

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 is 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 principles, 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.**

The meaning of image 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 an image dominated system 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 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 other '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 those five factors."

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.**"

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."**

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.

Into 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 at their side.

And we, millions and millions, depend on this intense blather because our lives have become so mediated and 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 out of 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 911, its predecessor in Oklahoma and so many other 'stories'. Who's the conductor? We are not supposed to ask.

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