become more and more of a visual experience. Sight, as one of the human senses, will have dominance over the other senses. The implications of this will continue to unfold into our individual lives and societal existence. Political processes and the entire nature of representation will be changed by this. Standards for the depiction of truth and fact will go through modification. We see shortcomings in this regard now but, if society demands more accountability, we will most likely see that accountability evolve with the next generation of technological invention.

What I offer in this writing is not a message of despair. Rather, it is encouragement that we go through these evolutions with our eyes open in a way that allows us to impact the direction of the road we are taking, not be victims of the technologies we have created (and will continue to create). Technological developments, and subsequent effects with modification, are part of the history of the world. We impact our environment and we are, in turn, impacted by it.

We, as consumers of mass mediated messages, are not helpless in this evolution. With the increased emphasis on visual images, at the expense of aural messages, there is

less of a standard for truth because subtle visual images are more seductive in their claims. They don't explicitly make claims as happens with aural spoken messages. Thus, we are more challenged in this regard in that we need to engage our critical thinking skills without any prompting from the senders of such visual images.

For instance, if a person contacts me and states "Please vote for candidate X on election day" I am prompted into critically analyzing the request and asking myself varied questions. "Who is the candidate? What are his/her positions on major issues?" However, when visual images are conveyed in our direction there usually is nothing alerting us that we are being influenced. The influence process is far more subtle. Thus, we need to get into the habit of instinctively alerting ourselves so we (as individuals) critically analyze such visual images & their overall context, speculate on the desired aims of the image sender, decide if those aims are commensurate with our individual value systems and then respond accordingly.

We can do this with commercial images, political images and other forms of contextual images that we are exposed to. For instance, when I see a visual advertisement on the internet sometimes I feel myself particularly focused on the human models used and less on the product. I will observe unique types of posture, expressions, graphics and colors. I can see I'm being influenced not only by the overt request to buy a product but am also being influenced by the subtle visual claims that I, as a consumer, can also be like the character depicted in the advertisement if I use the product (in ways totally unrelated to the product usage).

In a chapter titled "All Photos Lie: Images as Data," Barry Goldstein (Goldstein, 2007, pp. 64-65) explains "The photograph has an added realism of its own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration Viewers should not approach an image with the assumption that it represents realityThe most trivial reason that a photograph can never represent reality is that it's a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional world." Thus, when we view any kind of photograph we need to remember we are engaging in a highly interpretive process when we assign meaning to it.

When I observe a photo collage of John McCain as a former prisoner of war, shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, posing with his family, speaking to the U.S. Senate and standing among a collection of U.S. flags I will understandably experience influence resulting from the visual image conveyance that "John McCain is a dedicated American who is appealing as a war hero, family man, politician and visionary." It is at that point I need to instinctively prompt myself with the questions "What claims are being made and are they legitimate? Would they stand up to scrutiny if they were verbally stated?"

When my son was nearing school age I researched various internet websites of school districts in our area. One district in particular stood out as being excellent and we moved to a community in that school district. During that process I stopped to question my motives for the move and to critically analyze my data for the decision. I found I had been unduly swayed by the impressive visual appeal conveyed on the school district website showing new school buildings with matching Georgian brick and an abundance of white wooden fences. It was incredibly

appealing visually but it was irrational to necessarily equate such things with excellence in education. We eventually did make the move to that community but not until after I took the time to study more rational data linked to the school district regarding philosophy and approach.

5. Conclusions

Thus, we need to learn to consistently see ourselves as consumers of images we are exposed to via mass mediated channels. Mere exposure is enough in this regard. We don't have to be specifically targeted by the image source. Anytime we feel ourselves being influenced we should instinctively query ourselves regarding what influence we are feeling, how that influence is occurring and ask if the claims we are digesting are rational.

The more we engage in this process the more we can be startled by the findings from such analysis and this can act as reinforcement for developing the habit to view visual images in such a manner. Although this practice addresses new communication technologies the perspective being stressed grows out of an emphasis on standard critical thinking orientations. It is from this contention that I believe such practices by individuals, as consumers of images, can be instinctively embraced. We are used to emphasizing critical thinking in other areas of our lives and this application is an extension of that framework.

It is from the aforementioned points that those working with Army cultural programming can stand with regard to stressing awareness of the visual versus aural challenge. Derek Gregory (2010), in "American Military Imaginaries and Iraqi Cities: The Visual Economies of Globalizing War," explains "In 2004 Major General Robert Scales made a powerful case for cultural awareness to be given a higher priority than the technical fix of 'smart bombs, unmanned aircraft and expansive bandwidth" (p. 72). Twelve months later the shift in emphasis resulted in publication of the Army Field Manual on Counterinsurgency (FM 3-24). "The new doctrine defined the population as the centre of gravity and established its protection as the first priority. This required not only cultural knowledge—'American ideas of what is normal or rational are not universal' . . . but also immersion in the people and their lives" (Gregory, 2010, p. 73). That is, emphasis was stressed on being part of the Iraqi cultural framework rather than being detached observers from separate U.S. military installations.

The relevance of immersion training becomes very relevant in this process. "The University of Southern California, and in particular its Institute for Creative Technologies, has spearheaded the application of Artificial Intelligence to replicate military-civilian interactions" (Gregory, 2010, p. 79). The result is an exceedingly immersive experience for the student. "ICT's (Institute for Creative Technologies) Virtual Humans invoke the interpersonal by making trust central to cross-cultural interaction. . . . Trust is both the precondition of play and the currency of the game" (Gregory, 2010, p. 80).

In 2008 I served as a consultant to the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) in the creation of avatars, in this case Chinese avatars, to help replicate interaction with Chinese individuals. At that time ICT had completed

creation of Iraqi and German cultural avatars and was seeking to develop Chinese cultural avatars. In this process I learned that creation of avatars involves a sophisticated blend of unique disposition traits, behaviors (verbal and nonverbal), expectations (of self and others) and social norms. The intended result is a contextual framework whereby Department of Defense members can artificially experience the specified culture as preface to actually working and functioning in that culture.

Working with avatar development reminded me of how, as a 16 year old learning to drive a car, I spent time in a driving simulator (that exposed me to the basics of driving in traffic). It was clearly artificial, to the point of being humorous, but when it came time for me to actually drive a real car—in real traffic that could involve real accidents—I found that experience had provided me with a worthwhile contextual understanding. Such artificial cultural experiences are equally, if not more, valuable for U.S. military members due to the life and death nature of current military encounters.

A key concern is consideration of the overriding impact of visuals in the curriculum. Student minds are not clean slates. They have processed years of messages and images regarding cross-cultural phenomena before receiving instruction via the Army. As such, the visual is recognized as bypassing consumer assessment via critical thinking measures. This can be particularly vivid when images are viewed for the first time.

Army cultural education can benefit students by stressing the aforementioned emphasis on critical thinking skills when being exposed to visual images that impact the consistently evolving cultural understanding/ awareness/ expertise progression. That is, consumers of such visual images should consistently consider how such exposure impacts the formation of their cultural understanding, and subsequent functioning, and how faulty reasoning and assumptions can be detrimental to that process. Similarly, when critical thinking is applied and valid cultural

understanding conclusions are reached, then students can confidently proceed in their work with that awareness.

Taken together, these processes involve addressing many abstractions and thinking through many assumptions. It is not a clear path and there are many detours. It is an approach that will be distinctly unique for each individual in that each individual builds upon a unique frame of reference. It involves a fund of varied considerations and this report is intended as a contribution to that fund.

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