

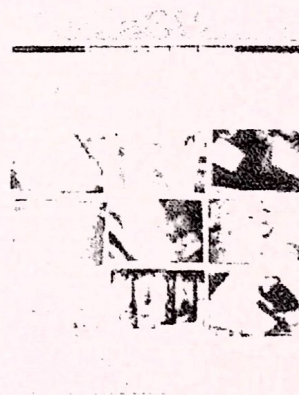
» Power of Images: Creating the Myths of Our Time

Power of Images: Creating the Myths of Our Time

We see them everywhere: on billboards, in magazines, on bus placards. They come in the mail and in our Sunday newspapers: glossy pictures of women and men in silk robes, pictures of electric twin-foil shavers and Dirt Devil hand-held vacuums. And we see them on TV: living rooms with two sofas, white-lighted football stadiums, even Wild West gunfight and bloodstained murder scenes.

Images. They are so compelling that we cannot not watch them. They are so seductive that they have revolutionized human social communication. Oral and written communication are in decline because a new form of communication, communication by image, has emerged.

The History of Communication



The history of human social interchange has evolved through three distinct phases: oral, text-based, and now image-centered communication. In oral cultures, learning and tradition were passed on by word of mouth, primarily through storytelling. The invention of writing made it possible to preserve information and literary traditions beyond the capacity of memory, but the circulation of hand-written books was still limited to an elite few.

With the invention of the printing press, written texts were in effect transferred from the exclusive property of those wealthy enough to afford hand-copied manuscripts to a broad reading public. Elizabeth Eisenstein, in *The Printing Press As An Agent of Change*, dramatizes this emergence by considering the case of inhabitants of Constantinople born in 1453, the year that the Byzantine capital fell to the Turks.

People born in that pivotal year who lived to be 50 saw more books produced in their lifetimes—some eight million—than been written in the previous thousand years of Constantinople's existence. The Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the rise of Western science are just a few of the revolutions spurred by the ability to mass-produce books and newspapers and the growing ability of common folk to read them.

A similar revolution began about 150 years ago with the invention of photography. For the first time, visual representation of objects in space could be reproduced on a mass scale. Image communication was born.

It only took about 50 years for this new method of representation to become a major player in the communication of social values in American society. The rise of the advertising industry spurred this change, for advertisers quickly learned that the most effective way to sell products was not through stories or plain-text facts, but through the creation of images that appealed to basic human needs and emotions.

Television cemented the era of image communication. In one sense television has turned back the clock to the era of oral storytelling, for television tells stories and we watch and listen just like our ancestors who sat mesmerized around campfires.

But television's most important stories are those not verbalized—the stories and myths hidden in its constant flow of images. These images suggest myths—and thus help construct our world and values—in much the same way that stories did in oral culture.

What Are Images?

Simply put, images are pictures. However, in our culture pictures have become tools used to elicit specific and planned emotional reactions in the people who see them. These pictures—these images—are created to give us pleasure—as when we watch *The Cosby Show*—or to make us anxious when we forget our deodorant or lipstick. Images work best at this task when they are vivid and emotionally saturated. The American flag elicits more powerful emotions than an Idaho potato on a couch, for example. The potato might make us laugh, but the flag is full of multiple and often contradictory meanings and associations—everything from the story of how Francis Scott Key wrote the *The Star-Spangled Banner* to flag burning as a protest against the Vietnam War.

The flag works as an image because it suggests a long list of stories and myths that are buried inside us. Image makers hope that in the moment it takes to "consume" an ad or commercial frame, their carefully selected graphics-like the image of the flag-will evoke emotions and memories bubbling deep within us. Pictures that evoke these deep memories can be very powerful-and also very spiritual.

In calling up these deep emotions and memories, however, today's images have taken on new meanings and have created new myths that are shrouded-often deliberately-by these deeper memories. These new myths lie at the heart of modern American culture, and illustrate the double-edged power of today's images.

The New Myths

Traditionally, a myth has been defined as a story or idea that explains the culture or customs of a people. Often myths describe heroes or explain why a people revere the sun, or why elders should be respected. Myths are the motivating stories or ideas common cultural practices.

This understanding of myth leaves little room for the common misperception that myths are simply false or superstitious ideas. Instead, myths are the ideas and stories that motivate daily behavior.

The key to recognizing the new myths of the image culture is to think of them as ideas that emerge from long exposure to patterns of images-not as myths that can be seen readily in one or two images. In fact, these myths are unconvincing unless one thinks of them as emerging from a huge glut of images which come from many sources, including advertising, entertainment and news.

Another way to put this is to say that today's images must be read on two levels. First there is the immediate, emotional level on which we recognize the flag or the sexy body and react in a way that taps our inner stories or emotions.

But second, there is a much broader stage on which we can step back and look at one image in context with hundreds of others. This second level is where we can see the new myths of the image clearly otherwise these basic ideas are obscured by the powerful stories and emotional connections that are used to sell them. Once identified, however, they are easy to recognize, even among all the media messages that daily bombard us.

MYTH #1. The world is a dangerous place and we need guns, police and military to protect us. Media critics often focus on violent entertainment dramas such as cop shows and movies like Terminator 2. But graphic reports of crime and terror on the news probably have a greater influence in creating our feeling that the world is unsafe. Newsmakers feature shocking, violent stories because they sell newspapers and raise ratings. And our belief that news stories are "real" and thus could happen to us heightens their impact.

MYTH #2. Leave it to the experts (who are usually white men).

Again, "real life" images-or those we assume to be real-are most important here because they set the pattern for our assumptions about who has power. The authority figures we see presenting the national news are white, middle-aged men. And when an "expert" is interviewed about a

crisis or program, as in a study of Nightline guests by the progressive media criticism organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (F.A.I.R.) the pattern is predictable; nine out of 10 were white males. On Nightline and elsewhere, the views of women, persons of color and representatives of alternate voices of all kinds are customarily absent.

Images found in advertisements and commercials, as well as the national news, reinforce this power structure. Contrast the traditional sex roles of advertisements for Chivas Regal, showing successful professional men in business suits with the stereotypic portraits of women and men in food ads that cast women as kitchen "experts." Many other media images depend on predefined roles based on gender or race.

MYTH #3. The good life consists of buying possessions that cost lots of money.

Living well is synonymous with wealth, according to the pictures and advertisements we see of homes and yards and cars. Big houses, yachts, fancy wine, dinner parties with silver and crystal, romantic evenings overlooking the ocean, vacations to Bermuda, sailing, BMW's, fancy two-oven sunlit kitchens: the list goes on and on. All are part of a luxurious lifestyle that is available for our enjoyment-if only we can afford it.

We can even purchase a little of it vicariously, if we can't have it all, by drinking fancy liquors or by driving a car that's out of our price range and financing it over 10 years. Some people call it status-but the myth behind the status myth is that we are getting the "good life."

MYTH#4. Happiness, satisfaction and sex appeal, just to name a few, are imminent-and available with the next consumer purchase.

Alas, even when we are wealthy, there's always something missing. We don't have the right woman or man, our car stalls at an intersection, we spend too much time doing housework. But a whole group of images imply that we are on the verge of being happy.

These images are largely advertisements. For example, Hope perfume. Joy dishwashing detergent, or "Oh what a feeling-Toyota!" People in these advertisements are gleefully happy, surrounded by lovers, leaping into the air in rapturous joy. Often, the instrument that brings this instant happiness is technology. We can buy the technology to make us happy.

MYTH #5. Your body is not good enough.

Many-if not most-of the women and men we see in the media are slim, muscular and good-looking. We, on the other hand, are always too fat, out-of-shape and smelly-though our friends don't always tell us so forthrightly. We are trained to worry, for example, that people will not even tell us if we smell bad because that kind of criticism is embarrassing.

Most disturbing, however, is the constant stream of perfect people advertising everything from auto parts to Haynes stockings. We are never told that almost all photo-advertisers make their subjects look better, so that legs are slimmer, eyes are bluer and faces have no freckles.

MYTH #6. Businesses and corporations are concerned for the public welfare.

Short of an environmental disaster like the Alaskan oil spill we see almost no advertisements and few news stories that shed negative light on corporations or businesses. This is not to suggest that all of these organizations are bad. It is worth noting, however, that most corporate images

appear in ads purchased or stories placed by the businesses themselves, so it's hardly surprising that the messages we hear are relentlessly positive.

We see full-page color ads for Chevron talking about its concern for the environment. Or news items reporting that gasoline emissions are down because of a new formula developed by ARCO. Ads from tobacco companies like R.J. Reynolds discourage kids under 18 from smoking. And business-oriented magazine and talk shows like Wall Street Week cater to the interests of PBS' upscale audience, reporting business and financial trends, while we see none from a labor perspective.

So Why Does This Matter?

To ask the question another way, how are these myths hurting us? The rest of this issue suggests a variety of answers, but in the Rise of the Image Culture, Elizabeth Thoman perhaps put it best when she points out that these myths have become a substitute for the search for meaning which other generations sought in more expansive and significant ways. We no longer face uncharted oceans and unexplored continents, but with a universe of space and time to explore uncounted problems to solve we need not end all our quests at the shopping mall.

Many of us feel a sense of dissatisfaction, a void that the myths of the image culture and the material goods they sell do little to fill. Besides the money, creativity and resources that the making and selling of these images waste, they also represent a gigantic "red herring," a signpost to an empty journey, a joust with the windmills of our culture, leaving us like confused Don Quixote's looking for a real opponent.

In this sense, the myths of the image culture are "false or superstitious ideas" as well as "motivating stories or ideas behind common cultural practices."

We do have signposts pointing other ways, however, and learning to read images is the first step in the right direction. This issue and its accompanying Media Literacy Workshop Kit^{1/2} are designed to be a primer on the basic principles of media literacy, using analysis that helps us read images as a beginning point.

Only when we learn to read these myths on a daily basis will we have the power to substitute other motivating ideas and goals of our choosing. Only then can we consciously transcend the Age of Image Communication and stop blindly accepting the myths of the image culture.

Author Bio:

J. Francis Davis, an adult educator and media education specialist, was on the staff of the Center for Media Literacy from 1989 to 1992. He holds an M.Div. from Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta where he currently works in the computer industry and lives with his wife, Elizabeth, and their children.