

FINAL MA PORTFOLIO

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A Final Portfolio

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Analytical Narrative

The MA II Non-Thesis graduate program was not without its initial difficulties, but these difficulties ultimately made the past two years a rewarding experience. In fact, this was the first time that I had taken any kind of online class, let alone an entire curriculum's worth. Despite only living an hour and a half away from Bowling Green, there were some growing pains in adjusting to the long distance instruction. However, I've become more flexible in my communication and ability to work within self-set deadlines as a result. The MA II was a fitting counterpart to my undergraduate degree at BGSU: I wanted to improve my writing and gain a more intimate understanding of rhetoric, editing, and effective research. The works in this portfolio were selected for two reasons: to demonstrate the variety of research topics I studied in the program, and to demonstrate the development of my writing, research, and editing throughout my graduate studies. Each essay focuses on different elements of modernity that interest me: advertisements, multimodality, accident report rhetoric, and social media. Each establishes unique methods of critical analysis that were learned during the graduate program. As they will prove, my time with the MA II program has resulted in a greater comprehension of the English language, and its application in different analytic techniques.

I've always struggled with topic selection for research. This is apparent in the first submission of this portfolio, an essay for ENG 6040, Graduate Studies. It analyzes humor in advertising and attempts to uncover the motivations of advertisers and their use of humor to sell products; from there, it investigates how these humorous ads relate to differences in gender. While the premise has potential, gathering research posed a problem: it was difficult finding established research on the subject. Still, this essay was included as an example of my writing after an academic hiatus of about a year between my undergraduate degree and the beginning of

my graduate studies. The comparison between the original draft and its current form evidence my development in writing and revision in the past two years: my use of language is more exact and concise, and the overall cohesion of the essay is clearer. But, there is also a greater comparison to be made. My research topics, as proven by the other three entries in this portfolio, have become more precise and streamlined.

The second selection, a research essay on visual culture, provides such an example. It was written for ENG 6800 501W, which discussed the rhetoric and analysis of visual communication in our culture. Written during the spring 2014 semester, this paper is much more focused in its analysis, which strengthens the writing and cohesion of the paper overall. It also presents a new method of analysis – visual communication – and the application of this method with my interest in modern media. In this essay, I measure the strength of visual arguments, the growing demand for multimodal instruction, and determine whether or not visual arguments (like infographics) are as effective as verbal arguments. From there I determine whether visual arguments are detrimental or beneficial to our modern instruction with the concepts of visuality and ocularcentrism. Because visual rhetoric is a refined and unique study, and because it offers a unique viewpoint of critical analysis, it greatly improved my interpretive vocabulary and analytical skills.

Another of my struggles during my graduate studies was my use of language itself. Last semester's elective, "Rhetoric of Disaster" (ENG 6800 501W), was valuable in strengthening my writing, and engaging a research method in which I had little experience. The original copy enclosed shows a problem I'm sure many graduate students must address: the correct and precise use of language. In my writing, this has always been an issue. My writing was plagued by words that almost arrived at the intended meaning, like "assertive" for "active" or needlessly long

words like “utilize” for “use.” In ENG 6800 501W, we examined the rhetorical progress of accident reports, and my research essay was an exercise in journalistic research similar to the reading we undertook that semester. My research topic was the 2008 explosion in Port Wentworth, Georgia. In my investigation of the disaster and its legal proceedings, I also consider the role of the media, public opinion and corporate maneuvering. In relation to our reading, I consider whether the archetype of the “disinterested expert” still exist in accident report rhetoric, and if the disasters that plagued British Petroleum were particular to the company’s practices or indicative of a greater pattern of corporate negligence. I include this essay in my portfolio because it demonstrates a new research methodology, and because it uses language precisely and effectively.

Substantive research is best represented in the last selection of this portfolio, a research paper I wrote for ENG 6460, the study of professional and technical writing. While the course covered a broad range of topics, my inherent interests in technology and modernity found their way back to the fore. I became particularly interested in a study by Selfe and Selfe that examined the politics of interface design, and applied it in a comparison of foreign social networking sites. Using Facebook as a control, I examine the influence of Western interface design on foreign language social networks like Sina Weibo, Taringa and Vkontakte. I use a set of criteria derived from the above article, as well as articles by Emily Thrush and Yiqin and Dan Wang, to analyze the cultural design mechanics present in these sites. My research then anticipates the future of interface design, and relates it back to the original query of my research. This research essay rounds out the portfolio as a comparison to the first essay enclosed; it demonstrates a growth in rhetorical, research, and writing skills while applying new methodologies to subjects that interest me.

My revision strategy is based on new skills I acquired through an editing course taken during my last semester in this program; the style guides and techniques from this course have greatly assisted my approach in editing this portfolio. I used two types of editing: proofreading and comprehensive editing. In proofreading, my goal was to minimize inflated word choices and preposition-heavy sentences to make each essay as lucid as possible. Formal elements and formatting were also revised, especially since two of these essays use graphics to illustrate data. In the comprehensive edit, clarity and cohesion of the argument itself is analyzed.

This proved difficult with the first essay I had written for graduate studies, because the topic itself changed over the course of writing the paper. This was evidenced by the rough transitions in the original. A comprehensive edit smoothed out these transitions, and ensured that the analysis was consistent throughout the essay. In the second selection, choosing effective visual arguments was a crucial element, so I wanted to ensure they were used effectively. Both the layout and the graphics were reassessed to ensure that they were used most effectively. Edits for clarity, as well as a clearer definition of my critical terminology (ocularcentrism and visuality) were made to ensure that the focus of the essay was comprehensive as possible. In the third selection, the writing was edited to reflect a more precise control of the English language, especially in considering one of the keys goals of this program: rhetorical strength. Comprehensive flow, from the progression of the disaster's litigations to my conclusion, was also edited. Because the fourth essay was chosen as my example of substantive research, I made sure that the analysis of each website contributed to the greater arc of my research goal. Strengthening the investigative elements and my conclusion were necessary in guaranteeing thorough and effective analysis.

Initially, I admit that I wasn't sure of my future plans following this program. I knew that I wanted to expand and improve my skills as a writer and a researcher, and I wanted to make my BA in English more flexible. Initial hurdles like relying on email/Canvas, learning the rhythms of online discussion, and submitting essays online were difficult at first, but they provided valuable lessons in communication and flexibility. The courses in this program have proven to be diverse, demanding a fresh perspective at the beginning of each semester. This has afforded me a versatile critical vocabulary, one that wouldn't be possible if it weren't for this program. If my undergraduate study is the foundation for my interests as a writer, my graduate study honed these interests and skills into a degree that isn't only practical in the contemporary office, but crucial in analyzing the rhetoric and language of our contemporary culture. The enclosures in this portfolio reflect this and demonstrate this progression through the past two years.

I currently work for a small company that rehabilitates adults with learning disabilities and individuals who have been injured at their previous job. Much of our communication is through the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Department of Labor, so clear and incisive writing is crucial, as is an ability to identify connections and facilitate more effective communication between staff and clients. My ability to adapt and thrive in these demands is surely in part thanks to this program, and the writing skills I've developed during this graduate program haven't proven to be a great advantage in my work. My implementation of these skills is assuredly present in both my day-to-day work, and my portfolio selections. I look forward to the future academic and professional endeavors this degree has afforded me.

“She Sounds Hideous!” Humor and Gender in Advertising

You may recall the “Jake from State Farm” commercials from a year ago: a man is talking with his insurance provider at 3 in the morning, and is discovered by his wife, who takes the late-night call as a rendezvous with another woman. Demanding to know who her husband is speaking to, he flatly replies, “Jake from State Farm.” Wresting the phone from her husband and demanding to know what Jake is wearing (who likewise deadpans “Um...red and khakis?”), she opines “well *she* sounds hideous!” Here, she is only rebuked by her husband, deadpanning again, “well, ‘she’s’ a guy, so...” I focus on this ad in particular due to the different reactions it caused in myself and my girlfriend the first time we watched it. I did not find the ad particularly funny or interesting (nor did I immediately begin critically appraising the ad’s implied commentary on gender and gender roles – it was a lazy Saturday night). My girlfriend, however, found the last rebuke of “well she’s a guy” profoundly funny, even remarking on his delivery in appreciation. In turn, I found the initial Old Spice commercials with Terry Crews hysterical, while my girlfriend only rolled her eyes, frankly stating “that ad is weird, and you’re weird.”

Humor is an indisputable institution in American culture, and it is an institution that effects many of us on a personal level. Humor is ubiquitous, present in everything from the internet, to television, to our daily small talk. However, humor is just as abundant in advertisements as a quick, effective way to capture the audience’s attention during breaks of an episode of *The Walking Dead*. Borrowing from a marketing analysis’ definition of humor and coupling it with my own interpretation, I define humor as any unexpected notion that triggers sincere amusement in the individual perceiving it. But this sincere reaction can be compromised if the effect is used to manipulate the individual psychologically. While advertising’s manipulation of empathetic themes is certainly covered ground, what of humor’s intrinsic value?

Does an ad without humor have no value (or even a negative value), while an ad that evokes a genuine humorous response have positive value? By “value” I mean that it adds something positive to our existence, whether it is making us feel better by laughing, or even providing a unique perspective on life. Using marketing texts, I will analyze the key methods of how advertising authorities implement humor. Whether or not these ads have value is a contentious issue for many reasons, but ultimately the problematic costs of manipulation dominate by attrition. Despite being humorous, an ad’s attempts to appeal to age groups and gender differences can be problematic.

There are strong precedents for incorporating humor in advertisements. Bud Light’s sales dropped for the first time in 27 years after forgoing humorous advertising in favor of their “drinkability” campaign. CEO Dave Peacock conceded that “we [Anheuser-Busch] felt like we had to capture [younger drinkers] with that product attribute” (Mullman 2009). While companies’ attempts to appeal to younger consumers is a staple of advertising strategy, it is still worthwhile to note the negative results of deviating from a humor-based strategy to the “drinkability” sell. In fact, this negative impact almost seems like an inconsistency, as one would imagine younger viewers are more inclined to purchase beer on the premise that it is eminently drinkable. It is also important to consider what products typically use humor as an advertising device, and what audiences those commercials are aimed at. A perusal of articles regarding humor in advertising gradually illuminate this target audience. Kenneth Hein wrote an investigative article examining Sprite’s move towards more bizarre and humorous ads to combat its declining public image. Hein only briefly mentions the most telling part of the article, that Coke began “to create edgy Gen Y male-friendly spots” in an effort to bolster sales (Hein 2006). Specifically, the Sprite ads featured avant-garde imagery and over-the-top slogans like “Obey

Your Thirst” in a faux-Orwellian presentation. From what we’ve seen thus far from the Budweiser commercials and now the Sprite article, it’s obvious that these two companies are specifically attempting to appeal to young male viewers.

This is not surprising. Many of the ads we see on television—especially those for soft drinks and beer—feature young men enjoying their free time and company, enjoying time “with the boys.” In Sprite’s case, the use of bizarre elements to attract the viewer’s attention is comparable Old Spice’s depiction of Terry Crews’ absurd masculinity: a sense of bizarre and nonsensical humor is often popular with younger men (Hein 2006). Other Old Spice ads embrace this masculinity with an aloof irony, like the “Man Your Man Could Smell Like” ads, which feature an escalating series of outlandish benefits to using Old Spice (Edwards 2010). When we think of ads that are aimed at women, most of the only ones that come to mind are tampon commercials, low fat foods, shampoo/conditioners, and childcare items (diapers, formula, and so forth). Obviously these are gendered commercials because the products are geared towards women, but it seems as though these are typically the only commercials aimed at women. Women enjoy beer and soft drinks just as much as men, but given this extreme division in gendered ads, marketers seem to be going for the easy sell in their products: products that appeal towards women will feature more subdued, “lighter” qualities, and products that typically appeal to men will feature the qualities Hein’s article describes above. In large part, most humorous ads seem to be geared towards men.

Here, we may be tempted to argue that this emphasis on the male buyer is indicative of the patriarchal nature of our society, and we may not be wrong. It is also important to consider the nature of these products. These humorous ads are effective in winning the viewers’ attention, and even sales, but they are focused on very simple products. Jeff Rosenblum acknowledges this

trend, observing that these are typically simple products like deodorant, beer, junk food and so forth. Specifically, he examines the Old Spice commercial featuring Terry Crews. These commercials feature absurdly exaggerated masculine themes for humorous effect, but this is an effect that gets lost between men and women. He writes that “every time I see the ads, I laugh out loud. Like many of you, I make my voice three octaves lower and recite: ‘Hello, ladies, look at your man. Now back to me...’ Each time, I cackle at how funny I am while my wife looks at me like I am a complete schmuck” (Rosenblum 2011). We may recall the differences of opinion shared by my girlfriend and me as well: the absurd humor in the Old Spice commercial doesn’t seem to have much pull with female viewers. Rosenblum also attributes the use of humor in Old Spice ads to a simple necessity, making the blunt observation that it’s difficult to sell a product in a variety of ways if that product is for armpits. While some research indicates that humor has greater appeal for “high involvement” products – products that cause a significant change in one’s life, versus “low involvement” products like the ones described above (Eisend, 1) – the bulk of evidence suggests that humor is applied most often to simple products, especially simple men’s products.

If most humorous ads are geared towards men and men’s products, where does this leave women? Thwarting expectations, Old Spice is unique amongst the three companies described here because the “Man Your Man Could Smell Like” article was actually created with women in mind, despite its masculine presentation. While its humor may consist of bizarre non sequiturs common to the more recent Old Spice commercials, its goal is to convince women to buy body wash and deodorant for “their man.” Breaking down the elements of the commercial, this intention becomes plain: diamonds, tickets to “that thing you want to go to,” and so forth. Lampooning its own brand for its absurd masculinity, Old Spice pushes in the opposite direction:

rather than trying to appeal to men, it appeals to women to buy the product. This strategy was determined by marketing research, which determined that over 50% of body wash purchases were made by *women*, not men (Edwards 2010). Still, Old Spice is driving demand through men, prompting women to buy the product as a *result* of this demand. The ad is ultimately masculine thematically and commercially. While it targets women, the purchase of the product is the result of the man's demand. Nonetheless, it does indicate (as does my personal anecdote) that women respond positively to humorous ads in turn.

A study in 2004 showed that women under the age of 50 preferred ads with sarcasm, while almost all women generally agreed that if an ad was humorous, they would be more receptive to seeing that ad again in the future (Brown 2004). It is interesting to note that younger women prefer ads with sarcasm, despite the fact that, as we've seen, advertising companies aim more bizarre/humorous ads at young men. This connection is difficult to determine, but as with my personal example, Rosenblum's article, and Brown's study here, this difference of preference is indeed a reality. The difference in preference may just be a difference between men and women based upon personality, gender roles and relation to a masculine-focused consumer culture. As I said before, most of the ads geared towards women typically focus on personal hygiene products, infant-care and beauty items. Very little humor is employed in these ads. Most commercials, like an ad for Garnier Fructis, emphasizes confidence and a 'spunky' attitude in conjunction with their product. Similarly, a commercial for Tampax assures its potential buyers that they will feel confident and self-assured in public situations, thanks to their product's design. Ads aimed at women are hinged on comfort and confidence. Brown recognizes this lack of humor in ads like the above as well, and argues that "marketers looking to target women might

try putting more humor in their ads” (2004). While it’s clear that humor can appeal to both men and women, advertising companies use humorous ads directed almost entirely at male viewers.

Perhaps the most definitive analysis of audience factors and humor are found in Charles Gulas and March Weinberger’s *Humor in Advertising*. The text discusses the various types of humor, its psychological effects, and most importantly, audience factors. Gulas and Weinberger address humor through its psychological effects, and break humor down to three different variations: cognitive-perceptual, superiority and relief (23). The simplest, the *cognitive-perceptual* approach, argues that the key to a humorous ad’s success relies on “incongruity,” or the subversion of audience expectations. It focuses on the object or idea itself in humor. *Superiority* is more complex, and bases itself on an ancient Greek philosophy that views humor as a form of derision. Superiority humor focuses on the emotions involved in a joke, and often makes a concept/person/place the object of ridicule. Another way to interpret superiority humor is the outcome at the end: there is a defined winner and a defined loser. The final form of humor, *relief*, uses psychological and biological parameters to argue that laughter exists as a form of catharsis in response to a subversion of viewer expectations (24-34). All three types of humor are different in their approach and presentation. Still, all three types of humor are similar in that they focus on the viewer’s expectations, and often indicate some kind of subversion of those expectations, presenting what Weinberger and Gulas identify as a “challenge” to the viewer (35). It is no surprise to learn that there are psychological implications and manipulations occurring when a humorous advertisement appears on television. Eschewing the notion of ‘evil,’ it stands that this is nonetheless negatively manipulative. If the humor evoked in the viewer is the result of calculated manipulation, a product in itself of tireless test audiences, psychological research and quarterly expectations, that humor, for all intents and purposes, feels cheapened. Compound that

dilemma with the previous gender implications, and the authenticity of the ad's humor is complicated by the societal iceberg lurking beneath these manipulations.

Gulas and Weinberger continue in Chapter 3 to investigate audience factors. Humor is broken down into two formulae: an agent, an object, and the audience (that receives the humor), and the understanding that the company may or may not benefit from the successful implementation of humor in that company's advertisement (40). They also touch upon the disparity in reactions between my girlfriend and I regarding to the two commercials we examined previously. However, these findings are vague at best, stating "it is clear that humor differences exist between men and women. The implications of these differences are less clear...research in education generally has not found significant gender effects on humor response" (44). This recalls the dilemma I discussed earlier: there is clearly something advertisers recognize between men and women's preferences, but this difference is difficult to pinpoint. Approximately, we can say that men prefer dumb, blunt humor and women tend to prefer more subtle, sarcastic humor. Yet we gain nothing by making this distinction; Gulas and Weinberger's discovery is not overwhelmingly helpful itself. But Gulas and Weinberger note that most audience analysis is either too old to be relevant, or limited in scope. It may be the case that there is no need for advertisers to probe this difference if what works, works already. The question that remains is not humor itself, but the type of humor and to whom that humor is directed. Articles in market research clearly indicate that the trends described earlier in this analysis are relevant. In fact, it is entirely possible that the trends in surreal-versus-sarcastic commercials are the product of research such as *Humor in Advertising* and Brown's article, where test audiences and focus groups provided a rough sketch of something bigger; as before, however, the superficial results – if effective – could be enough from a business standpoint.

It may be beneficial to look back on the Old Spice / State Farm example in reference to the psychological motivations behind humorous advertisements. The State Farm commercial's categorical placement is rather clear – it uses cognitive displacement to subvert audience expectations, but also relief in the potential affair turning out to be the mundane activity of getting insurance rates. The Old Spice commercial's categorization is vaguer – there is no clear object of ridicule, nor is there particularly any sense of relief due to the frenetic pace of the advertisement. It is conceivable that the object of ridicule is the advertisement itself, due to its absurd presentation, a concept addressed later in *Humor in Advertising*. Gulas and Weinberger found that in a number of different analytical models (and in a variety of metrics) nonsensical and absurd advertisements reign at the top of the heap, with surprising advertisements coming in at second most often (99-102). With this data in mind, it would seem that the State Farm advertisement is somewhat rarer, as most male-oriented ads we've examined (Sprite, Budweiser) do seem to strive for a surprising twist over sarcasm or satire. However, the disparity between the data from Gulas and Weinberger's research, and the much more recent air date for the Old Spice advertisement means that this push towards nonsensical ads increased exponentially over the course of time. The increase of social media's prevalence may have caused such an extreme push towards the attention-grabbing surreal nature of the advertisement, given the rush of information and distractions afforded by the internet. If the trend with the ads we've examined earlier is indicative of a long-standing favoring of young male viewers, there is indeed a gender component. But the rise in relatively ad-free media outlets seem to have forced marketer's hands. This rise in bizarre ads could be a new method of forcefully grabbing audiences' attention in response to the increased demand of consumers' attention due to social media and the internet.

Nevertheless, Gulas and Weinberger note that the push for more attention-grabbing ads is symptomatic of two major factors. The first is perhaps due simply to the frenetic nature of television itself; advertisements in magazines are more subtle and emphasize sarcasm due to the limitations of its medium (101). The second factor relates to the changing landscape in technology and media; even in 2006, Gulas and Weinberger noted the increase in media choices, remarking that contemporary advertisers found themselves “lost in the clutter” (191). It then seems indicative that the irreverent humor in Old Spice, Sprite, Budweiser, and Snickers commercials is symptomatic of American consumer culture. To avoid being lost in the rush of distractions social media offers, advertisers are leaning more heavily on the humor option to appeal to viewers. While this makes it sound as though marketers are struggling against a changing culture, the evidence for their success is widespread. Advertisements litter Facebook, play before Youtube videos, and appear before and after news articles. If this is a sign of desperation, then it’s working extremely well for marketers. Given this new focus on advertising online, these attention-grabbing advertisements may exist because the customers’ attention is now away from the television. Ironically, these ads are less intrusive than their early ancestors. Despite the amount of time that has passed since their heyday, we may still recall pop-up ads with a slight (or major) tinge of revulsion. Ads operate differently online today, but adopt the same strategy TV ads use: attract as much attention to the product as possible, at the risk of leaving viewers with a negative impression.

Marketers have good reason for implementing humor in advertisements if only for the simple reason of humor’s powerful effect on our memory and goodwill. Hwiman Chung and Xinshu Zhao confirm this notion in their incisive study, “The Effects of Humor on Ad Processing,” wherein a number of subjects were tested on how memorable an ad was, and

whether that ad was humorous or not. Chung and Zhao found that “humorous ads worked for both familiar and non-familiar brands in terms of attitude and memory of advertisement,” which “indicates simply that humorous executions are still more effective than non-humorous ads” (92). While it is arguable that a manipulative underpinning exists in this push – the ad’s mental effect on the viewers – at this point there is nothing to truly indicate that this is negative or harmful. It also speaks for efficacy’s sake that I recalled both the State Farm and Old Spice ads with remarkable clarity.

Elpers et al supports and expounds on Chung and Zhao’s research in their article “Humor in Television Advertising: A Moment-To-Moment Analysis” by pinpointing a particularly effective form of advertising addressed Gulas and Weinberger: the cognitive incongruity of surprise as an advertising technique. They found that “humorous episodes are said to generate surprise by the presence of incongruous situations. Surprise is then converted into humor when incongruities are resolved in a playful context” (593). This reciprocates and further legitimizes the claims made in *Humor in Advertising*; returning again to the Old Spice / State Farm example, we see more of a prevalence in ‘surprise humor’ in the former commercial. The ad’s efficacy is again plain. By this point one may be compelled to argue that there is little moral value at stake, since the primary motivation of advertisers seems to simply be attracting the viewers’ attention. But a recent study titled “Those Who Laugh Are Defenseless: How Humor Breaks Resistance to Influence” by Madelijn Strick, Rob Holland, Rick van Baaren and Ad van Knippenberg reveals that there is indeed a darker, manipulative underpinning to the implementation of humor in ads.

Strick et al. argue principally that “advertisements (ads) pervade every social space” and use humor to break down “consumer resistance... ‘a motivated state in which the goal is to withstand the effects of a persuasive communication.’ (213)” The average consumer’s immediate

reaction to most advertisements on television is to reject the advertisement and ignore it as a nuisance. Strick et al. define this resistance as “as basic need to restore freedom in response to a persuasive attempt” (213). By refocusing the issue —consumer resistance instead of the business’s motivations—Strick et al. present a more unnerving depiction of humor in ads. There is more to humor in advertising than its existence as a simple means of grabbing the viewer’s attention. Rather, it is the product of a long-lasting conflict between marketers and their consumers’ attention. Humor is instead a subtle way to flag the audience’s attention without resorting to a cattle bell; Strick et al. acknowledge an overtly obnoxious angle is not effective at all (220). While humorous ads diminish the viewer’s resistance to their influence, they simultaneously bolster positive brand associations in these same viewers. In their study, participants were “blatantly remind[ed] they are the target of an influence attempt,” but overall reactions to the ads were still overwhelmingly positive (215).

Finally, Strick et al. acknowledge Gulas and Weinberger’s research in confirming that humor often uses two primary components: a cognitive phase of incongruity (which enjoys a resolution) and the experience of positive effect to inspire feelings of goodwill and relief in audiences (214). The Old Spice / State Farm commercials mentioned earlier use this incongruity-relief in different ways. The Old Spice commercial uses surreal humor to disarm its audience, its only relief residing in the banality of its product, a body wash; the State Farm commercial is more traditional in its revelation that a midnight tryst is actually the husband making a late night call to his insurance agent.

Strick et al.’s findings seem accurate. Recalling my personal experience, I was more receptive to the Old Spice commercials, and even noticed the products in stores more often after seeing Terry Crews’ bizarre exhibition on television. My girlfriend was less compelled by the

State Farm advertisement, but she did continue to react positively upon seeing the ad after repeated views. Strick et al. argue that humor in this effect “increases positive brand associations” and later conclude humor “forestalls the development of negative brand associations due to its distractive properties” (214, 219). Suffice to say that the Old Spice commercial makes use of excessively distracting elements, executing its presentation flawlessly. Old Spice, Sprite and Snickers also use a concept of humor that is “thematically unrelated to the brand” (220). That is to say, the commercial may casually reference the product at its conclusion, but it otherwise abstains from focusing entirely on the product. Its motivation here is simple: if the advertisement draws too much attention to the fact it is selling a product, audience resistance increases. This argument is not entirely consistent; we may recall that the State Farm commercial features the company’s name frequently. However, the emphasis lies solely in the interaction between the husband, wife, and Jake. Viewers are essentially powerless to this combination of thematically unrelated humor (223). The notion of powerlessness casts considerable doubt on the previously innocuous notion that companies are using humor as a simple means to sell their product. Instead, it seems that marketers constantly manipulate the audience’s expectations, emotions and attention in an effort to push their products. An ethical problem arises, and it’s one that has been examined extensively by previous theorists/critics.

Strick et al. flatly argue that “advertisers use humor to sell practically anything... they are right to do so” (220), and even acknowledge Gulas and Weinberger’s research as a source of motivation for marketers. It is true that if these methods of attracting viewer’s attention work, there is no reason for marketers to cease using them. If that’s the case, then it is up to the individual to develop a personal resistance against these humorous – but manipulative – ads, as they would with any other kind of advertisement. If the ad does cause genuine feelings of

amusement, the implications are disturbing, because the audience is being manipulated into expressing goodwill by unscrupulous means. It is difficult to see these ads as harmless when we consider Strick et al.'s research. Given that there is no foreseeable end to these ads, it may simply be a bitter pill to swallow.

From a more optimistic outlook, one may develop agency against manipulation by acknowledging the humorous ad's existence as a manipulative device. This steels the viewer with an agency allowing them to find the ad humorous while simultaneously allowing them to be aware of their status as a targeted consumer. For instance, I laughed at the Old Spice commercial. But it doesn't mean that I'm about to run out to the nearest store and leave with armfuls of Old Spice deodorant and body wash. I may recall the commercial while shopping and understand that the advertisement has done its job effectively; from there, the option to purchase the item would still, technically, be mine to make. Recognizing this manipulation is its own advantage, and provides something of a compromise in the face of the constant bombardment we endure daily by marketing.

State Farm's commercial offers something of a twist to ads depicting domestic situations in the home with its humorous presentation, but there are still implications to consider. Erica Scharrer et al. discuss the way genders are portrayed in advertisements and their adverse effect on the viewer's psychology. Ads featuring tacit gender roles mean that "individuals can learn norms and expectations regarding 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' roles within the home for men and women" (215). Again, the State Farm commercial offers a twist by taking a 'raunchy' subject – an affair – and subverts our expectations to create a humorous effect. The wife is resolute in her hostile suspicion of her husband throughout the ad. Obviously this is meant to be amusing, but if the roles were reversed, would the effect be as humorous? Scharrer et al. point to

superiority theory as the probable source of humor in gender-driven commercials. We may recall that superiority theory posits that the “butt of a joke” is the source of humor by means of derision. Here, the wife is clearly the butt of the joke in her refusal to take her husband at his word. It is possible that the State Farm ad is gender specific by coincidence, and the fact that the woman is the butt of the joke is inconsequential to the ad’s humor. Still, questions can be made: is it implied that these affairs are common? Do the actions of the wife “validate” the desires of the husband to engage in an actual affair? Is the husband’s wife foolish and harpy like? While these questions may be needlessly probing, there are still implied—and negative—indications of gender roles in the advertisement.

It is difficult to say whether or not these implications are harmful, or as dire as the previous analysis makes them out to be. After all, my girlfriend at the time found the advertisement humorous, and she is a conscious individual towards gender representation and women’s struggles in commercialism. In this case, we may return to our previous example of acknowledging the manipulative nature of humor in advertisements while simultaneously finding humor in them. While this doesn’t make for a perfect solution, it still provides the audience with a small amount of agency to promote Strick et al.’s concept of consumer resistance.

But if we adopt the understanding that most advertisements will be geared towards the attention of young men, we still see that ads indicate our society’s ultimate interest. Even ads geared towards women, as we saw with Tampax and Garnier Fructis, offer confidence and beauty in exchange for choosing their brand. Of ads typical to women, most seem to emphasize domesticity. As Scharrer et al. note, these trends in television ads “[are] underscored by the considerable evidence that gender role portrayals in advertising can influence the attitudes and behavior of audience members” (218). Humor then can be used as tool in determining which ads

feature humor, and which ads don't. The emphasis of humor in ads aimed at young men indicates this gender bias; ads directed at women seem almost bereft of humor, and when they are humorous, they tend to depict a woman in a domestic setting and not much more (Scharrer 220). Given the manipulation of gender roles and the audience's psychology, the humor in advertisements cannot be taken as humor 'in itself'. Rather, it serves an ulterior motive, providing a value to marketers, but not necessarily the average American citizen. We might laugh, but we also need to recognize that we're playing part in a larger context that takes advantage of psychology and gender roles to sell a product.

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Humor in Advertising Original Draft

One may recall the “Jake from State Farm” commercials from a year ago: a man is talking with his insurance provider at 3 in the morning, and is discovered by his wife, who takes the late-night call as a rendezvous with another woman. Demanding who her husband is speaking to, he deadpans “Jake from State Farm.” Upon wresting the phone from her husband and demanding to know what Jake is wearing (he likewise deadpans “Um...red and khakis?”), she opines “well *she* sounds hideous!” Here she is only rebuked by her husband, deadpanning again “well, she’s a guy, so...” I bring this ad up in particular due to the different reactions it caused in myself and my girlfriend at the time. I did not find the ad particularly funny or interesting (nor did I immediately begin critically appraising the ad’s implied commentary on gender and gender roles – it was a lazy Saturday night). My girlfriend, however, found the last rebuke of “well she’s a guy” as fundamentally funny, even remarking on his delivery in appreciation. In turn, I found the initial Old Spice commercials with Terry Crews hysterical, while my girlfriend only rolled her eyes, bemusedly stating “that ad is weird, and you’re weird.”

Humor is an indisputable institution in American culture, and is an institution that exists on a personal level—spiritually or physically—that floods contemporary existence. Its values are intrinsic, and while it’s arguable that humor is found widespread on the internet most prominently in contemporary times, its chief platform is still televised comedy. The value in these television programs is plain: relief and entertainment for viewers from the stresses of modernity, relationships, or just boredom. Hand and hand with televised comedy, of course, are humorous advertisements. Indeed, humor is also a large of advertising as a quick, effective (and often obnoxious) way to capture the audience’s attention during breaks of an episode of *The*

Walking Dead. Many of them humorous, or at least attempt to be humorous. I borrow from a marketing analysis' own definition of humor and couple it with my own to define humor as any unexpected notion that triggers genuine amusement in the individual perceiving it. However, this notion can be compromised if the effect is used to manipulate the individual psychologically. Advertising's manipulative cooption of empathetic themes is certainly covered ground; to simply study these affects is trite to say the least. But what of humor's intrinsic value? Does an ad without humor have zero value, while an ad that evokes a genuine humorous response have positive value? By "value" I mean that it adds something positive to our existence, whether it is making us feel better by laughing, or even saying something about us as viewers. Using a number of texts related in and out of the business field, I will analyze the key tenets of how advertising authorities and corporations implement humor. While humorous ads can have a positive effect in their humor, the implications of their portrayal of gender are problematic.

The case for incorporating humor in advertising has plentiful data behind it. Bud Light's sales dropped for the first time in 27 years after forgoing humorous advertising in favor of their "drinkability" campaign. Even CEO Dave Peacock conceded that "we [Anheuser-Busch] felt like we had to capture [younger drinkers] with that product attribute" (Mullner 2009). Corporations appealing to younger consumers is an obvious factor in advertising, but it is worthwhile to note the negative results of deviating from a humor-based strategy to the "drinkability" sell. In fact, this negative impact almost seems like an inconsistency, as one would imagine younger viewers are more inclined to purchase beer on the premise that it is eminently drinkable. It is also important to note what products typically use humor as an advertising device, and who these commercials are aimed at. By investigating further into articles relating to advertising humor, we gradually see the target audience revealed. Kenneth Hein wrote an investigative article

examining Sprite's move towards more bizarre and humorous ads in lieu of waning public image. Hein only briefly mentions the most telling part of the article, writing that Coke began "to create edgy Gen Y male-friendly spots" in an effort to bolster sales (Hein 2006). Specifically, the Sprite ads featured avant-garde imagery and over-the-top slogans like "Obey Your Thirst" in a faux-Orwellian presentation. Given the data from the Budweiser commercials and now the Sprite article we see that these two companies are specifically appealing to young male viewers. This is not particularly surprising.

Many of the ads we see on television—especially those for soft drinks and beer—feature young men enjoying their free time and company, with women either presented as a nagging obstacle to good times, or as a sexualized object. In Sprite's case, the use of bizarre elements to attract the viewer's attention is comparable to the hyperbolic manliness of Terry Crews in Old Spice commercials: a sense of bizarre and nonsensical humor is often popular with younger men (Hein 2006). When we think of ads that are aimed at women, most of the only ones that come to mind are tampon commercials, shampoo/conditioners and childcare items (diapers, formula, and so forth). Obviously these are gendered commercials because the products are geared towards women, but it seems as though these are the only commercials aimed at women. Women enjoy beer and soft drinks just as much as men, but given the focus on men's viewership, it seems as though marketers are playing a part in the male-centric attitudes that pervade American culture. If this is true, then humorous ads, especially those aimed at young men, are part of a larger problem.

One may be tempted to argue that this emphasis on the male buyer is indicative of the patriarchal nature of our society, and they may not be wrong. As before, however, we must also consider the nature of these products. These humorous ads are effective in raising viewer

attention, and even sales, but they are focused on very simple products. Jeff Rosenblum acknowledges this trend and notes that these are typically simple products – deodorant, beer, junk food and so forth. Specifically, he examines the Old Spice commercial featuring Terry Crews. Like the Sprite advertisements, these commercials feature absurdly exaggerated masculine themes for humorous effect, but this is an effect that gets lost between men and women. He writes that “every time I see the ads, I laugh out loud. Like many of you, I make my voice three octaves lower and recite: ‘Hello, ladies, look at your man. Now back to me ...’ Each time, I cackle at how funny I am while my wife looks at me like I am a complete schmuck” (Rosenblum 2011). This recalls the difference of opinion shared by my girlfriend and I at the time as well: the absurd humor in the Old Spice commercial simply doesn’t have much pull with female viewers. Rosenblum also attributes the humor of Old Spice ads to simple necessity, making the blunt observation that it’s difficult to sell a product in other ways if that product is for armpits. But if we compare the Old Spice ads with Sprite and Budweiser’s push towards more humorous ads that test well with young males, Old Spice’s focus is taking part in marketers’ focus on male-oriented advertising. If most humorous ads are geared towards men and men’s products, where does this leave women? Women were indeed found to respond positively to humorous ads, but in different parameters.

A study in 2004 showed that women under the age of 50 preferred ads with sarcasm, while almost all women generally agreed that if an ad was humorous, they would be more receptive to seeing that ad again in the future (Brown 2004). It is interesting to note that younger women prefer ads with sarcasm, despite the fact that, as we’ve seen, advertising companies aim more bizarre/humorous ads at young men. This connection is difficult to determine, but as with my personal example, Rosenblum’s article, and Brown’s study here, this difference of preference

is indeed a reality. The difference in preference may just be a simple difference between men and women in response to personality, gender roles and relation to a masculine-focused consumer culture. As I said before, most of the few ads geared towards women focus on personal hygiene products, infant-care and beauty items. Very little humor is employed in these ads. Most commercials, like an ad for Garnier Fructis, emphasizes confidence and a ‘spunky’ attitude in conjunction with their product. Similarly, a commercial for Tampax assures its patrons that they will feel confident and self-assured in public situations thanks to their product’s design. Ads aimed specifically at women are hinged on comfort and confidence. Brown recognized this lacking humor in ads as well and opined that “marketers looking to target women might try putting more humor in their ads” (2004). While humor may be a universal concept between men and women, advertising companies use humorous ads hinging almost entirely on male viewers.

Perhaps the most definitive analysis of audience factors and humor are found in Charles Gulas and March Weinberger’s *Humor in Advertising*. The text discusses the various gradations of humor, its psychological underpinnings, and most importantly, audience factors. Gulas and Weinberger address humor through the underpinnings of its psychology, and essentially break humor down to three different variations: cognitive-perceptual, superiority and relief (Gulas & Weinberger, 23). The cognitive-perceptual approach argues that the key to a humorous ad’s success lies on “incongruity,” or the subversion of audience expectations. It focuses on the object or idea itself in humor. Superiority is more complex, and hinges itself on Ancient Greek philosophy that views humor as a form of derision. Superiority humor focuses on the emotions involved in a joke, and often makes a concept/person/place the object of ridicule. Another way to interpret superiority humor is the outcome at the end: there is a defined winner and a defined loser. The final form of humor, relief, focuses on the psychological and biological parameters of

laughter itself, and essentially argues that laughter exists as a catharsis in response to a subversion of viewer expectations (Weinberger & Gulas, 24-34). Obviously, all three types of humor focus on the viewer's expectations, and often indicate some kind of subversion of those expectations, and present what Weinberger and Gulas identify as a "challenge" to the viewer (35). We may not be surprised to learn that there are psychological implications and manipulations occurring when a humorous advertisement appears on television. Eschewing the notion of 'evil,' it stands that this use is negatively manipulative. If the humor evoked in the viewer is the result of calculated manipulation, a product in itself of tireless test audiences, psychological research and quarterly expectations, that humor feels cheapened. Compound that dilemma with the previous gender implications, and the authenticity of the ad's humor is complicated in the societal iceberg underlying these manipulations.

Gulas and Weinberger continue in Chapter 3 to investigate audience factors. Humor is broken down into two formulae: an agent, an object and the audience (that receives the humor), and the understanding that the company may or may not benefit from the successful implementation of humor in that company's advertisement (40). They also touch upon the disparity of reactions between my girlfriend and I in regards to the two commercials examined previously. However, Gulas and Weinberger's findings are vague at best, as they note that "it is clear that humor differences exist between men and women. The implications of these differences are less clear...research in education generally has not found significant gender effects on humor response" (44). This recalls the dilemma I discussed earlier: there is clearly something advertisers recognize between men and women's preferences, but this difference is difficult to elucidate. At best, we can say that men prefer dumb, blunt humor and women tend to prefer more subtle, sarcastic humor. We gain nothing, really, by making this distinction; Gulas

and Weinberger's discovery is not overwhelmingly helpful itself. But Gulas and Weinberger note that most audience analysis is either too old to be relevant, or limited in scope. It may be the case that there is no need for advertisers to probe this difference if what works, works already. But market research clearly exists due to the trends identified earlier in this analysis. It is entirely possible that the trends in surreal-versus-sarcastic commercials are the product of research such as *Humor in Advertising* and Brown's article, where test audiences and focus groups provided a rough sketch at something bigger; as I said before, however, the superficial results – if effective – could be enough from a business standpoint.

It may be beneficial to look back on the Old Spice / State Farm example in reference the psychological motivations behind humorous advertisements. The State Farm commercial's categorical placement is rather clear – it uses cognitive displacement to subvert audience expectations, but also relief in the potential affair turning out to be the mundane activity of getting insurance rates. The Old Spice commercial's placement is more vague – there is no clear object of ridicule, nor is there particularly any sense in relief due to the frenetic pace of the advertisement. It is conceivable that the object of ridicule is the advertisement itself, due to its absurd presentation; this is stated later in *Humor in Advertising*. Gulas and Weinberger found that in a number of different analytical models (and in a variety of metrics) nonsensical and absurd advertisements reign at the top of the heap, with surprising advertisements coming in at second most often (99-102). With this data in mind, it would seem that the State Farm advertisement is something of a rarity, as most male-oriented ads we've examined (Sprite, Budweiser) do seem to drive for a surprising twist over sarcasm or satire. However, the disparity between the data from Gulas and Weinberger's research, and the air date for the Old Spice advertisement (two years) means that this push towards nonsensical ads increased exponentially

over the course of time. At the very least, the increase of social media's prevalence may have caused such an extreme push towards the attention-grabbing surreal nature of the advertisement. If the trend with the ads we've examined earlier is indicative of a long-standing favoring of young male viewers, there is a gender component. But the rise in relatively ad-free media outlets seem to have forced marketer's hands. This rise in stranger ads is being used as a method of forcefully grabbing audiences' attention in response to commercials being placed on the backburner in websites.

Nevertheless, Gulas and Weinberger note that the push for more attention-grabbing ads is symptomatic of two major factors. The first is perhaps due simply to the frenetic nature of television itself; advertisements in magazines were shown to be more subtle and emphasize sarcasm and wit due to the limitations of its medium (101). The second factor relates to the changing landscape in technology and media; even in 2006, Gulas and Weinberger noted the increase in media choices, remarking that contemporary advertisers found themselves "lost in the clutter" (191). It seems indicative then that the irreverent humor in Old Spice, Sprite, Budweiser and Snickers commercials is symptomatic of American consumer culture. To avoid being lost in the rush of distractions social media offers today, advertisers are leaning more heavily on the humor option to appeal to viewers. While this makes it sound as though marketers are struggling against a changing culture, the evidence for their success is widespread. Advertisements litter Facebook alongside and *in* the news feed, play before Youtube videos, and insert themselves before and after news articles. If this is the sign of desperation, then it's working extremely well for marketers. Given this new focus on spending marketing budgets on advertising online, these attention-grabbing advertisements may exist because the customers' attention is now away from the television. Despite the amount of time that has passed since they were a true nuisance, we

might recall pop-up ads with a slight (or major) tinge of revulsion. Ads operate differently online, but with the same ultimate philosophy TV ads carry – attract as much attention to the product as possible, at the risk of leaving viewers with a negative impression.

Marketers have good reason for implementing humor in advertisements if for the simple reason of humor's powerful effect on our memory and goodwill. Hwiman Chung and Xinshu Zhao confirm this notion in their incisive study, "The Effects of Humor on Ad Processing," wherein a number of subjects were tested on how memorable an ad was, and whether that ad was humorous or not. Chung and Zhao found that "humorous ads worked for both familiar and non-familiar brands in terms of attitude and memory of advertisement," which clearly "indicates simply that humorous executions are still more effective than non-humorous ads" (92). While it is arguable that a manipulative underpinning exists in this push – the ad's mental effect on the viewers – at this point there is nothing to truly indicate that this is negative or harmful. It also speaks for efficacy's sake that I recalled both the State Farm and Old Spice ads with remarkable clarity.

Elpers et al support and expounds on Chung and Zhao's research in their article "Humor in Television Advertising: A Moment-To-Moment Analysis" by pinpointing a particularly effective form of advertising Gulas and Weinberger discuss: the cognitive incongruity of surprise as an advertising technique. They found that "humorous episodes are said to generate surprise by the presence of incongruous situations. Surprise is then converted into humor when incongruities are resolved in a playful context" (593). Obviously this reciprocates and further legitimizes the claims made in *Humor in Advertising*, and returning again to the Old Spice / State Farm example, we see more of a prevalence in 'surprise humor' in the former commercial. The ad's efficacy is again plain. By this point one may be compelled to argue that there is little moral

value at stake, since the prime motivation of advertisers seems to simply be attracting the viewers' attention. But a very recent study titled "Those Who Laugh Are Defenseless: How Humor Breaks Resistance to Influence" by Madelijn Strick, Rob Holland, Rick van Baaren and Ad van Knippenberg revealed that there is indeed a darker, manipulative underpinning to the implementation of humor in ads.

Strick et al argue principally that "advertisements (ads) pervade every social space" and use humor to break down "consumer resistance... 'a motivated state in which the goal is to withstand the effects of a persuasive communication.' (213)" The average consumer's immediate reaction to most advertisements on television is to reject the advertisement and ignore it as a nuisance. Strick et al defines this resistance as "as basic need to restore freedom in response to a persuasive attempt" (213). By changing the perspective—consumer resistance instead of the business's motivations—Strick et al present a more unnerving depiction of humor in ads. There is more to humor in advertising than a simple means of grabbing the viewer's attention. Rather, it is the symptom of a long-fought war of attrition between marketers and their consumers' attention. Humor is instead a subtle way to flag the audience's attention without resorting to loud noises and obnoxious distraction; Strick et al acknowledge the obnoxious angle is not effective at all (220). While humorous ads diminish the viewer's resistance to their influence, they simultaneously bolster positive brand associations in these same viewers. In their study, participants were "blatantly remind[ed] they are the target of an influence attempt," but overall reactions to the ads were still overwhelmingly positive (215).

Finally, Strick et al acknowledge Gulas and Weinberger's research in confirming that humor often uses two primary components: a cognitive phase of incongruity (which enjoys a resolution) and the experience of positive effect to inspire feelings of goodwill and relief in

audiences (214). The Old Spice / State Farm commercials mentioned earlier used this incongruity-relief in different ways. The Old Spice commercial used surreal humor to disarm its audience, with its only relief lying in the fact that it was simply a commercial for body wash; the State Farm commercial was more traditional in the revelation that a midnight tryst was actually the deadpanning husband speaking with his insurance agent.

Based on my personal experience, Strick et al's findings seem accurate. After the first time, I was more receptive to the Old Spice commercials, and even noticed the products in stores more often after seeing Terry Crews' bizarre exhibition on television. My girlfriend was less compelled by the State Farm advertisement, but she did comment positively even after seeing the ad come on television. Strick et al argue that humor in this effect "increases positive brand associations" and later conclude humor "forestalls the development of negative brand associations due to its distractive properties" (214, 219). It is sufficient at least to say that the Old Spice commercial makes use of excessively distractive properties, and it executes its presentation flawlessly. Old Spice, Sprite and Snickers also use the concept of humor that is "thematically unrelated to the brand" (220). That is to say, the commercial may casually reference the product at its conclusion but otherwise abstain from focusing entirely on the product. Its motivation here is simple: if the advertisement draws too much attention to the fact it is selling a product, audience resistance increases. This argument is not consistent entirely, as we may recall that the State Farm commercial does feature the insurance company's name frequently. However, the emphasis lies solely in the interaction between the husband, wife, and Jake. Viewers are essentially powerless to this combination of thematically unrelated humor (223). The notion of powerlessness casts considerable doubt on the previously innocuous notion that companies are using humor as a simple means to sell their product. Instead, it seems that marketers constantly

manipulate the audience's expectations, emotions and attention in an effort to push their products. An ethical problem arises, and it's one that has been examined extensively by previous theorists/critics.

As Strick et al flatly note, "advertisers use humor to sell practically anything... they are right to do so" (220), and even acknowledge Gulas and Weinberger's research as a point of motivation for marketers. It is true that if these methods of attracting viewer's attention work, there is little to no reason for marketers to cease using them. If that's the case, then it is up to the individual to find personal agency against these humorous ads, as they would with any other kind of advertisement. If the ad does cause genuine feelings of amusement, the implications are disconcerting, because the audience is being manipulated into expressing goodwill from a highly calculated stand point. It is difficult to see these ads as harmless given Strick et al's research. Given that there is no end in sight to their broadcast, it may simply be a bitter pill to swallow.

In a more optimistic sense, one may acknowledge the humorous ad's quality as a manipulative device. This provides the viewer with an agency allowing them to find the ad humorous while simultaneously allowing them to be aware of their status as a targeted consumer. For instance, I laughed at the Old Spice commercial. But that wouldn't necessarily mean that I would run out to the nearest store and leave with armfuls of Old Spice deodorant and body wash. I may recall the commercial while shopping and understand that the advertisement has done its job effectively; from there, the option to purchase the item would still be mine to make – with the understanding that the choice to purchase the Old Spice would be informed by the ad's influence. Recognizing this manipulation is its own agency, and provides something of a compromise in the face of the constant bombardment we endure daily by marketing.

State Farm's commercial offers something of a twist to the domestic ads depicting gender roles in the home in its humorous presentation, but there are many factors in its implications to consider. Erica Scharrer et al discuss the way genders are portrayed in advertisements and their adverse effect on the viewer's psychology. Ads featuring tacit gender roles cause "individuals can learn norms and expectations regarding 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' roles within the home for men and women" (215). Again, the State Farm commercial offers a twist by approaching a more 'raunchy' subject matter – an affair – and twists it to humorous effect. The wife is resolute in her hostile suspicion of her husband throughout the ad. Obviously this is the intent of the humor in the ad, but if the roles were reversed, would the effect be as humorous? Scharrer et al point to superiority theory as the probable source of humor in gender-driven commercials. We may recall that superiority theory posits that the "butt of a joke" is the source of humor by means of derision. Here, the wife is clearly the butt of the joke in her refusal to take her husband at his word. It is arguable that the State Farm ad is gender specific by coincidence, and the fact that the woman is the butt of the joke is inconsequential to the ad's humor. Regardless of the personal perceptions surrounding this ad, there are still tacit—and negative—implications of gender in the advertisement.

It is difficult to say whether or not these implications are harmful, or as dire as the previous analysis makes them out to be. After all, my girlfriend at the time found the advertisement humorous, and she is a conscious individual towards gender presentation and women's struggles in commercialism. In this case, we may return to our previous example of acknowledging the manipulative nature of humor in advertisements while simultaneously finding humor in them. While this doesn't make for a perfect solution, it still provides the audience with a modicum of agency to promote Strick et al's concept of consumer resistance.

But if we take the understanding that most advertisements will be geared towards the attention of young men, we still see that ads indicate our society's interest. Even ads geared towards women, as we saw with Tampax and Garnier Fructis, offer confidence and beauty in exchange for choosing their brand. Of ads typical to women, most would seem to emphasize domesticity. As Scharrer et al note, these trends in television ads "[are] underscored by the considerable evidence that gender role portrayals in advertising can influence the attitudes and behavior of audience members" (218). Humor then can be used as a form of power in what ads feature humor, and which ads don't. The emphasis of humor in ads aimed at young men indicates this gender bias; ads directed at women seem bereft of humor, and when they are humorous, they tend to depict a woman in a domestic setting and not much more (Scharrer 220). Given the manipulation of gender roles and the audience's psychology, the humor in advertisements cannot be taken as humor in itself. Rather, it serves an ulterior motive, providing a value to marketers, but not necessarily the average American citizen. We might laugh, but we also need to recognize that we're playing part in a larger context that takes advantage of psychology and gender roles to sell a product.

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Multimodal Cultures: Ocularcentrism and Visuality in Visual Arguments

Our society is largely a visual one, and the rise of our digital culture makes this even more apparent. By “digital culture,” I mean one that is continually immersed in social media, television, print ads and so forth. Information, ranging from the extremely factual to the basest form of advertising, is a permanent part of our culture: a chart analyzing data or a vodka are both visual arguments. It follows that these visual arguments are a major fixture in both professional and popular cultures, because they provide an aesthetically arresting means to distribute information quickly. Visual arguments can also be an element of the visual’s dominance in our society, a term that Nicholas Mirzoeff describes as “ocularcentric” (Rose, *Visual Methodologies* 4). In other words, visual stimuli are intrinsically (at least initially) privileged over all other forms of information. While it is arguable that verbal arguments can provide a fuller, richer form of rhetoric than a visual argument, this is not to say that visual arguments are inferior or ineffective by comparison. In fact, depending on context, visual arguments can be just as effective as verbal arguments.

Ultimately, the problem falls on the dimensionality of the visual argument, but there are ways of adding rhetorical depth to primarily visual arguments. Good or bad, visual arguments are a permanent component in our society, and indicative of the growing demand for multimodal instruction in today’s class rooms. Learning how to create effective visual arguments (or at least identify ones that work versus ones that do not) is an increasingly important ability to possess in contemporary society.

Visual arguments enjoy more prevalence than ever, but their existence is not a recent development. Similarly, while ocularcentrism may be a neologism, its existence has likewise

been the concern of critical analysis for some time. In his essay “The Right to Look,” Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts a definition for what he refers to as ‘visuality’, arguing that the right to visualize is the right to visualize history. It gives us an ability to see beyond the information presented to us by authority figures, or at least create some meaning to our experiences of reality. Mirzoeff is careful to note that this does not equate to autonomy, but it presents “a discursive practice for regulating and rendering the real that has material effects” (Mirzoeff 474, 476). Ocularcentrism might carry some negative connotations initially. In asserting the visual as the center of our senses, other traditional forms of information seem obsolete. It is important to distinguish some exceptions; while print is a visual medium, it lacks the instantaneous impact of a purely visual image. Mirzoeff’s “Right to Look” asserts that this visual dominance is a source of individual empowerment: if we establish visual arguments as opportunities to make a point with maximum efficacy, ocularcentrism can be a powerful tool. In another essay by Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” he quotes Foster’s claim that there is “a difference within the visual...a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein” (Foster, ix). This is an early attempt by Foster to define ‘visuality’ itself, as a means of understanding that we are made to see things a certain way by institutions like advertisers, our government, and so forth. If we couple Foster’s definition with Mirzoeff’s assertion from “The Right to Look”, we are left with a more assertive interpretation than one would initially think. The visual is less of a shorthand understanding of our surroundings, but an interpretation so simple that it is difficult for these institutions to obscure meaning. While in certain cases we may be ‘made to see’ certain things, the knowledge itself that this is the case is an empowering knowledge all the same. Visual *arguments* are in turn an element of this concept, as far as strong visual arguments are considered: we can be especially aware of them as visual

objects, and perhaps this understanding between an image and its viewer makes them more effective.

Martin Jay's analysis of Jacques Ellul's criticism of ocularcentrism – aptly titled “The Crisis of Ocularcentrism” – offers a balance between visual and verbal arguments. Ellul rails against the “medusa-like” sense of the gaze and visuals, “freezing everything on which it fixates into death-like stillness” (311). Ellul's concern is easily valid; we are more of a visual culture than a literary one, as BuzzFeed “listicles” may attest to. But he misses a crucial point that Jay makes: not to construe the visual and/or the literary as being inherently “better” than the other. Jay writes that “[h]umbling the image is no antidote to humiliating the word. It is far healthier to nurture in both what is best called a mutual regard” (323). It is counterintuitive to stack the deck against one or the other; both visual and verbal arguments should be held in equal value, a value that is entirely dependent on context. Dismissing one or the other as inferior will only act to our detriment. Ocularcentrism and visuality can thus be active interpretations of the visual dominance of our culture. Rather than being a symptom of the visual, visuality can instead be a useful tool in conjunction with ocularcentrism: whereas ocularcentrism is as a catch-all term for the predominance of visuals and visual arguments in our culture, visuality is the means by which we interpret these visual stimuli actively.

Since we now have a working definition of ‘visuality’ and ‘ocularcentrism,’ and how they function in contemporary society, it will be beneficial to determine exactly what a ‘visual argument’ consists of. Anthony Blair provides an excellent framework in which we can define both an ‘argument’ and a ‘visual argument’. Blair derives his definition of a visual argument from Daniel O’Keefe’s ‘argument₁’, which states that an argument is anything that creates some kind of proposition to exist. This is a broad term to apply to a definition of ‘argument,’ but Blair

cleverly applies this beyond the written to the visual as well, writing that the propositions (reasons backing a claim) must be "overtly expressed, and that reasons and claim be linguistically explicable" (25). However, Blair notes that O'Keefe doesn't *initially* specify that arguments have to be linguistic or written. They simply need to offer a clear, overtly expressed proposition. We can infer a linguistic response following the interaction with such an argument. In other words, a visual argument can stand on its own if it provides an implicit argument and reasoning – with or without the inclusion of text, or a written argument. This makes it possible to reach our above goal in keeping the visual and the verbal in balanced favor. But, it is important to note that Blair concedes that there are drawbacks to visual arguments. They are rather one-dimensional; that is, they can clearly provide an argument, but lack the depth and breadth a verbal argument can possess (like considering counterarguments and contrasting data, for example) and Blair acknowledges that their use is extremely case sensitive (37-38). While some visual arguments are emblematic of this problem, as we will see in the next paragraph, there are certain ways of incorporating text to add a layer of analytical depth to a visual argument. Despite the fact that text is included, they are still principally visual arguments, pointing to a reconciliation of the verbal and visual that may lean one way or the other. To return to Jay's argument, it would be foolish to favor one over the other, even if one is narrowing their argument to a predominantly visual / verbal style. The addition of visuals in a verbal argument, given the correct context, can greatly benefit one's argument.

In an attempt to put Blair's definition to practice, I will analyze a form of visual argument that is arguably (and perhaps obviously) a propositional statement, with as few words as possible: anti-tobacco ads. Anti-tobacco and anti-smoking campaigns are a good place to start with visual arguments because they defend a position that is readily defensible. The dangers of

smoking and tobacco use are well established by this point, and there is no doubt that these PSAs are effective. The article “More than 1 Million Rethink Cigarette Habit, Thanks to CDC anti-smoking ads” showed that 1.6 million smokers were convinced to quit smoking as a result of the CDC ads, which demonstrate the grisly effects of cancer surgery on advocate Terrie Hall (McGill 2013). CDC created the “Tip from a Former Smoker” campaign featuring the extreme effects of smoking after surgery and chemotherapy; a particularly vivid example features Terrie Hall with a surgical stoma clearly visible with the text “Record your voice for loved ones while you still can.”



Figure 1.1: CDC Anti-smoking ad featuring Terrie Hall

<http://www.adweek.com/files/imagecache/node-blog/blogs/terrie-hall-hed-2013.jpg>

While the accompanying text takes up at least a quarter of the ad, the imagery of the devastating effects of smoking is still the most prominent feature. The grisly reality of facial reconstruction surgery, jaw cancer, and throat cancer are displayed fully, in a stark presentation. It is true that the text adds another dimension to the image, and works its overall efficacy, but the

disfigurement caused by cancer treatment is the most dominant aspect of the advertisement. Here, the proposition Blair refers to is presented to the viewer in two ways: the visual of Terrie Hall, and the accompanying text. The former presents the consequences of smoking, and the latter evokes compromised health and families. Given that the dangers of smoking and its inherent health risks are well-known at this point, there is almost no rebuttal that tobacco companies can make. Thus, the proposition is a strong one, as is the linguistically explicable sentiment: quit smoking, or suffer dire consequences.

Still, there are inherent problems in visual arguments. While they provide a quick and striking proposition to the viewer, we must also consider Blair's warning of their disadvantage: the argument presented is often one-dimensional, and lacking the component of a counterargument. However, there are instances where ads can present two sides of an argument, while also retaining a dominantly visual aspect. We have all seen political advertisements in magazines and

television, especially those fixed upon issues that seem irresolvable.

Consider the following pro-gun advertisements:

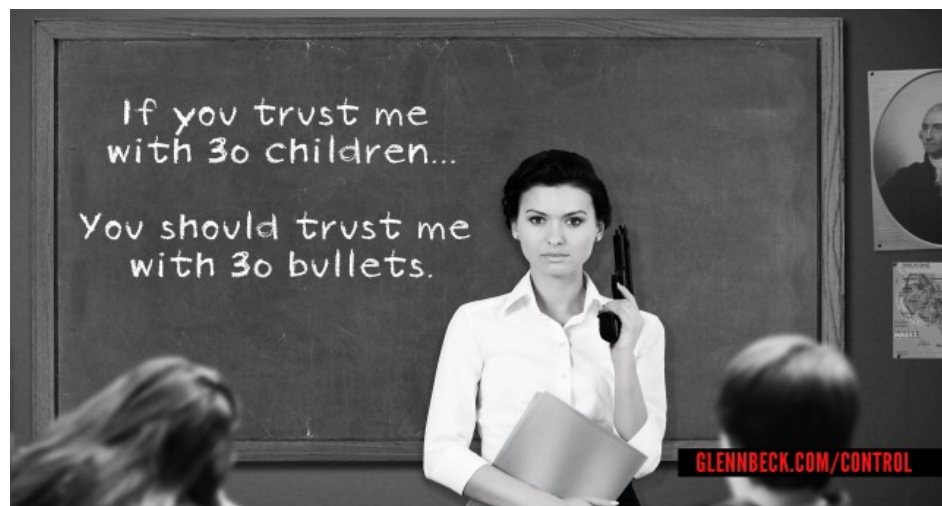


Figure 1.2: Pro-gun advertisement from GlennBeck.com
<http://www.glennbeck.com/publish/uploads/2013/05/GBC-TEACHER-JPG-640x360.jpg>



Figure 1.3: Moms Demand Action Gun Control Print Ad

http://a.abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/ht_moms_demand_gun_sense_nt_130415_wblog.jpg

Both take a hard stance on one side of the issue, and both play heavily on the emotions of the viewer. The overall effect of both centers around two concepts that hit audiences like a lightning rod: children and guns in schools. Given the great amount of gun-related violence in public and in schools in the past two years – Sandyhook and Chardon Elementary specifically – these ads aren't surprising to see. However, in a strict sense of visual argumentation, these ads do imply some deeper complexity in visual arguments, at least more so than the previous example of the pro-smoking advertisement. They present both sides of an issue, and a specific one at that: should guns be in schools? Do they protect children or increase the likelihood of violence in schools? We see both sides of the argument clearly. The latter refers to the banning of *Little Red Riding Hood* in two California school districts, due to the presence of a bottle of wine (Parnass 2013). In highlighting the absurdity of school censorship, the latter ad mocks the very question of having guns in schools. The two children drive the point home: the image of a young child

holding an automatic weapon is without question a demanding visual stimulus. It is an understatement to say that the first image lacks subtlety: a teacher, in stark black and white, holds a handgun while being foregrounded by school children. The message is clear: if the teacher is entrusted to protect children, he or she should be provided an adequate means to do so. Both ads address the viewer's sense of fear, and in the case of parents, their sense of responsibility towards their children.

Ted Brader addresses this manipulation in his investigation of political ads, but his research applies here effectively. Essentially, political ads chiefly focus upon two stimuli in viewers: their sense of fear, and their sense of enthusiasm; Brader summarizes this sentiment in a study by Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen in stating "In troubled times, minds are more easily led; in good times, citizens are creatures of habit" (402-403). An individual might be more persuaded to take action in a time of danger, and in more stable times, they feel compelled to maintain the institution that is in place preserve that stability. In the case of the above two ads, there is no question that the fear response in viewers is being preyed upon. Brader notes that "fear appeals are more effective at changing behavior, especially when an appeal offers recipients something to do to mitigate the danger" (390). Both of the above ads provide an option to alleviate the danger of school shootings, only their solutions differ. The former espouses the total presence of guns in schools, whereas the latter calls for more moderation in the use of guns, calling more pressing issues to the fore (in this case, the quality of education). But both use children as the element at stake in the issue: one should be conscious of the danger of school shootings, and take action immediately. While both of these images indeed demonstrate how a visual argument can also present a counter argument to itself, we also have to consider the individuals responsible for creating these visual images, as well as the intended audience.

As Blair argued, the power of a visual argument is more indeterminate, with much more emphasis placed on context (27). Both of these ads hinge heavily on their target audience, as well as the associations the argument makes with the audience in question. Put simply, both ads work in strict conjunction with a pro- or anti-gun audience. While they are powerful visual images that immediately grab the attention of the viewer, it is hard to ignore the motives of both images, especially the former image with a large “GlennBeck” website watermark placed on it. This is perhaps the greatest drawback of visual arguments. Despite the fact that we are seeing both sides of an issue, both sides of this issue have their feet dug firmly in the ground. That is, both of these ads run the risk of ‘preaching to the choir’ and doing little beyond that. While the use of fear Brader describes creates a response trigger in the viewer, this response might only go so far as an individual who already feels one way or another about the issue itself. Additionally, the use of demanding visual images could actually undermine one’s argument altogether. In a study of negative stimuli in political messages, Daignault, Soroka and Giasson found that despite effectively triggering a response from viewers, negative ads actually increased viewer resistance: “while the negative ads generated more emotional and attention responses than positive ads, the results on cognitive impacts show a greater resistance to persuasion, as evidenced by the increased number of counterarguments” (Daignault, Soroka and Giasson 180). Pro- and anti-gun advertisements like the ones above may grab the viewer’s attention, but they may also push them away. Given a highly partisan issue like gun control, this problem seems even more likely. Ultimately, while a visual argument can be more flexible than initially thought, Blair’s argument that they are too one-dimensional still remains a concern. They may present a clear argument and an explicable notion, but this argument may only hold weight with individuals already entrenched in the issue. The above pro-/anti-gun ads may only hold significance as an emblem of

an individual who already has a hard stance on the issue. Visual arguments may also have a limited application. Though they are a major part of some academic writing, it is difficult to say whether or not they have precedence in scholarly writing.

The dominance of images in advertisements, arguments, and so forth can be problematic. As we have seen from the above examples, it is possible that visual images can even detract from an argument, drawing the reader's attention away from the verbal argument at hand, or worse, from the issue itself. This risk seems especially evident in scholarly writing. Anne-Marie Willis' presentation speech "Sight Unseen" is a damning criticism of ocularcentrism in politics, as well as academic writing. Willis classifies ocularcentrism as the "privileging of ocular observation as path to knowledge" (1). In other words, the veracity of arguments, as well as knowledge itself may be diminished given the ocularcentric nature of our society; at the very least, it may be a call to transcend the 'seeing is believing' mentality. Actually, we may recall Barthes and his attack on the 'naturalness' presented by mass media, and the desire to see beyond "what-goes-without-saying" (Barthes 11). Perhaps Willis is echoing Barthes' concern with looking beyond what images purport to be in arguments.

Nonetheless, Willis' call for caution is a credible one: academic articles are arguments that do not lend themselves as well to visual arguments. Favoring the use of images to illustrate a point might ultimately detract from the greater point of an academic argument. Willis describes the pervasive nature of the visual within our culture, even extending as turns of phrase into our written speech writing that "it has to be admitted that any attempt to think about the visual is fraught. It seems impossible to get a distance on 'it' because of the inescapable tendency to rely on visual metaphors" (2). 'I see,' 'insight' and so forth are only a few examples of the visual metaphors that pepper our everyday speech, and given the previous examples of the ads

concerning firearms, maybe at our most cynical, we can argue that our society is going the way of one-dimensional arguments. Perhaps a permanent rift is in place between academic arguments and visual arguments (which may themselves fall into a kind of ‘pop’ argumentation). Willis does seem to avoid considering the place of visual supports in academic writing, especially scientific and empirical reports.

Visual arguments and empirical data are not separate domains of argumentation. A content analysis is an argument founded upon aggregate visual data, and can provide “the cultural meaning of images” if executed and coded well (Rose 101-102)¹. Laura Perini provides an argument that is stronger yet: the place of graphs and statistical data within academic writing. She cites Goodman’s finding that pictorial representations are virtually similar to linguistic ones. These images are “based on denotation, and the content of a picture is not determined by any relation between the visible features of a picture and its referent besides a conventional assignment of referent to pictorial symbol” (Perini 915). In other words, a visual argument in support of a textual argument is essentially one and the same. Again, we may compare this to the notion of denotation addressed by Barthes; as Willis may have been echoing the concern of ‘naturalness’ with images, Perini addresses their denotation in an academic context. As Barthes argued, the denotation of an image is ostensibly the ‘definitive’ aspect of it (Barthes 157). I take it that Perini is using this sense of ‘denotation’ – the image existing of itself and the larger academic text it accompanies without an implied, symbolic meaning. It does not obfuscate meaning but strengthens scientific findings. Perini gives a simple but vivid example of this in the use of scientific tables in journals, arguing that they add a spatial dimension that adds to the credence of the data in a simple yet effective manner.

¹ It is curious but coincidental that Rose notes that content analysis omits audience concerns, as the opposite problem was just addressed in the previous section with the political ads.

Perini writes that the table “functions by arranging linguistic data in two dimensions, and using spatial relations to model relations among certain aspects of the data. This allows for use of spatial relations to identify other higher order, relations among the data” (919). By adding a sense of ‘up’ and ‘down’ to the data, the viewer can create associations easier than they may have missed altogether, and that they act as a visual agent serving the written argument itself. While visual images like the pro-gun advertisement may cloud an argument or only present one side of it, supplemental images like tables and graphs can add another dimension altogether. In another example, Perini demonstrates that a pure image lends significant credence to a scientific argument; a micrograph, for instance, doesn’t exist in academic writing in a sense of ‘naturalness’ (as it is a representative electronic image), but instead “depends on the causal connections and reliability of this method in generating accurate representations” (920). While it is wise to approach visual arguments with some skepticism, as Willis argues, in other contexts it is acceptable to embrace visual elements, as Perini does here. Again, context is a major concern: the articles Perini describes are the products of empirical research and data, and the political ads I examined were the product of partisan attitudes. Can data and partisan attitudes be more eloquently expressed? One will note that the examples Perini gave were not reliant on visual images, but benefited greatly from them. Still, a journal that only contained statistics, devoid of images, would still be credible; by comparison, a political ad arguing that “guns kill” is solely providing a connotative argument. Finally, these supplemental images Perini describes may not be ‘purely’ visual arguments. An image of mitochondria under a micrograph isn’t itself a visual argument, but the further presentation of evidence that was argued within the text of the academic article (Perini 920). However, they still – as Blair argues – contain a propositional

context: image y is representational of argument x intrinsically as a visual representation of that data.

Still, there may be room for data and the visual to work in harmony. A major fad arising on social media platforms are the data-based images called ‘infographics’. An infographic is exactly what it sounds like: statistics and data that is arranged in a visual / spatial dimension for aesthetic purposes. The following image is a strong example.

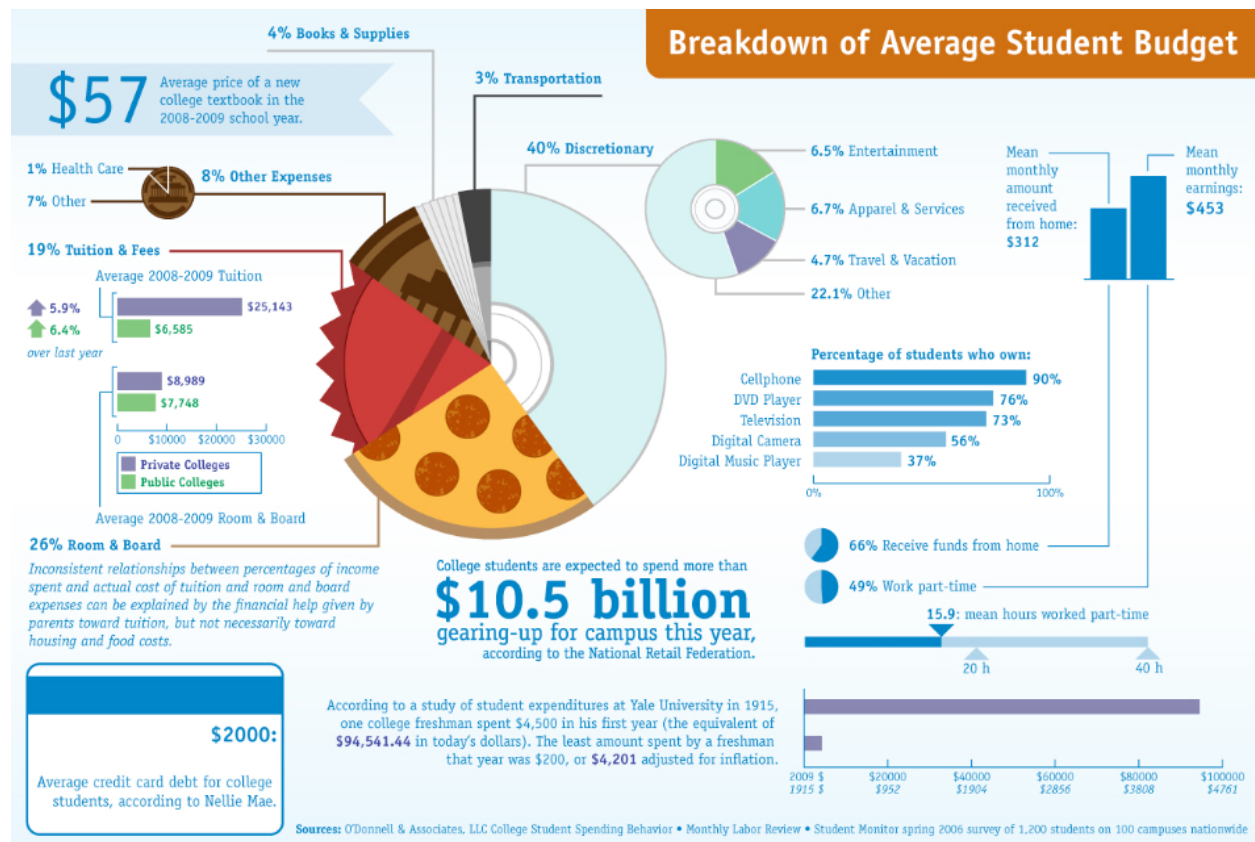


Figure 1.4: “Breakdown of Student Budget” Infographic.

<http://www.thecampuscompanion.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/student-budget.jpg>

There are a number of qualities one must consider to determine whether or not an infographic is a good source of information, or whether or not it is a strong visual argument. In his *Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, Edmund Tufte provides perhaps the strongest measure of a visual argument’s quality (or ‘graphical excellence’):

“Graphical excellence is the well-designed presentation of interesting data - a matter of substance, of statistics and design. Graphical excellence consists of complex ideas communicated with clarity, precision, and efficiency. Graphical excellence is that which gives to the viewer the greatest number of ideas in the shortest time with the least ink in the smallest space.” (51)

Obviously, I will be using Tufte’s ‘graphical excellence’ as my measure of the infographic’s quality. The infographic above does this well: it presents the complicated nature of student budgets in an aesthetically pleasing but spare medium. Statistics are not cluttered, and the most pertinent information dominates the page. While the image itself isn’t a particularly eye-grabbing one, the information in the graphic pertains specifically to it. Denotative graphics, such as the charts and graphs featuring the statistics about student income, are also arguably the supportive and causal visual arguments Perini described in her journal article. They stand as representative data to the main argument, and only serve to strengthen the information presented (Perini 919).

While it is arguable that this image is essentially a glorified pie chart, it represents a strong example of graphical and

informational excellence. Sources are identifiable at the bottom of the image, and credible. An effective infographic, then, offers a wealth of information regarding a complicated topic while using up the least amount of space and time as possible. This can have its shortcomings, however, if the artist becomes too ambitious.

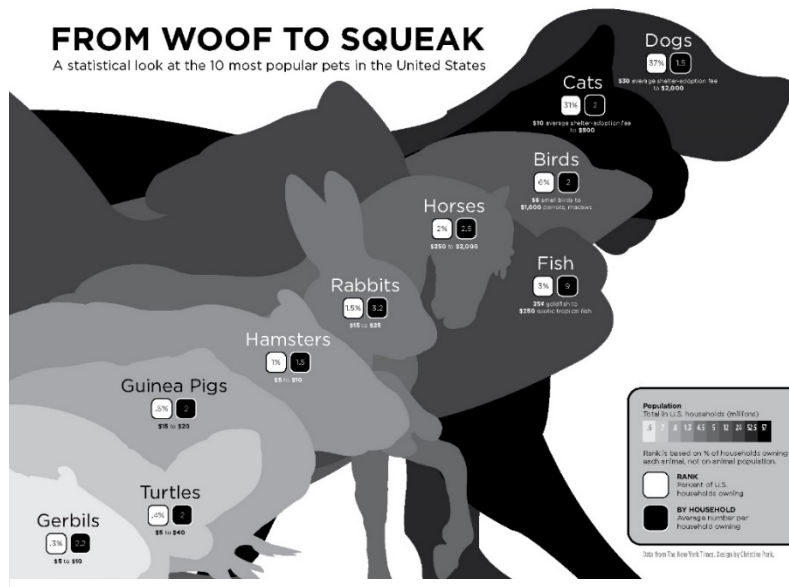


Figure 1.5: “From Woof to Squeak.” Infographic detailing the most popular pets in the US.
<http://infographiclist.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/christine39designbloginfographics4e5baae8c7ecf.jpg>

In this example, we are again given statistical data, but the data is obfuscated by the image. The image doesn't serve as a denotation of the data presented, but a complicated eyesore. The key on the lower left allows the viewer to make some sense of the data presented, but in an expression of 'graphical excellence', the data should speak for itself without any kind of cue or hint from the creator. Here is the peril Willis described in letting the visual dominate an argument; while visual arguments strengthen data, they can also undermine the purposes of the rhetoric.

Regardless, infographics may indicate the rising demand for multimodal information. Multimodal classrooms are already a concern today, and authors like Mark Davis and David Quinn have recognized the potential for infographics in classrooms. They argue that infographics provide a way for students to create simple ways to present complex ideas, and the idea that "the nature of the infographic lends itself to the elements commonly cited in writing: purpose, style, evidence and format" (16). Additionally, they argue that infographics provide ways to bolster critical thinking and spatial recognition in students learning in Common Core classrooms. Whether they provide adequate information or not falls strictly upon the content creator and their editors, if any exist. The nature of contemporary society is indeed a visual one, and Davis and Quinn's article is any indication, visual arguments are going to be an increasingly dominant fixture in academic arguments. Given the need for visual literacy and multimodal education in classrooms, this may not be a bad thing, either. Whether or not infographics will play a significant role in academic texts remains to be seen, however.

Visual arguments then exist as an inevitability. Our culture is visually dominated: a video of a politician engaging in an extramarital affair can be a gaffe that undermines his or her entire political campaign. The shocking press photo of Rihanna after her brutal domestic abuse from Chris Brown became a social call for domestic abuse everywhere, shared in a matter of seconds

over social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. It follows that visual arguments are a growing genre of argumentation, though some have existed for longer than others; the political ads reviewed in this study have been around for some time, but fall prey to the problems Blair discussed in their one-dimensionality. Infographics, by contrast, may represent a more complex form of expressing an argument visually. They can even account for counterarguments, if they are designed cleverly enough. With the emphasis of Common Core in America's classroom – i.e. the emphasis of critical thinking and the 'essentials' of different academic focuses – infographics may indeed present an elegant way to reconcile the gap between textual and visual arguments. With this in mind, however, it may be that a purely visual argument – an image representing a concrete proposition in depth – may not be possible. So, we may be forced to return to Martin Jay's assertion: not to humble the image or the written word, but to reconcile the two together for a greater effect.

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Visuality and Ocularcentrism Original Draft

Our society is irrevocably a visual one, and our digital culture makes this all the more apparent. By digital culture, I mean one that is continually immersed in social media, television, print ads and so forth. Information, ranging from the extremely factual (like scientific or economic statistics) to the lowliest form of attention grabbing (cat memes barely begin to scratch the surface), is an indelible facet of our culture. It follows that visual arguments are a major fixture in both professional and popular cultures, because they provide an aesthetically pleasing means to disseminate information quickly. Visual arguments can also be taken as a sign of the predominance of the visual as a whole in our society, a term that has been described by Nicholas Mirzoeff as “ocularcentric” (Rose, *Visual Methodologies* 4). In other words, visual stimuli – everything from statistical graphs, to pictures of cats, to advertisements – are intrinsically (at least initially) privileged over all other forms of information. While it is arguable that verbal arguments provide a fuller, richer form of rhetoric than a visual argument, this is not to say that visual arguments are inferior or ineffective. In fact, depending on context, visual arguments can be just as effective as verbal arguments.

Ultimately, the problem falls on the dimensionality of the visual argument, but there are certain ways of adding rhetorical depth to arguments that are primarily visual. Good or bad, visual arguments are a fixture of our society, and symptomatic of the pressing desire for multimodal instruction in today’s class rooms. Learning how to create effective visual arguments (or at least identify ones that work versus ones that do not) is an imperative ability to possess in our contemporary society.

Visual arguments enjoy prevalence more than ever, but their existence is not a recent development. Similarly, ocularcentrism may be a neologism, but its existence has likewise been

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:39 PM

Comment [1]: Title?

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:42 PM

Comment [2]: I'm going to take this as your thesis.

the concern of critical analysis for some time. In his essay “The Right to Look,” Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts a definition for what he refers to as ‘visuality’, arguing that the right to visualize is the right to visualize history. It gives us as individuals an ability to see beyond the information that is presented to us by authority figures, or at least have some sort of impactful relation to our experiences of reality. Mirzoeff is careful to note that this does not equate to autonomy, but it presents “a discursive practice for regulating and rendering the real that has material effects” (Mirzoeff 474, 476). Ocularcentrism might carry some negative connotations initially, given that in asserting the visual as the center of our senses, other traditional forms of information are made to seem obsolete. Instead, Mirzoeff’s “Right to Look” asserts this visual dominance as a sense of individual empowerment: if we establish visual arguments as an opportunity to make a point with maximum efficacy, ocularcentrism can be a powerful tool. In another essay by Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” he quotes Foster’s claim that there is “a difference within the visual... a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein” (Foster, ix). This was actually an early attempt by Foster to define ‘visuality’ itself, as a way of understanding the reality that we are being made to see things in a certain light, and so forth. If we take this with Mirzoeff’s assertion from “The Right to Look”, we again are left with a more assertive interpretation than one would initially think. While in certain cases we may be ‘made to see’ certain things, the knowledge that this is intrinsically the case is an empowering knowledge all the same. Visual arguments act as an element of this concept, insofar as strong visual arguments are considered: they are understood on a fundamental level to be a visual. That is, the creators of a visual argument are aware of the visual medium in the creation of a visual argument, and perhaps even the ocularcentric nature of

basing their argument within a visual medium. Perhaps this tacit understanding between image and viewer makes them more effective.

Martin Jay's analysis of Jacques Ellul's criticism of ocularcentrism – aptly titled “The Crisis of Ocularcentrism” – offers a sense of balance between visual and verbal arguments. While Ellul rails against the “medusa-like” sense of the gaze and visuals, “freezing everything on which it fixates into death-like stillness” (311). Ellul's concern can certainly be seen as a valid one – our culture is certainly more of a visual culture than a literary one, as Buzzfeed top 10 lists can attest to – but he misses a crucial point Jay touches upon. That is, not to construe one as being inherently “better” than the other; Jay writes that “[h]umbling the image is no antidote to humiliating the word. It is far healthier to nurture in both what is best called a mutual regard” (323). In other words, it only acts counteractively to stack the deck against or for one or the other. Both visual and verbal arguments should be held in equal value, entirely dependent on context. To dismiss one or the other as inferior only works to the detriment of both, and impractical. Thus, ocularcentrism and visibility stand as an active means to the dominance of the visual in our culture. Rather than simply being symptomatic of a tyranny of the visual, visibility can be thus seen as an extension of ocularcentrism. Whereas ocularcentrism stands as a catch-all term for the predominance of visuals and visual arguments in our culture, visibility is the means by which we interpret these visual stimuli **actively**.

Since we now have a working definition of how ‘visibility’ and ‘ocularcentrism’ function within contemporary society, it will likewise be beneficial to determine exactly what a ‘visual argument’ consists of. Anthony Blair provides an excellent framework in which we can define both ‘argument’, as well as a ‘visual argument’. Blair derives his definition of a visual argument from Daniel O’Keefe’s argument₁, which states that an argument is anything that creates some

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:44 PM

Comment [3]: good distinctions between visibility and ocularcentrism

kind of proposition to exist. Certainly, this is a broad term with which to apply to an argument, but Blair cleverly applies this beyond the written to the visual as well, writing that the proposition (reasons backing a claim) are "overtly expressed, and that reasons and claim be linguistically explicable" (25). However, what Blair notes is that O'Keefe doesn't *initially* note that arguments have to be linguistic or written. They simply need to offer a clear, overtly expressed proposition. We can infer a linguistic response following the interaction with an argument. In other words, a visual argument can stand on its own if it provides an implicit argument and reasoning – with or without the inclusion of text, or a written argument. It is important to note, however, that Blair concedes some drawbacks to visual arguments. While they are not unusual, they are rather one-dimensional; that is, they can clearly provide an argument, but lack the depth and breadth a verbal argument can possess (like considering counterarguments and contrasting data, for example) and acknowledges that their use is extremely case sensitive (37-38). Still, while some visual arguments are emblematic of this problem – as we will see in the next paragraph – there are certain ways of incorporating text to add a layer of analytical depth to a visual argument. While text is included, they are still principally visual arguments. To return to Jay's argument, it would be foolish to favor one or the other, even if one is narrowing their argument to a predominantly visual / verbal style. The addition of visuals in a verbal argument, given the correct context, can greatly benefit one's argument.

In an attempt to put Blair's definition to practice, I will analyze a form of visual argument that is arguably – and perhaps obviously – ideally a propositional statement, with as few words as possible: anti-tobacco ads. Anti-tobacco and anti-smoking campaigns are a good place to start with visual arguments because they defend and put forth a position that is soundly defensible: the dangers of smoking and tobacco use are well established by this point, and there is no doubt

that these PSAs are effective. The article “More than 1 Million Rethink Cigarette Habit, Thanks to CDC anti-smoking ads” showed that 1.6 million smokers were convinced to quit smoking as a result of the CDC anti-smoking ads showing the grisly effects of cancer surgery on advocate Terrie Hall (McGill 2013). CDC created a “A Tip from a Former Smoker” campaign featuring the extreme effects of smoking after surgery and chemotherapy; a particularly vivid example features Terrie Hall with a surgical stoma clearly visible with the text “Record your voice for loved ones while you still can.”



Figure 1.1: CDC Anti-smoking ad featuring Terrie Hall

<http://www.adweek.com/files/imagecache/node-blog/blogs/terrie-hall-hed-2013.jpg>

While the accompanying text takes up at least a quarter of the ad, the imagery of the devastating effects of smoking is still the most prominent feature depicted. The grisly reality of facial reconstruction surgery, jaw cancer and throat cancer are displayed fully, in stark presentation. It is true that the text adds another dimension to the image, and works to the ad’s overall benefit, but the fact remains that the disfigurement endured by cancer treatment is the most dominant

aspect of the image. Here, the proposition Blair refers to is presented to the viewer in two ways: the visual of Terrie Hall, and the accompanying text. The former presents the results of a lifetime of smoking, and the former evokes both the danger of compromising an integral part of their personality – their voice – as well as thoughts of loved ones and family. Given that the dangers of smoking and its inherent health risks are well-known at this point, there is little rebuttal tobacco companies can make. With this in mind, the proposition is a strong one, as is the linguistically explicable sentiment: quit smoking, or suffer dire consequences.

Still, there are intrinsic problems in visual arguments. While they provide a quick and striking proposition to the viewer, we must also consider Blair's warning of their inherent drawback: the argument presented is often one-dimensional, and lacking the component of a counterargument. However, there are instances where ads can present two sides of an argument, while also retaining a dominantly visual aspect. We have all seen political advertisements in magazines and television, especially those fixed upon issues that seem irresolvable. Consider the following pro-gun advertisements:

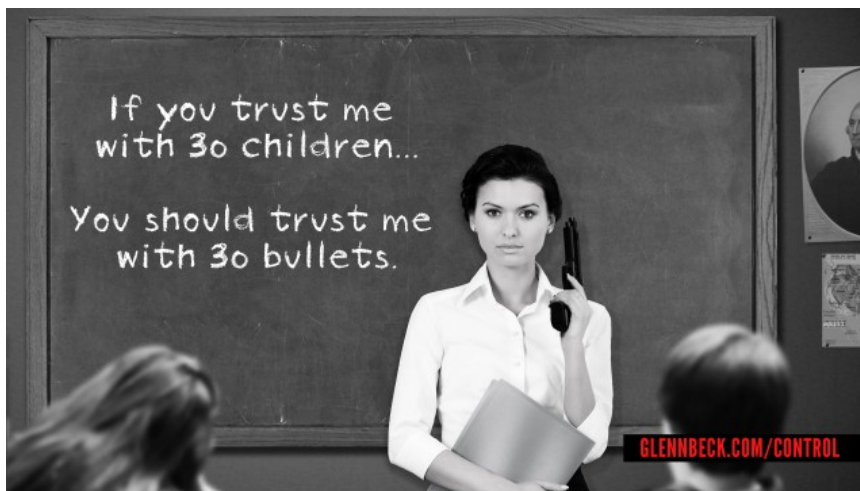


Figure 1.2: Pro-gun advertisement from GlennBeck.com

<http://www.glennbeck.com/publish/uploads/2013/05/GBC-TEACHER-JPG-640x360.jpg>



Figure 1.3: Moms Demand Action Gun Control Print Ad

http://a.abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/ht_moms_demand_gun_sense_nt_130415_wblog.jpg

Both take a hard stance on one side of the issue, and both play heavily on the emotions of the viewer. The overall effect of both centers around two concepts that hit audiences like a lightning rod: children and guns in schools. Given the great amount of gun-related violence in public and in schools in the past two years – Sandyhook and Chardon Elementary specifically – these ads aren't surprising to see. However, in a strict sense of visual argumentation, these ads do show some flexibility in visual arguments, at least more flexibility than the previous example of the pro-smoking advertisement. Both sides of an issue, and a specific one at that: should guns be in schools? Do they protect children or increase the likelihood of violence in schools? We see both sides of the argument clearly. The latter refers to the banning of *Little Red Riding Hood* in two California school districts, due to the presence of a bottle of wine (Parnass 2013). In highlighting the absurdity of school censorship, the latter ad mocks the very question of having

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:47 PM

Comment [4]: Very good examples to show both sides of the argument. Good hunting, and I'm glad you addressed the difference between 1- and 2-sided arguments.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:48 PM

Comment [5]: Flexibility is maybe not the right word - the 2nd set of ads reveals a more complex discursiveness, so maybe complexity is what you are going for here.

guns in schools. The two children drive the point home: the image of a young child holding an automatic weapon is without question a demanding visual stimulus. It is an understatement to say that the first image lacks subtlety: a teacher, in stark black and white, holds a handgun while being foregrounded by school children. The message is clear: if the teacher is entrusted to protect children, he or she should be provided an adequate means to do so. Both ads address the viewer's sense of fear, and in the case of parents, their sense of responsibility towards their children.

Ted Brader addresses this manipulation in his investigation of political ads, but his research applies here effectively. Essentially, political ads chiefly focus upon two stimuli in viewers: their sense of fear, and their sense of enthusiasm; Brader summarizes this sentiment in a study by Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen in stating "In troubled times, minds are more easily led; in good times, citizens are creatures of habit" (402-403). An individual might be more persuaded to take action in a time of danger, and in more stable times, they will feel compelled to maintain whatever institution is in place to keep things that way. In the case of the above two ads, there is no question that the fear response in viewers is being preyed upon. Brader notes that "fear appeals are more effective at changing behavior, especially when an appeal offers recipients something to do to mitigate the danger" (390). Both of the above ads provide an option to alleviate the danger of school shootings, only their solutions differ. The former espouses the total presence of guns in schools, whereas the latter calls for more moderation in the use of guns, calling more pressing issues to the fore (in this case, the quality of education). But both use children as the element at stake in the issue: one should be conscious of the danger of school shootings, and take action immediately. While both of these images indeed demonstrate how a visual argument can also present a counter argument to itself, we also have to consider the individuals responsible for creating these visual images, as well as the intended audience.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 2:50 PM

Comment [6]: Interesting quote.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:02 PM

Comment [7]: Barthes' myth on the right.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:02 PM

Comment [8]: Not to itself, but that there are arguments for and against - it is a true argument in that sense.

As Blair argued, the power of a visual argument is more indeterminate, with much more emphasis placed on context (27). Both of these ads hinge heavily on the targeted audience, as well as the associations that argument makes with the audience in question. Put simply, both ads work in strict conjunction with a pro- or anti-gun audience. While they are powerful visual images that immediately grab the attention of the viewer, it is hard to ignore the sources of both images, especially the former image with a large “GlennBeck” website watermark placed on it. Herein lies perhaps the greatest drawback of visual arguments. Despite the fact that we are seeing both sides of an issue, both sides of this issue have their feet dug firmly in the ground. That is, both of these ads run the risk of ‘preaching to the choir’ and doing little beyond. While the use of fear Brader describes creates a response trigger in the viewer, this response might only go so far as an individual who already feels one way or another about the issue itself. Additionally, the use of demanding visual images could actually serve to undermine one’s argument altogether. In a study of negative stimuli in political messages, Daignault, Soroka and Giasson found that despite effectively triggering a response from viewers, negative ads actually increased viewer resistance: “while the negative ads generated more emotional and attention responses than positive ads, the results on cognitive impacts show a greater resistance to persuasion, as evidenced by the increased number of counterarguments” (Daignault, Soroka and Giasson 180). Pro- and anti-gun advertisements like the ones above may grab the viewer’s attention, but they may also push them away. Given a highly partisan issue like gun control, this problem seems even more likely. Ultimately, we observe that while a visual argument can be more flexible than initially thought, Blair’s argument that they are too one-dimensional still remains a concern. They may present a clear argument and an explicable notion, but this argument may only hold weight with individuals already entrenched in the issue. The above pro-

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:03 PM

Comment [9]: Good point

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:05 PM

Comment [10]: Good citation for your purpose.

/anti-gun ads may only hold significance as an emblem of an individual who already has a hard stance on the issue. Visual arguments may also have a limited application. Though they are a major part of some academic writing, it is difficult to say whether or not they have a place of dominance in scholarly writing.

The dominance of images in advertisements, arguments, and so forth can be problematic. As we have seen from the above examples, it is possible that visual images can even detract from an argument, drawing the reader's attention away from the verbal argument at hand, or worse, from the issue itself. This risk seems especially evident in scholarly writing. Anne-Marie Willis' presentation speech "Sight Unseen" is a damning criticism of ocularcentrism in politics, as well as academic writing. Willis classifies ocularcentrism as the "privileging of ocular observation as path to knowledge" (1). In other words, the veracity of arguments, as well as knowledge itself may be diminished given the ocularcentric nature of our society; at the very least, it may be a call to transcend the 'seeing is believing' mentality. Actually, we may recall Barthes and his attack on the 'naturalness' presented by mass media, and the desire to see beyond "what-goes-without-saying" (Barthes 11). Perhaps Willis is echoing Barthes' concern with looking beyond what images purport to be in arguments.

Nonetheless, Willis' call for caution is a credible one: academic articles are arguments that do not lend themselves as well to visual arguments. Favoring the use of images to illustrate a point might ultimately detract from the greater point of an academic argument. Willis describes the pervasive nature of the visual within our culture, even extending as turns of phrase into our written speech writing that "it has to be admitted that any attempt to think about the visual is fraught. It seems impossible to get a distance on 'it' because of the inescapable tendency to rely on visual metaphors" (2). 'I see,' 'insight' and so forth are only a few examples of the visual

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:05 PM

Comment [11]: Good connection

metaphors that pepper our every day speech, and given the previous examples of the ads concerning firearms, maybe at our most cynical, we can argue that our society is going the way of one-dimensional arguments. Perhaps a permanent rift is in place between academic arguments and visual arguments (which may themselves fall into a kind of ‘pop’ argumentation). Willis does seem to eschew considering the place of visual supports in academic writing, however, especially scientific and empirical reports.

As we have seen throughout the semester, visual arguments and empirical data are not mutual domains of argumentation. A content analysis is an argument founded upon aggregate visual data, and can provide “the cultural meaning of images” if executed and coded well (Rose 101-102)². Laura Perini provides an argument that is stronger yet: the place of graphs and statistical data within academic writing. She cites Goodman’s finding that pictorial representations are virtually similar to linguistic ones as well. These images are “based on denotation, and the content of a picture is not determined by any relation between the visible features of a picture and its referent besides a conventional assignment of referent to pictorial symbol” (Perini 915). In other words, a visual argument in support of a textual argument is essentially one and the same. Again, we may compare this to the notion of denotation addressed by Barthes; as Willis may have been echoing the concern of ‘naturalness’ with images, so Perini addresses their denotation in an academic context. As Barthes argued, the denotation of an image is ostensibly the ‘definitive’ aspect of it (Barthes 157). At least, I take it that Perini is using this sense of ‘denotation’ – the image existing of itself and the larger academic text it accompanies without an implied, symbolic meaning. It does not obfuscate meaning but elucidates scientific findings. Perini gives a simple but vivid example of this in the use of scientific tables in journals,

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:07 PM

Comment [12]: Yet visuals like graphs and charts are essential to accurately providing data in this genre.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:07 PM

Comment [13]: Good transition to this section

² It is curious but coincidental that Rose notes that content analysis omits audience concerns, as the opposite problem was just addressed in the previous section with the political ads.

arguing that they add a spatial dimension that adds to the credence of the data in a simple yet effective manner.

Perini writes that the table “functions by arranging linguistic data in two dimensions, and using spatial relations to model relations among certain aspects of the data. This allows for use of spatial relations to identify other higher order, relations among the data” (919). By adding a sense of ‘up’ and ‘down’ to the data, the viewer can create associations easier that they may have missed altogether, and that they act as a visual agent serving the written argument itself. While visual images like the pro-gun advertisement may obfuscate an argument or only present one side of it, supplemental images like tables and graphs can add another dimension altogether. In another example, Perini also demonstrates that a pure image lends significant credence to a scientific argument; a micrograph, for instance, doesn’t exist in academic writing in a sense of ‘naturalness’ (as it is a representative electronic image), but instead “depends on the causal connections and reliability of this method in generating accurate representations” (920). While it may be advisable to approach visual arguments with some skepticism, as Willis argues, in some contexts it is acceptable to embrace visual elements, as Perini does here. Again, context is a major concern: the articles Perini describes are the products of empirical research and data, and the political ads I examined were the product of partisan attitudes. Can data and partisan attitudes be more eloquently expressed? One will note that the examples Perini gave were not reliant on visual images, but benefited greatly from them. Still, a journal that only delivered statistics would still hold a certain degree of veracity; by comparison, a political ad arguing that “guns kill” is providing a connotative argument. Finally, while these supplemental images Perini describes may not be ‘purely’ visual arguments. An image of mitochondria under a micrograph isn’t itself a visual argument, but the further presentation of evidence that was argued within the

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:09 PM

Comment [14]: New paragraph

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:10 PM

Comment [15]: Some scientists only read the charts and data tables in research articles - they present complex results in a kind of shorthand.

text of the academic article (Perini 920). However, they still – as Blair argues – contain a propositional context: image y is representational of argument x intrinsically as a visual representation of that data.

Still, there may be room for data and the visual to work in harmony. A major fad arising on social media platforms are the data-based images called ‘infographics’. An infographic is essentially what it sounds like: statistics and data that is arranged in a visual / spatial dimension for aesthetic purposes. The following image is a strong example.

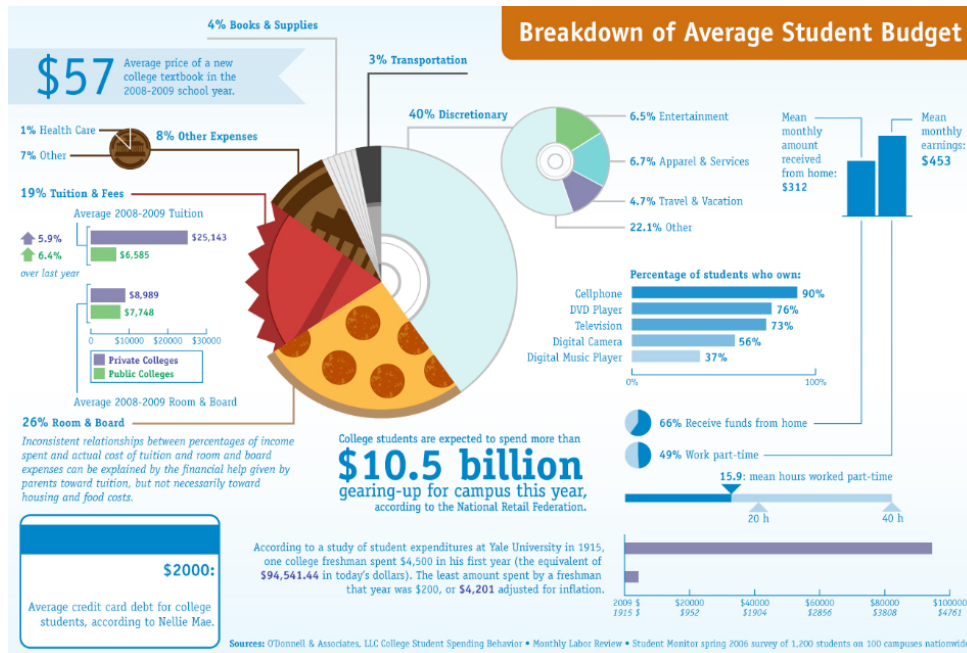


Figure 1.4: “Breakdown of Student Budget” Infographic.

<http://www.thecampuscompanion.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/student-budget.jpg>

There are a number of qualities one must consider to determine whether or not an infographic is a good source of information, or whether or not it is a strong visual argument. In his *Visual*

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:10 PM

Comment [16]: I don't get your point here - something is missing from the sentence.

Display of Quantitative Information, Edmund Tufte provides perhaps still the strongest measure of a visual argument's quality (or 'graphical excellence'):

"Graphical excellence is the well-designed presentation of interesting data - a matter of substance, of statistics and design. Graphical excellence consists of complex ideas communicated with clarity, precision, and efficiency. Graphical excellence is that which gives to the viewer the greatest number of ideas in the shortest time with the least ink in the smallest space." (51)

Obviously, I will be using Tufte's 'graphical excellence' as my measure of the infographic's quality. The infographic above does this well: it presents the complicated nature of student budgets in an aesthetically pleasing but spare medium. Statistics are not cluttered, and the most pertinent information dominates the page. While the image itself isn't a particularly eye-grabbing one, the information in the graphic pertains specifically to it. Denotative graphics, such as the charts and graphs featuring the statistics about student income, are also arguably the supportive and causal visual arguments Perini described in her journal article. They stand as representative data to the main argument, and only serve to elucidate the information presented (Perini 919). While it is arguable that this image is essentially a glorified pie chart, it represents a strong example of graphical and informational excellence. Sources are identifiable at the bottom of the image, and credible. An effective infographic, then, offers a wealth of information regarding a complicated topic while using up the least amount of space and time as possible. This can have

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:12 PM

Comment [17]: The bottom left is a little fussy in my opinion

its shortcomings, however, if the artist becomes too ambitious:

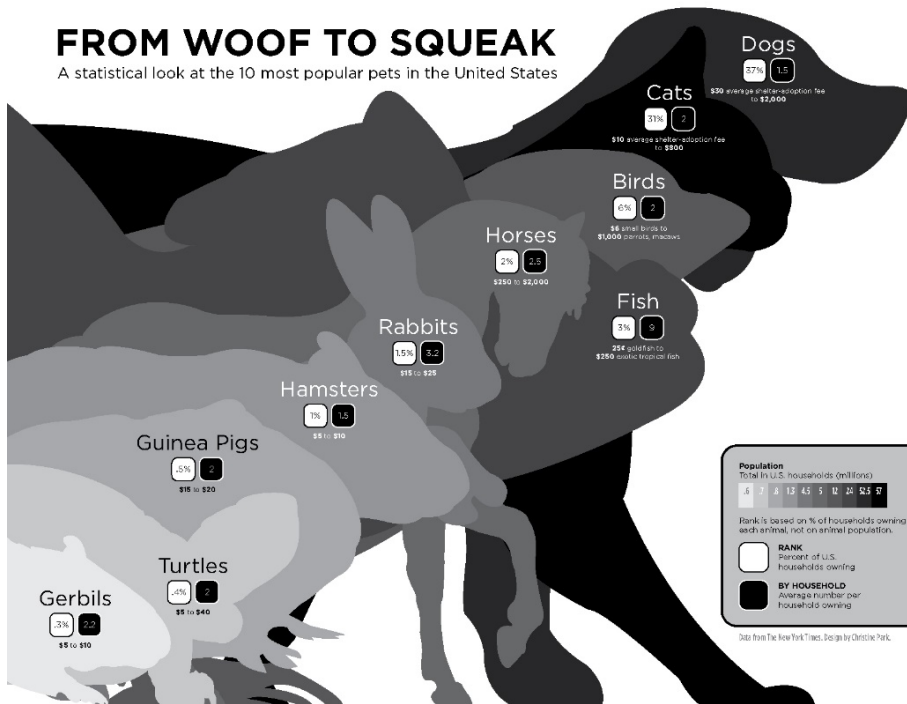


Figure 1.5: "From Woof to Squeak." Infographic detailing the most popular pets in the US.

http://infographiclist.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/christine39sdesignbloginfographics_4e5baae8c7ecf.jpg

In this example, we are again given statistical data, but the data is obfuscated by the image. The image doesn't serve as a denotation of the data presented, but a complicated eyesore. The key on the lower left allows the viewer to make some sense of the data presented, but in an expression of 'graphical excellence', the data should speak for itself without any kind of cue or hint from the creator. We're arguably seeing the peril Willis described in letting the visual dominate an argument; while visual arguments strengthen data, they can also undermine the purposes of the rhetoric.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:16 PM

Comment [18]: I don't share your disdain for this infographic - it is pretty simple, and so is the key - an interesting point though if keys add or detract from graphical excellence.

Regardless, infographics may be emblematic of the rising need for multimodal information. Multimodal classrooms are already a concern today, and authors like Mark Davis and David Quinn have recognized the potential for infographics in classrooms. They argue that infographics provide a way for students to create simple ways to present complex ideas, and the idea that "the nature of the infographic lends itself to the elements commonly cited in writing: purpose, style, evidence and format" (16). Additionally, they argue that infographics provide ways to bolster critical thinking and spatial recognition in students learning within Common Core classrooms. Whether they provide adequate information or not falls strictly upon the content creator and their editors, if any exist. The changing nature of contemporary society is indeed a visual one, and Davis and Quinn's article is any indication, visual arguments are going to be an increasingly dominant fixture in academic arguments. Given the need for visual literacy and multimodal education in classrooms, this may not be a bad thing, either. Whether or not infographics will play as significant a role in academic texts remains to be seen, however.

Visual arguments then exist as an inevitability. Our culture is visually dominated: a video of a politician engaging in an extramarital affair can be a gaffe that undermines their entire political campaign. The shocking press photo of Rihanna after her brutal domestic abuse from Chris Brown stood as a bastion for domestic abuse everywhere, shared in a matter of seconds over social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. It only follows that visual arguments are a growing genre of argumentation, though some have existed for longer than others. The purest form, like the political ads reviewed in this study, have been around for some time, but fall prey to the problems Blair discussed in their one-dimensionality. Infographics, by contrast, may represent a more complex form of expressing an argument visually. They can even account for counterarguments, if they are designed cleverly enough. With the emphasis of Common Core in

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:17 PM

Comment [19]: his or her

America's classroom – i.e. the emphasis of critical thinking and the 'essentials' of different academic focuses – infographics may indeed represent an elegant way to reconcile the gap between textual and visual arguments. With this in mind, however, it may be that a purely visual argument – an image representing a concrete proposition in depth – may not be likely. We may be forced to return to Martin Jay's assertion not to humble the image or the written word, but to reconcile the two together for a greater effect.

Gary Heba 5/11/2014 3:19 PM

Comment [20]: Matt -

Really excellent revisions. The essay holds together very well and the various areas you explore are tied together effectively through the focus on multimodality. Good research and range of sources - they add a further layer of credibility to your work. Also, excellent visual support.

Great job - 25

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“House-keeping Offenses”: The Imperial Sugar Refinery Explosion of 2008

THE DISASTER

It was the seventh of February 2008, a Friday. What was known, at the time of the blast, was that at approximately 7:20pm, a massive explosion shook the Imperial Sugar factory, initially killing six in the blast. Initial reports were as scattered as the workers attempting to flee the multiple explosions and combusting sugar, reporting mere estimates of injuries at the time, the consensus being that “dozens” were injured. After the fires abated and the smoke cleared, 14 would be left dead, with over 40 injured, with some in critical condition for their wounds³.

Workers for Imperial Sugar Company were leaving for the evening, while the others filed in that afternoon to begin the third shift. The city the sugar factory was based in, Port Wentworth, was one of three cities with a sugar plant owned by Imperial Sugar; the plant in Port Wentworth was especially recent, an acquisition by Imperial from Savannah Foods in 1997. Its equipment and silos were run down, and the plant’s emergency procedures were alarmingly lax: no fire drills were in place, nor were any fire alarms in working order⁴. Given the lack of safety officials present at the time, the actual circumstances of the explosion remain to be seen⁵. The cause of the accident couldn’t be determined at the time, due to the confusion and lawsuits following the explosion. However, it is most likely that the explosion was doubtlessly caused by the antiquated and dilapidated equipment at the plant. Sugar dust and granulated sugar had spilled and accumulated in large quantities throughout the plant. An obstruction – most likely a hardened mass of sugar – became stuck on one of the chutes the sugar traveled on to the conveyor belt. The obstruction spilled onto the belt, then onto the floor, launching clouds sugar and dust

³ Sean Horgan, "No public memorial for Imperial Sugar explosion anniversary," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Feb. 7 2013.

⁴ Larry Peterson, "Experts Warned Imperial about Dust Hazards," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Apr. 7 2009.

⁵ Larry Peterson, "Peterson: Six Years Later, Questions about Imperial Sugar Catastrophe Remain," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Feb. 2 2014.

through the tunnel of the processing room. In 2007, the plant had installed plate coverings over the belt that transported the sugar in an effort to keep the sugar from being contaminated; this unfortunately created an unventilated, pressurized atmosphere filled with combustible sugar dust⁶. Officials have yet to determine the cause, but it is theorized that the obstruction created a jam in the line.

While it is unclear what happened next, the faulty equipment was likely the culprit: it is thought that a bearing on the belt became overheated and sparked⁷. The initial explosion was caused by the dust in the high-pressure air igniting, then exploding, which in turn combusted the piles of sugar and encrusted dust on the equipment. Firemen reported that “thick masses of molten sugar were smoldering at temperatures as high as 4,000 degrees”⁸, and the blaze took close to three days to extinguish. After the blaze was extinguished, damage reports began to arrive: the packaging area had been completely destroyed, but the refinery itself had suffered almost no damage; nonetheless, 12% of the factory had been destroyed⁹. Public and government response would be quick, but the investigations and law suits would be drawn out for years to come.

THE INVESTIGATION

Initial investigations of the disaster were conducted by two different government agencies, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Chemical Safety Board (CSB). The goal of both was to determine the cause of the explosion, and who was to be held accountable. One of the contrasts from the BP disasters was the sudden accountability

⁶ Larry Peterson, "Chemical Safety Board says 14 Imperial Sugar deaths 'entirely preventable'," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Sep. 25 2009.

⁷ Peterson, Feb. 2, 2014.

⁸ "Explosion at US sugar refinery kills six." *Loss Prevention Bulletin* no. 200 (April 2008): 31. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

⁹ Dan Chapman, "Sugar Refinery Near Savannah Determined to Rebuild," The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Apr. 13 2008.

shown by CEO and President John Sheptor, who came forward with the initial report that sugar dust had accumulated and ignited in one of its collection silos¹⁰. This only prompted the CSB to investigate further, who pointed out that combustible dust was a persistent problem that safety boards and officials honestly knew little about. While Sheptor may have been attempting to appear compliant, the combustible dust – and its accumulation throughout the plant – would become one of the most damning issues during the investigation.

Soon after the disaster at the Port Wentworth site, investigators quickly shut down the plant present at Gramercy, Louisiana to prevent a second explosion from occurring. Investigators reported similar build-ups of dust, and the presence of antiquated equipment¹¹. After five months of determining the vast number of violations at both Port Wentworth and Gramercy, OSHA fined Imperial Sugar \$8.77 million in July 2008: \$5,062,000 for the penalties at Port Wentworth and \$3,715,500 for violations at Gramercy¹². OSHA reported that its investigators found large accumulations of combustible sugar dust in workrooms, on electrical motors and other equipment; worse yet, OSHA found that officials in the company were aware of these conditions but remained negligent in any efforts to repair, clean, or upgrade the equipment. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the Imperial Sugar disaster was the final report published by the Chemical Safety Board a year later, which found the disaster to be “entirely preventable”¹³. Negligence by the management and the safety officers seemed to be the cause of the problem, as well as an unwillingness by the company to upgrade or even clean its equipment. At the close of its investigation, OSHA found “108 instances of willful violations related to the combustible dust hazard, including the failure to clean up dust and not using appropriate equipment of safeguards

¹⁰ "REFINERY BLAST." Industry Week/IW 257, no. 4 (April 2008): 22. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

¹¹ Julia Muller, "TIMELINE: Imperial Sugar explosion from 2008 until today," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Feb. 10 2013.

¹² "OSHA Fines Imperial Sugar \$8.77 Million." Occupational Hazards 70, no. 9 (September 2008): 12. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

¹³ Peterson, Sep. 25 2009.

where combustible dust is present”¹⁴. But the faulty equipment and lack of safeguards were the product of more than simple ‘wear-and-tear.’ The history of the Imperial Sugar Company is important to consider when examining the deteriorating state of the factories. As litigation began in the post-investigation, news reports revealed a company with a number of problems in its financial history, as well as its staffing.

LITIGATION

Over the next two years, OSHA and a number of employees harmed in the explosion would take legal action against Imperial Sugar. As litigations proceeded, more unsettling information surfaced regarding the history of the company, as well as the staff that constituted it. Between the two plants at Port Wentworth and Gramercy, there were 200 alleged safety violations¹⁵. To make matters worse, three anonymous officials claimed to have warned Imperial Sugar about defects in its control system for sugar dust long before the blast. On three separate occasions – 2006, 2007 and 2008, the year of the disaster – Imperial Sugar had been warned that its dust control systems were in serious need of upgrading and maintenance. One consultant flatly remarked that the dust collection system was “state of the art – for the early 1960’s”¹⁶. Despite these damning allegations, CEO and President John Sheptor and company spokesman Steve Behm maintained that they had no idea that the dust control systems were so outdated, and denied receiving any kind of report, especially any from 2008. These reactions are not surprising, as the best strategy when facing litigation is to presume innocence and ignorance, regardless of the evidence. A similar tactic of the ‘know-nothing’ defense was used by BP during the Texas City debacle, and Imperial Sugar followed the same game plan. Sheptor would defer all questions regarding the explosion to Brian Harrison, the Vice President for Sugar Technology.

¹⁴ Occupational Hazards 70, no. 9 (September 2008).

¹⁵ Larry Peterson, “Feds Push Ahead in Bid to Crack Down Imperial Sugar,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Apr. 2 2009.

¹⁶ Larry Peterson, “Experts Warned Imperial About Dust Hazards,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Apr. 7 2009.

Of course, all attempts to contact Harrison were met with his voicemail, informing the caller that it was at capacity. Tim Hale (a company contact) and Derek Kight (an Imperial project manager) failed to answer any calls regarding the explosion. Regardless, the 2008 report did exist, and was conducted by a company called MacAljon Engineering, which determined that the machines were running at half efficiency, had blocked connections with almost no airflow, and that two of the other collectors were not “performing to original design,” in addition to lapses in maintenance, irregular lubrication and cleaning of the machines¹⁷. This failure of regular maintenance may point to cost-cutting in safety budgets, reminiscent of the issues leading up to BP crises discussed in Lustgarten’s book.

A number of whistle-blowers would emerge as proceedings continued. A man named Graham H. Graham reported that there was “no evacuation plan at the local Imperial Sugar refinery” to speak of whatsoever and worse, that there was no working fire alarm either¹⁸. Graham went on to allege that despite his concerns, Imperial repeatedly hindered his efforts to correct these severe lapses in safety protocol. Behm retorted that action was difficult to take because several higher-ups in Imperial were frequently traveling. Still, the allegations continued: another former Imperial Sugar official, Michael Lastie – the former safety manager – warned that the poor ventilation of sugar dust would inevitably lead to an explosion. He corroborated Graham in reporting that sugar had “no formal program or anything in writing concerning combustible dust” during his time there, from July 2004 to March 2008¹⁹. Again, we are seeing negligence comparable to that of BP’s, as well as the communication failure that plagued any effort to amend the combustible dust program. In a matter of months, yet another individual

¹⁷ Peterson, Apr. 7 2009.

¹⁸ Larry Peterson, “Whistleblower: No Evacuation Plan or Fire Alarms At Sugar Plant That Blew Up,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Jun. 2 2009.

¹⁹ Larry Peterson, “Former Imperial Official Says he Warned about Explosion Risks in 2004,” Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Jun. 18 2009.

came forward, this time a woman named Deborah Haban, who had been hired in 2003 to supervise training and development. Haban declined the offer to head the safety department, but was still involved in reports from the safety officer, despite having “no training on safety issues”²⁰. Haban was convinced that her role was solely as an administrator, and never considered herself to be formally in charge of Imperial’s safety program; she also alleged that Sheptor told her to downplay her role in safety issues because of the explosion that occurred the previous year. These developments are puzzling, but it certainly seems like Haban was trying to clear her name as court proceedings continued. Behm fired back, asserting that Haban was aware of Sheptor’s voiced commitment to safety and improving safety protocols. This ‘shushing’ and stretching of responsibilities of the company is again reminiscent of BP’s actions when its safety programs were being cut. Given the sheer amount of safety personnel that jumped ship, it seems safe to say that Imperial Sugar couldn’t possibly have a safety program in place. While Sheptor stressed safety during his tenure as CEO and President, this essentially amounts to empty words; we may find this redolent of BP’s repeated stance of being a ‘green company’ with the environment in its best interest, despite the disastrous effects it wrought on the environment.

The last straw was the report produced by the Chemical Safety Board, which produced memorandums in which managers voiced concerns about the accumulation of sugar as a fire hazard. In fact, Imperial Sugar (as well as the entire sugar industry) had been aware of the dangers of combustible sugar dust as early as 1925; the CSB depicted the consequence of this negligence with a grim image, reporting that “Imperial Sugar had not conducted evacuation drills and the explosion and fires disabled most emergency lighting, trapping workers in a dark maze of corridors”²¹. Allegations thus far did not bode well for Imperial Sugar. But court proceedings

²⁰ Larry Peterson, “Imperial Executive Says CEO Tried to Shush Her,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Aug. 16 2009.

²¹ Shaila Dewan, “Report Cites Lack of Precautions in 2008 Sugar Plant Fire,” New York Times (New York, NY), Sep. 24 2009.

dragged on as blame had yet to be legally determined. Still, more damning evidence would emerge.

Imperial Sugar had investigated the explosion, but refused to state whether any conclusions had been made. The “probe” that Imperial Sugar had sent to investigate the explosion hadn’t even stated whether or not a report had been issued, with Behm again running interference by using a stock response on the subject²². As court proceedings continued, it was revealed that Imperial Sugar had indeed investigated itself in lieu of the explosion, hiring two ‘experts’ named John Stokely and Ronald Kesselman to investigate the disaster at the Port Wentworth refinery, both of whom Imperial Sugar described as “independent and disinterested”²³. Here, we see a return to the ‘disinterested expert’, still present long after the refinement of railroad accident reports. Just as soon as Imperial vouched for its independent consultants, a report revealed that each had received 8,517 shares of Imperial Sugar stock (at the time, worth \$10.10 a share), and that both men were employed for \$70,000 a year as a “special investigative committee”. It goes without saying that Kesselman and Stokely were far from ‘disinterested’, but they did not face litigation, nor did they have to appear in court. Due to their status as “independents,” they were free from any form of legal action. NASDAQ also found that their shareholding was perfectly legal as well. This was only the first instance of Imperial using independent contracts and subsidiaries, which made it all but impossible to assign blame. Imperial Sugar used these independent contractors to escape culpability by using legal loopholes. It had a requisite worker’s compensation program (under the company Imperial Sugar) protecting it from workers taking legal action, since legal action would violate their contracts. But, since the company leased out its *operations* to different independent subsidiaries, the blame

²² Larry Peterson, “Imperial Sugar Still Won’t Discuss Its Year-Long Probe of 2008 Refinery Disaster,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Nov. 10 2009.

²³ Larry Peterson, “Imperial Sugar’s Self-Investigation Credibility Questioned,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), May 29, 2009.

didn't directly fall on Imperial Sugar, so determining who was at fault would eventually reach a stand-still²⁴.

Court proceedings would eventually stagnate with no one readily culpable, and legal loopholes miring investigations. Nonetheless, by January 2010 Imperial still had 45 lawsuits filed by employees and their families, despite settling its property claims from the 2008 disaster, as well as the \$8.7 million fine from OSHA²⁵. By September that year, plaintiffs began to drop their cases against Imperial. Eighteen of the existing cases settled out of court; the pre-trial appeal was also rejected by an appellate court. Attorney Walter B. Maxwell spoke the thoughts of many when he alleged that "the defendants intentionally created and preserved separate corporate groups"²⁶. Because of Imperial's legal maneuvering, there was little legal action that could be taken. Imperial Sugar was essentially absolved of legal responsibility due to its use of subsidiaries. The OSHA fine did pose a problem for the future of Imperial Sugar, but by February 2013, five years after the explosion in Port Wentworth, no prosecution occurred. Despite the 200 citations against the two plants, there wasn't enough solid evidence to pursue legal action against the company. US Attorney Edward J. Taver stated that "there was insufficient evidence of intentional disregard or plain indifference to the requirements of OSHA's general housekeeping standards to charge Imperial Sugar with a criminal violation" and that there were few federal laws "specifically addressed to the safety of workers within the sugar industry at the time of the Imperial Sugar explosion"²⁷. Taver attributed to the violations by Imperial Sugar to be noncompliant with "housekeeping laws" and that the maximum possible fine would be \$500,000. Ultimately, a combination of legal manipulation and vague federal

²⁴ Larry Peterson, "Blame for Disaster Might Not Determine Outcome of Imperial Sugar Lawsuits," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Oct. 11 2009.

²⁵ Roberto Cenicerros. "Imperial Sugar settles property claim in 2008 refinery explosion." Business Insurance 44, no. 1 (January 4, 2010): 20. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 17, 2014).

²⁶ Jan Skutch, "Appellate Court Rejects Pre-Trial Appeal in Imperial Sugar Case," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Sep. 23 2010.

²⁷ Sean Horgan, "Imperial Sugar: No Prosecution," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Feb. 26 2013.

guidelines regarding safety protocols granted absolution to Imperial Sugar. Despite dodging this legal bullet, Imperial Sugar had already cut its losses, selling the company to a French-based global conglomerate called Louis Dreyfus Commodities in 2012 for \$78 million²⁸. Imperial Sugar's stock had dropped dramatically from \$10.10 a share in 2008 to \$6.35 each. A combination of maintenance required to run its plant in Port Wentworth, and the aforementioned legal troubles had become too costly.

AFTERMATH

Imperial Sugar's financial history had been plagued before the 2008 disaster, suffering a 50% drop in profit for the 4th quarter of 2007 and another 28% fall in 2008. Despite being in relatively good shape before the explosion, Imperial's problems pointed to a bigger issue with sugar production in the United States. Offshore competition made running factories stateside difficult, so it is not surprising that Imperial Sugar would be bought out by an offshore conglomerate like Louis Dreyfus Commodities. These falling stock profits may also account for the 'double-dipping' in staff like Haban, who was unofficially put in charge of safety procedures at the plant, as well as the rapidly deteriorating state of the equipment and ventilation systems at the Port Wentworth and Gramercy plants. These problems are again reminiscent of the cost-cutting and lax safety protocols at British Petroleum through its rise as a company. More alarming still are the poorly defined regulations concerning sugar plant safety – specifically, sugar dust combustion – which is puzzling, considering the CSB report that reported dust combustion concerns as far back as 1925.

Ultimately, one is sobered by the results of the legal proceedings by OSHA and the CSB. Despite their efforts to bring Imperial Sugar to justice, citing 200 violations that could be filed as

²⁸ Bijoy Koyitty, "Louis Dreyfus to take Imperial Sugar Private in \$78 Million Deal," Reuters. May 1 2012.

‘willful negligence,’ justice was not to be served after five long years of litigation. I will admit that I had personally never heard about the Imperial Sugar explosion until this research assignment, and despite the relatively wide range of media coverage (from local news like Savannah Now to Reuters), it may be safe to say that public opinion beyond Savannah or Port Wentworth was essentially nonexistent. Even with massive technological disasters like the Texas City crisis in 2005, I will again admit that I don’t recall much of the news coverage. This lack of public opinion and faulty federal regulations seem to point to a greater problem concerning the price of poor safety protocols. Given the events of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, it seems like many of these problems are still present, with a solution still out of reach.

However, if there is one figure to be lauded throughout the investigation and proceedings of the Imperial Sugar explosion, it would be Larry Peterson, cited heavily in this research essay. Peterson reported tirelessly through the investigation of Imperial Sugar, even writing a piece after his retirement in 2010 that lamented the sheer number of unanswered questions regarding the circumstances of the explosion in 2008. In 2014, Peterson noted that the true cause of the explosion remained a mystery, with only speculation as to what caused it. His quotes from project engineer Derek Kight (who we recall was present in the initial investigation of the explosion) are telling of the inherent problems within the company, as well as the lack of defined legislation on sugar combustion. Despite the fact that he discovered a five-inch deep accumulation of granulated sugar under the covered belt, Kight noted that “I really [didn’t] have the people to clean this up”²⁹. While a vacuum contractor had been scheduled, perhaps ironically, the day after the explosion occurred, it still remained unclear whether or not his would have reduced the severity of the explosion. Despite these unanswered questions, Peterson’s

²⁹ Larry Peterson, “Peterson: Six Years Later, Questions About Imperial Sugar Catastrophe Remain,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Feb. 2 2014.

journalistic integrity is commendable in that he never ceased investigating the Imperial Sugar disaster, even after the selling of the company and ‘no persecution’ ruling by the court. Sadly, Peterson passed away later this year at the age of 71. His efforts recall some of the figures in *Run to Failure*, especially individuals like Chuck Hamel and Jeanne Pascal, who also felt the civic and ethical responsibility to find justice for the negligence of corporations.

One of the takeaways from the disasters in *Run to Failure* and the Imperial Sugar explosion might be how catastrophes can be avoided in the future. Given the legal and social outcomes of these disasters, the future does not look promising. More rigid federal guidelines need to be put in place regarding safety protocols and budgets, as well as research on concepts like dust combustion, for which federal protocols should have existed years ago. Still, both this research essay and Lustgarten’s book note the inherent issue in the need for more government restriction: profit and demand. Oil-based products and fuels are obvious enough, especially considering the buzz in the news due to the recent drops in gas prices across the country. Sugar is also a major part of our economy, used in food products of all persuasions. Ultimately, the public itself is tasked with sacrificing convenience for human lives. This is not an easy sacrifice to make, as our consumption of both sugar and oil on such a regular basis is essentially an institution of the United States. But the possible push towards more legislation and restrictions in the name of worker’s safety rights will remain difficult to attain if the demand for oil and sugar products remains as widespread as it is now.

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THE DISASTER

It was the seventh of February 2008, on a Friday. Workers for Imperial Sugar Company had filed out for the evening, while others filed in that afternoon to begin the third shift. The city the sugar factory was based in, Port Wentworth, was one of three cities featuring a sugar plant owned by Imperial Sugar; the plant in Port Wentworth was especially recent, an acquisition by Imperial from Savannah Foods in 1997. Its equipment and silos were run down, and the plant's emergency procedures were alarmingly lax: no fire drills were in place, nor were any fire alarms in working order³⁰. Given the lack of any safety officials present at that time, as well, the actual circumstances of the explosion that would take place at Imperial Sugar remains to be seen³¹.

What was known, at the time of the blast, was that at approximately 7:20pm, a massive explosion shook the Imperial Sugar factory, killing six in the blast initially. Initial reports were as frantic as the workers attempting to flee the multiple explosions and combusting sugar, reporting only estimates of injuries at the time – “dozens” who were injured. After the fires abated and the smoke cleared, 14 would be left dead, with over 40 injured, with some in critical condition for their wounds³². For some time, the cause of the accident couldn't be determined given the confusion and lawsuits following the explosion, but today, the case was doubtlessly caused by the number of antiquated and dilapidated equipment at the plant. Sugar dust and granulated sugar had spilled and accumulated in mass quantities throughout the plant. An obstruction – most likely a lump of sugar – became stuck on one of the chutes the sugar traveled down to the conveyor belt. The obstruction spilled onto the belt, then onto the floor, shooting

³⁰ Larry Peterson, "Experts Warned Imperial about Dust Hazards," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Apr. 7 2009.

³¹ Larry Peterson, "Peterson: Six Years Later, Questions about Imperial Sugar Catastrophe Remain," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Feb. 2 2014.

³² Sean Horgan, "No public memorial for Imperial Sugar explosion anniversary," Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Feb. 7 2013.

samuelwagner 1/31/2015 12:45 PM

Comment [21]: “Would it have been more rhetorically effective to move your description of the “blast” in the Disaster section to immediately follow the second sentence in the first paragraph? When I read “lump” of sugar, I picture one of those tiny cubes we used to build igloos in elementary school. I'm assuming this lump was quite a bit larger--how might you communicate this more clearly? It's like using the term “foam” to describe the substance that struck the Challenger on its ascent--not descriptive enough to arouse a perception of risk. Also, any injury to humans could be mentioned much earlier than the litigation section. Effective, detailed comparisons to BP's run to failure. This is a strong point in your reporting. I'm wondering if one of the reasons there were no clearly defined regulations (dating back to concerns raised in 1925) is that unlike workers for the oil industry, who are reasonably compensated for their labor, workers in a sugar packaging factory are not as well compensated--perhaps a little exploited, even? Very comprehensive research! For the smaller stuff, watch your comma use, proofreading and word choice--I noticed a few words you chose didn't really communicate the meaning you intended...I always keep a dictionary and thesaurus window open when I write and refer to it often. Rhetorically effective writing depends almost as much, I think, on finding the most suitable words as it does on finding the most suitable means of persuasion.”

Judith Edminster, Dec 22, 2014 at 3:30pm

sugar and dust down the tunnel of the processing room. In 2007, the plant had installed plate coverings over the belt that transported the sugar, in an effort to keep the sugar from being contaminated; this unfortunately created an unventilated, pressurized atmosphere filled with combustible sugar dust³³. Officials have yet to determine the cause, but one theory holds that the obstruction created a jam in the line.

While it is unclear what happened next, the faulty equipment most likely was to blame; it is estimated that a bearing on the belt became overheated and sparked³⁴. The initial explosion was caused by the dust in the high-pressure air igniting, then exploding, which in turn combusted the piles of sugar and encrusted dust on the equipment. Firemen reported “thick masses of molten sugar were smoldering at temperatures as high as 4,000 degrees”³⁵, and the blaze would take close to three days to extinguish. After the blaze was extinguished, the damage reports began to arrive: the packaging area had been completely destroyed, but the refinery itself suffered almost no damage whatsoever; nonetheless, 12% of the factory had been destroyed³⁶. Public, and government, response would be quick, but the investigations, law suits and closure would be drawn out for years to come.

THE INVESTIGATION

Initial investigations on the disaster were thorough and took place by a few government agencies, specifically the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Chemical Safety Board (CSB), both of which wanted to determine the cause of the explosion, as well as who was to be held accountable. What contrasts the situation from, say, the disasters

³³ Larry Peterson, "Chemical Safety Board says 14 Imperial Sugar deaths 'entirely preventable'," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Sep. 25 2009.

³⁴ Peterson, Feb. 2, 2014.

³⁵ "Explosion at US sugar refinery kills six." *Loss Prevention Bulletin* no. 200 (April 2008): 31. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

³⁶ Dan Chapman, "Sugar Refinery Near Savannah Determined to Rebuild," The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Apr. 13 2008.

involved with BP was the sudden accountability shown by CEO and President John Sheptor came forward with the initial report that sugar dust had accumulated and ignited in one of its collection silos³⁷. This only prompted the CSB to investigate further, who pointed out that combustible dust was a persistent problem that safety boards and officials honestly knew little about. While Sheptor may have been attempting to not shirk the disaster in outright in an attempt to appear compliant, the combustible dust – and its accumulation throughout the plant – would become one of the most contentious elements of the investigation.

Soon after the disaster at the Port Wentworth site, investigators quickly shut down the plant present at Gramercy, Louisiana to prevent a second explosion from occurring. Investigators reported finding similar build ups of dust, sugar and antiquated equipment³⁸. After five months of determining the vast number of violations present at both Port Wentworth, but also Gramercy, OSHA fined Imperial Sugar \$8.77 million in July 2008: \$5,062,000 for the penalties at Port Wentworth and \$3,715,500 for violations at Gramercy³⁹. OSHA reported that its investigators found large accumulations of combustible sugar dust in workrooms, electrical motors and on other equipment; worse yet, OSHA determined that officials in the company were aware of these conditions but remained negligent in any efforts to repair, clean, or upgrade the equipment. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the Imperial Sugar disaster was the final report published by the Chemical Safety Board a year later, which found the disaster to be “entirely preventable”⁴⁰. A combination of negligence by the management and the safety officers seemed to be the blame at the time, as well as a company unwillingness to upgrade or clean its equipment. At the close of its investigation, OSHA found “108 instances of willful violations related to the combustible dust

³⁷ "REFINERY BLAST." *Industry Week/IW* 257, no. 4 (April 2008): 22. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

³⁸ Julia Muller, "TIMELINE: Imperial Sugar explosion from 2008 until today," *Savannah Now* (Savannah, GA), Feb. 10 2013.

³⁹ "OSHA Fines Imperial Sugar \$8.77 Million." *Occupational Hazards* 70, no. 9 (September 2008): 12. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 16, 2014).

⁴⁰ Peterson, Sep. 25 2009.

hazard, including the failure to clean up dust and not using appropriate equipment of safeguards where combustible dust is present”⁴¹. But this lack of safeguards and faulty equipment had a root and a cause beyond the simple ‘wear-and-tear’ of machinery. The history of the Imperial Sugar Company is important to consider when considering the deteriorating state of the factories. As litigation began in the post-investigation, news reports revealed a company with a number of problems in its financial history, as well as its staffing.

LITIGATION

Over the next two years, OSHA and a number of employees harmed in the explosion would proceed to take legal action against Imperial Sugar. As litigations proceeded, more unsettling information surfaced regarding the history of the company, as well as the staff that constituted it. Between the two plants at Port Wentworth and Gramercy, there were 200 alleged safety violations⁴². To make matters worse for Imperial Sugar, three officials, who had remained anonymous, claimed to have warned Imperial Sugar about defects in its control system for sugar dust long before the blast. On three separate occasions – 2006, 2007 and the year of the disaster, in 2008 – Imperial Sugar had been warned that its dust control systems were in serious need of upgrading and maintenance. One consultant quipped that the dust collection system was “state of the art – for the early 1960’s”⁴³. Despite these damning allegations, CEO and President John Sheptor and company spokesman Steve Behm maintained that they had no knowledge that the dust control systems were so outdated, and denied receiving any kind of report, especially one from that year. These reactions are not surprising on the part of Imperial Sugar, as the best strategy when facing litigation is to presume innocence and ignorance, regardless of the evidence. A similar tactic of ‘know-nothing’ defense was used by BP during the Texas City

⁴¹ Occupational Hazards 70, no. 9 (September 2008).

⁴² Larry Peterson, “Feds Push Ahead in Bid to Crack Down Imperial Sugar,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Apr. 2 2009.

⁴³ Larry Peterson, “Experts Warned Imperial About Dust Hazards,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Apr. 7 2009.

debacle, and Imperial Sugar seems to have followed the same game plan. In fact, Sheptor would defer all questions regarding the explosion to Brian Harrison, the Vice President for Sugar Technology. However, all attempts to contact Harrison were met with a voice mail box, informing the caller that it was at capacity. Neither did Tim Hale (a company contact) nor Derek Kight (an Imperial project manager) answer any calls regarding the explosion. Nonetheless, the final report was conducted by a company called MacAljon Engineering, which in 2008 determined that the machines were running at half efficiency, had blocked connections with almost no airflow, and that two of the other collectors were not “performing to original design” in addition to lapses in maintenance, irregular lubrication and cleaning of the machines⁴⁴. These lapses in maintenance may point cost-cutting in safety budgets, another cause reminiscent of the BP crises discussed in Lustgarten’s book. The financial and personnel history of Imperial Sugar will be examined later.

A number of whistle-blowers would proceed to emerge as proceedings continued. A man named Graham H. Graham reported that there was “no evacuation plan at the local Imperial Sugar refinery” to speak of whatsoever and worse, that there was no working fire alarm present, either⁴⁵. Graham went on to allege that despite his concerns, Imperial took several steps to hinder his efforts to correct these severe lapses in safety protocol. Behm replied that action was difficult to take because several higher-ups in Imperial were frequently traveling. Another former Imperial Sugar official, Michael Lastie – the former safety manager – warned that the poor ventilation of sugar dust would inevitably lead to an explosion. He corroborated Graham in reporting that sugar had “no formal program or anything in writing concerning combustible dust”

⁴⁴ Peterson, Apr. 7 2009.

⁴⁵ Larry Peterson, “Whistleblower: No Evacuation Plan or Fire Alarms At Sugar Plant That Blew Up,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Jun. 2 2009.

during his time there, from July 2004 to March 2008⁴⁶. Again, we are seeing the pattern of deniability that BP also followed; more troubling yet are the parallels in communication failure that plagued any action taking place regarding the combustible dust program. In a matter of months, yet another individual came forward, this time Deborah Haban, who had been hired in 2003 to supervise training and development. Haban declined the offer to head the safety department, but was still involved in reports from the safety officer, despite having “no training on safety issues”⁴⁷. Haban was convinced that her role was solely as an administrator, and never considered herself to be formally in charge of Imperial’s safety program; despite these claims by Haban, she also alleged that Sheptor told her to downplay her role in safety issues in lieu of the explosion that occurred the previous year. These developments are puzzling, but it certainly seems as though Haban was trying to clear her name as court proceedings continued. Behm fired back, observing that Haban was aware of Sheptor’s voiced commitment to safety and improving safety protocols. But the ‘shushing’ and stretching of responsibilities of the company is again reminiscent of BP’s actions when its safety programs were being cut. Given the sheer amount of safety personnel that jumped ship, it seems safe to say that Imperial Sugar did not have any safety program in place. While Sheptor may have stressed safety during his tenure as CEO and President, this essentially amounts to nothing; we may reflect on BP’s repeated stance of being a ‘green company’ with the environment in its best interest, despite the disastrous effects it wrought on the environment.

Perhaps the last straw was the report produced by the Chemical Safety Board, which produced memorandums from the previous owner of the plant, wherein managers voiced concerns about the accumulation of sugar as a fire hazard. In fact, Imperial Sugar, as well as the

⁴⁶ Larry Peterson, “Former Imperial Official Says he Warned about Explosion Risks in 2004,” Savannah Morning News (Savannah, GA), Jun. 18 2009.

⁴⁷ Larry Peterson, “Imperial Executive Says CEO Tried to Shush Her,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Aug. 16 2009.

sugar industry entirely had been aware of the dangers of combustible sugar dust as early as 1925; the CSB concluded the result of this negligence with a stark mental picture, stating that “Imperial Sugar had not conducted evacuation drills and the explosion and fires disabled most emergency lighting, trapping workers in a dark maze of corridors”⁴⁸. Allegations thus far had been grim for Imperial Sugar. But court proceedings dragged on as blame had yet to be legally determined. Still, more damning evidence would emerge.

Imperial Sugar had investigated the explosion, but refused to state whether any conclusions had been made. The “probe” that Imperial Sugar had sent to investigate the explosion hadn’t even stated whether or not a report had been issued, with Behm again playing interference by using a stock response on the subject⁴⁹. As court proceedings carried on, it was revealed that Imperial Sugar had indeed investigated itself in lieu of the explosion, hiring two ‘experts’ named John Stokely and Ronald Kesselman to investigate the disaster at the Port Wentworth refinery, who Imperial Sugar described as “independent and disinterested”⁵⁰. Here, we see a return to the trope of the ‘disinterested expert’, still alive and thriving long after the refinement of railroad accident reports. Just as soon as Imperial vouched for its independent consultants, a report surfaced revealing that each received 8,517 shares of Imperial Sugar stock (at the time, worth \$10.10 a share), and that both men were employed for \$70,000 a year as a “special investigative committee”. It goes without saying that the interests of Kesselman and Stokely were far from ‘disinterested’, but they did not face litigation, nor did they have to appear in court. Due to their status as “independents,” they were free from any form of legal action. NASDAQ also found that their shareholding was perfectly legal as well. This was only the start

⁴⁸ Shaila Dewan, “Report Cites Lack of Precautions in 2008 Sugar Plant Fire,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Sep. 24 2009.

⁴⁹ Larry Peterson, “Imperial Sugar Still Won’t Discuss Its Year-Long Probe of 2008 Refinery Disaster,” *Savannah Now* (Savannah, GA), Nov. 10 2009.

⁵⁰ Larry Peterson, “Imperial Sugar’s Self-Investigation Credibility Questioned,” *Savannah Now* (Savannah, GA), May 29, 2009.

of Imperial's tactic of using independent contracts and subsidiaries. As the investigation continued, determining blame became a complicated matter of legal red tape. It turned out that Imperial Sugar turned the workers' own plan against them. The workers who were suing for personal damages ordinarily could not have done so, because their contracts indicated that they could not take legal action against Imperial Sugar. However, Imperial Sugar leased out its operations to different and independent subsidiaries. Thus, the workers weren't violating workman's compensation, but the blame also didn't directly rest on Imperial Sugar in turn, so determining who was at fault would eventually reach a stand-still⁵¹.

Court proceedings would eventually stagnate, with no one to legally blame, and red tape miring swift action. By January 2010, however, Imperial still had 45 lawsuits filed by employees and their families, despite settling its property claims from the 2008 disaster, as well as the \$8.7 million fine from OSHA⁵². By September that year, plaintiffs began to abate in their cases against Imperial, with 18 of the existing cases settling out of court; the pre-trial appeal was also rejected by an appellate court. Attorney Walter B. Maxwell echoed the thoughts of many when he alleged that "the defendants intentionally created and preserved separate corporate groups"⁵³. Despite Imperial's legal maneuvering being well established by this point, there was little legal action that could be taken. Imperial Sugar was essentially absolved of legal responsibility due to its use of subsidiaries. The OSHA fine did pose a problem for the future of Imperial Sugar, but by February 2013, five years after the explosion in Port Wentworth, no prosecution would occur. Despite the 200 citations against the two plants, there wasn't enough solid evidence to pursue legal action against the company. US Attorney Edward J. Taver stated that "there was

⁵¹ Larry Peterson, "Blame for Disaster Might Not Determine Outcome of Imperial Sugar Lawsuits," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Oct. 11 2009.

⁵² Roberto Cenicerros. "Imperial Sugar settles property claim in 2008 refinery explosion." Business Insurance 44, no. 1 (January 4, 2010): 20. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed December 17, 2014).

⁵³ Jan Skutch, "Appellate Court Rejects Pre-Trial Appeal in Imperial Sugar Case," Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Sep. 23 2010.

insufficient evidence of intentional disregard or plain indifference to the requirements of OSHA’s general housekeeping standards to charge Imperial Sugar with a criminal violation” and that there was little federal law “specifically addressed to the safety of workers within the sugar industry at the time of the Imperial Sugar explosion”⁵⁴. Taver attributed to the violations by Imperial Sugar to be noncompliant with “housekeeping laws” and that the maximum possible fine would be \$500,000. Ultimately, a combination of legal red tape slowing proceedings with the vague federal guidelines regarding safety protocols in sugar manufacturing led to what would be essentially absolution of Imperial Sugar. Despite dodging this legal bullet, Imperial Sugar had already cut its losses, selling the company to a French-based global conglomerate called Louis Dreyfus Commodities in 2012 for \$78 million⁵⁵. Imperial Sugar’s stock had dropped dramatically from \$10.10 a share in 2008 to \$6.35 each. The legal troubles and maintenance required to run its plant in Port Wentworth had become insoluble.

AFTERMATH

Aside from numerous legal vagueries regarding safety protocol, Imperial Sugar’s financial history had been plagued before the 2008 disaster, suffering a 50% drop in profit for the 4th quarter of 2007 and another 28% fall in 2008. Despite being in relatively good shape before the explosion, Imperial’s problems pointed to a bigger problem with sugar production in the United States. Offshore competition made running factories stateside difficult, so it is not surprising that Imperial Sugar would be bought out by an offshore conglomerate like Louis Dreyfus commodities. These falling stock profits may also account for the ‘double-dipping’ in staff like Haban, who was unofficially put in charge of safety procedures at the plant, as well as the rapidly deteriorating state of the equipment and ventilation systems at the Port Wentworth

⁵⁴ Sean Horgan, “Imperial Sugar: No Prosecution,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Feb. 26 2013.

⁵⁵ Bijoy Koyitty, “Louis Dreyfus to take Imperial Sugar Private in \$78 Million Deal,” Reuters. May 1 2012.

and Gramercy plants. These problems are, again, reminiscent of the cost-cutting and lax safety protocols at British Petroleum through the duration of its rise as a company. More alarming are the poorly defined regulations concerning sugar dust combustion, which is puzzling considering the CSB report that dated dust combustion concerns as far back as 1925.

Ultimately, one is left feeling nonplussed at the results of the legal proceedings by OSHA and the CSB. Despite their efforts to bring Imperial Sugar to justice, citing 200 violations that could be filed as ‘willful negligence,’ justice was not to be served after five long years of litigation. I will admit that I had personally never heard about the Imperial Sugar explosion until the undertaking of this research assignment, and despite the relatively wide range of media coverage (from local news like Savannah Now to Reuters), it may be safe to say that public opinion outside of Savannah or Port Wentworth was essentially nonexistent. Even with massive technological disasters like the Texas City crisis in 2005, I will personally admit that I don’t recall much of the news coverage. Public opinion, as well as federal regulations seem to underpin the greater problems concerning punishments for poor safety protocols. Given the events of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, it seems like many of these problems are still in place, with a solution seeming still out of reach.

If there is one figure to be lauded throughout the investigation and proceedings of the Imperial Sugar explosion, it would be Larry Peterson, cited and featured heavily in this research essay. Peterson reported tirelessly throughout the investigation of Imperial Sugar, even writing a piece after his retirement in 2010, lamenting the sheer number of unanswered questions regarding the circumstances of the explosion in 2008. In 2014, Peterson noted that the true cause of the explosion remained a mystery, with only estimations and guesses as to what had caused it. His quotations from project engineer Derek Kight (who we may recall was present in the initial

investigation of the explosion) are telling of the inherent problems within the company, as well as the lack of defined legislation on sugar combustion. Despite the fact that he discovered a five-inch deep accumulation of granulated sugar under the covered belt, Kight noted that “I really [didn’t] have the people to clean this up”⁵⁶. While a vacuum contractor had been scheduled, perhaps ironically, the day after the explosion occurred, it still remained unclear whether or not this would have abated the severity of the explosion. Despite these unanswered questions, Peterson’s journalistic integrity is laudable in that he never ceased investigating the terms of the Imperial Sugar disaster, even after the selling of the company and ‘no persecution’ ruling by the court. Sadly, Peterson passed away later this year at the age of 71. His efforts recall some of the figures in *Run to Failure*, especially individuals like Chuck Hamel and Jeanne Pascal, who also felt the compulsion of civic and ethical responsibility to find justice for the negligence of corporations.

The ultimate takeaway from the disasters in *Run to Failure* and the Imperial Sugar explosion might be how they can be avoided in the future. Given the legal and social outcomes of these disasters, unfortunately, the future does not look promising. More rigid federal guidelines need to be put in place regarding oil companies’ safety protocols and budgets, as well as concepts like dust combustion, for which there should have been federal protocols put in place long ago. Still, this research essay and Lustgarten both note the conflict inherent in the need for more government restriction: profit and demand. Oil-based products and fuels are obvious enough, especially considering the buzz in the news due to the recent drops in gas prices across the country. Sugar as well is a major part of our economy, as it is used in countless numbers of food and food products. At the end of the day, the public itself is tasked with being willing to

⁵⁶ Larry Peterson, “Peterson: Six Years Later, Questions About Imperial Sugar Catastrophe Remain,” Savannah Now (Savannah, GA), Feb. 2 2014.

sacrifice convenience for human lives. This is by no means an easy sacrifice to make, and our consumption of both sugar and oil on a regular basis is essentially an institution of the United States. But the possible push towards more legislation and restrictions in the name of workers' safety rights will remain difficult to attain if the demand for oil and sugar products remains as fervent as it is now.

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Culture Specific Interface Design: A Survey of Foreign-Language Social Media

I work at a company called Townsend Learning Center, a small company that rehabilitates individuals who cannot return to their previous work due to physical injuries they suffered on the job. We teach them basic to intermediate office skills like Microsoft Word, Excel, and Powerpoint. Individuals in the program are usually sent from the Department of Labor or the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, and learn to work in a simulated office environment. Familiarity with office etiquette and programs differs. One student had no experience with basic computer concepts; terminology like the ‘desktop’ and the ‘Start Menu’ were unfamiliar concepts as well. It hadn’t occurred to me that my understanding of these concepts was a privileged position: many of our clients had never even owned a computer. This led me to consider the Selfe and Selfe article, “The Politics of the Interface,” in which they argue that the very names, icons, and terminology used in computer interfaces and applications are themselves based on a privileged and specific sociological viewpoint. It follows that these icons, terms and constructions are imposed worldwide: Microsoft and Apple are global corporations, after all. Interfaces that use Western imagery exclude and alienate users who do not share the same cultural norms. This ranges from a socioeconomic difference to differences in foreign language and customs (Chinese cultural interfaces vs. those seen on a Macintosh desktop). Both pose persistent given the highly Westernized design of computer and internet interfaces. In this research essay, I determine if foreign-language social networks feature more culture-specific interface design, outside the standards present in Western website design. From there, I examine possible alternatives and the developments in interface design.

ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL WEB DESIGN

Interfaces control all of our interactions with a website or a computer program, and also affect and interact with our mental processes. It is arguable that interfaces not only represent but maintain Western concepts and motivations, preserving them as fixtures of power. Using Western interface design in websites creates a globalized standard for users regardless of creed and culture. It is possible that these “gestures of domination and colonialism” (Selfe and Selfe 433) are merely the byproduct of our customs as citizens of the United States. In other words, this interface design may simply be a design limited to the English language and Western cultural norms. But, evidence supports the notion that Western interface design is present worldwide, and may be present in foreign language interface design. Selfe and Selfe investigated the politics of the desktop design itself, and I realized that this design has not changed greatly since their study. Instead, I am opting to analyze something that is rapidly changing in design and style: websites. Specifically, social media networks. Though not necessarily new technology, they could prove to be a good test of the accommodations made to the user bases removed from Western or English-speaking traditions. I reason that examining foreign interface design will demonstrate how invasive Western interface features are. Given the ubiquity of social media, I figured that foreign language social media websites would be a consistent model to compare and contrast against a control that embodied many elements of what constitute “Western” design – Facebook.

The need for more diverse website design is not new. In their excellent study, “Trends in Culturally Relevant Interface design features for Latino Web site users” Sachau and Hutchinson make the point that “most instructional designers will need to design instructional interfaces targeted for an audience that comes from a different cultural background than the designer. This will require the designer to know what interface features might be indicative of the given

culture” (1034). Given that they specifically study accommodations of interfaces for Spanish-speaking individuals on US food stamp websites, their research is of particular relevance today, given the rising demographics of Spanish-speaking individuals within the United States. While they do stress the need for more research on foreign-language interface design, they also note that more research is needed into determining how designers should develop culturally differentiated web design (1035). The focus of Sachau and Hutchinson’s study is admittedly rather narrow, as it was comparing US food stamp web sites with Mexican government web sites. However, they still identify core problems with cross-cultural interface design, noting that the greatest difference between these sites is that interfaces on US websites often featured little indication of the Spanish language gateway. Sachau and Hutchinson list a number of possible visual indicators that could aid Spanish-speaking users:

Including images of groups of Latino children, adults, or classroom students; providing Web site links to educational resources that recognize and support the Latino community; designing interfaces that are linear, highly structured, and include navigational aids; providing photographs and statements that help to communicate instructors’ expertise in subjects they are teaching; and using colors of the Mexican flag and/or bright colors of blue, green, red, and purple for visual cues and aesthetics are examples of how interface features supported by this study may translate into both formal and informal Web-based educational resources for the given population. (1047).

These visual cues alone make an interface more accommodating in a cross-cultural sense. Sachau and Hutchinson also make the important conclusion that national culture may influence web design itself. While it is true that the US government may not see a pressing need to adapt its websites to accommodate another country’s culture, small modifications like the above can make interfaces more cross-cultural. Some sites like Wikipedia might represent a step in the right direction; its home page features a number of different languages presented in the native speaker’s written language, clearly indicating the gateway. Nevertheless, there are subtle cultural signifiers behind website design that go beyond simple language and even visual cues.

Emily Thrush identifies such a cultural cue in her essay “Multicultural Issues in Technical Communication,” identifying a disparity between the thinking of a citizen of the United States and a citizen of China, which she calls low-context versus high-context thinking. For instance, Chinese, or high-context thinking, does not need supplemental information; everything is a part of a greater whole. Low-context thinking, a more Western thought process, works the opposite way, piecing together parts that eventually create a whole (Thrush 418). Thrush warns that in the wrong cultural context, extensive writing or information could insult the reader’s intelligence by over-explaining information. In “A Study of Chinese and German Automobile Literature”, Yiqin Wang and Dan Wang also determine a high context versus low context disparity exists between different cultures. They propose a handy if-then proposition: “[i]f the synthesis thought pattern [high-context] predominates in one culture, a system of a component should be structured in the technical document with interrelations and context. If the analysis thought pattern [low-context] is predominant in another culture, it should be constructed with specific and separate elements (48).” Thrush and the Wang’s give us a sense of the high demands and cultural sensitivity required in creating cross-cultural website designs. However, the question remains as to whether or not website design in social media networks accommodates these culturally diverse ways of thinking.

The nature of technology itself poses interesting implications for cultural differences as well. Proctor et al. note that accommodation to technology similarly adapts differently with regard to different cultures. For instance, they write that “the Internet was put to use very early in India for horoscope construction and matching. Matrimonial web sites sprang up swiftly” (177). While it is safe to say now that many Indian individuals use the internet for far more personal and social reasons, Proctor et al. provides a vivid example of the different cultural expectations

that come into play with interface design – different cultures necessitate different imperatives.

Proctor et al. also address the aforementioned cultural differences in the Chinese-German example, finding that Chinese users preferred rich layouts on web pages, with several advertisements present, while German users preferred more simplified styles (174). Again, this might point to different cultural frameworks and mindsets at hand, holistic and analytic frameworks (the above mentioned high-context and low-context thinking) that designers need to keep in mind when creating interfaces.

In an effort to truly examine how disparate these differences are, I developed an analysis of different foreign-language social media sites. By doing a comparative analysis, my hope is that the differences described above might manifest themselves during the analysis. Similarities will also be taken into account.

ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SOCIAL NETWORKS

I attempted to select a range of websites that were not only diverse, but those with a substantial user base, with the intention and hope that a larger user base would be more indicative of the cultural trends and accommodations that website contained. I chose four of the most popular foreign-language social media websites available: Sina Weibo (China), V Kontakte (Russia), Taringa (Argentine/Spanish) and Mixi (Japan). Originally, I had selected the Indian social networking site Ibibo for diversity, but it has puzzlingly become an online travel company since my initial research. Regardless, each of these websites I selected enjoy a massive user base, and are each relatively distinct in their layout and web design. I will compare each of these

websites to Facebook, arguably the most popular social networking site worldwide. I developed

Fig 2.1: Facebook Homepage. Many of the site's features adhere to Western site standards.

a list of criteria based upon the sources above to determine whether or not the site in question had an interface that was more accommodating to the culture in question. The criteria are as follows: page orientation (is it read left to right?), page layout (rich

graphics or simple design?), icons (what kinds are used, what do they represent?), how knowledge and information is represented (Selfe and Selfe, 437), and finally whether or not the website is designed with holistic or analytical thinking in mind. Representation of knowledge determines whether or not it is presented hierarchically, i.e. is the most important or relevant information listed first, and so forth. Holistic and analytical thinking refers to the distinction between high and low-context thinking described above in the Emily Thrush article, and the article by Wang and Wang. With these criteria established, I expected many of the findings from the above articles to be relatively reciprocated. After all, many social media networks bear resemblances to one another, especially Facebook and Vkontakte. Still, there were elements from each that held their own surprises.

Sina Weibo



Fig 2.1: Sina Weibo homepage. Columns contain different media and options for users, such as (left to right) related pages, news and quick previews of microblogs.

Sina Weibo is a Chinese blogging site that is something of a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook. It is currently China's largest Chinese-based social network. The site does not feature much of a "left to right" orientation, but its log-in is located in a similar position to Facebook's, in the upper-right corner. There is a link to the main site in the upper left corner that leads back to the "top" of the page. True to what Proctor et al. noted, the page does feature a large number of different links and options. A menu bar separates the top of the page (topics) with areas of

interest in columns: microblogging links, recent news in the center column. Scrolling down provides even more options to browse news centers, a news scroll, and recent microblog topics. Like Facebook, scrolling down to the “end” results in an endlessly loading stream of featured microblogs from users of the site. The icons



Fig 2.2: Sina Weibo Microblogs Page. This follows the ‘main’ news section and features an endlessly refreshing list of users’ blogs on the site.

used are predominantly ones from Western site design, a small house indicating the 'Home' page, a small portrait of a person that navigates to the user page, and even a small "FB" icon to link a user's Sina Weibo account to Facebook. Knowledge is not presented hierarchically, but rather spread evenly down the page, presenting a number of ideas simultaneously; while it uses Western iconography, this website is certainly designed with Chinese thinking, i.e. high contextual thinking, in mind.

Vkontakte

While Vkontakte (Contact) is primarily a Russian site, it bills itself as “The largest European social network with more than a 100 million active users.” The site is remarkable for a number of reasons, the first being that it is almost entirely identical to Facebook's early page layout. Its orientation is even reminiscent of older web sites, with a log-in on the left hand side

(beneath a 'Home'

link). There is a

sign in area for

newcomers, like

Facebook, with the

added absurdity of

a "Sign in with

Facebook" button

as well. Its

formatting is definitely more Western, with simple colors, layout and page design. Aside from

the Facebook logo and Vkontakte logo, there is little iconography present on the page

whatsoever. In a more Western sense, knowledge is presented hierarchically, with the

information reading from log-in to additional information at the very bottom of the page.

Whereas Sina Weibo's information continued indefinitely, Vkontakte's layout ends with hardly a

mouse scroll. The website's very minimalist design suggests a more Westernized cultural

framework. Even the default language for the page is English, indicating some globalized

intentions.

Taringa

Taringa is an

Argentinian-based social

networking service that

enjoys, at time of writing,

26,000,000 registered

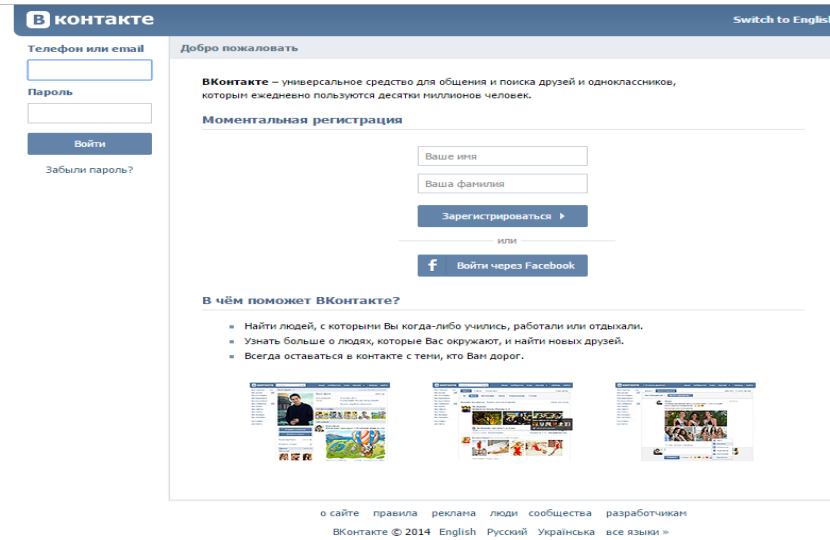


Fig 2.3: Vkontakte homepage. Its simple log in page and color scheme are highly derivative of Facebook.



Fig 2.4: Taringa Homepage. The homepage features a number of different links and information.

users. Taringa is unique in that it promotes content sharing exclusively, rewarding users with points per original content shared. Users who share content receive feedback from the Taringa community. Taringa's log-in orientation is more reminiscent of Facebook, and its font and color scheme at the top is reminiscent of Facebook's log-in page as well. Its orientation is left to right, with a rich layout similar to Sina Weibo's site, in columns: newest items stream 'endlessly' on the left column; new information, staff picks and top videos stream in the center column; user information streams on the far right column. Taringa uses several different icons, including a small crown to indicate a newly added "Games" section. Most of the other images present are either user avatars or thumbnails for the news itself. Information is definitely represented in a more even layout, though there are hierarchical elements at hand, with the "Top Users" lists and so forth. Given the large amount of information and options at hand, Taringa leans towards a more holistic thinking layout.

Mixi



Fig 2.6: Mixi Homepage. Features minimal design, but also a more holistic orientation like Sina

Mixi is one of Japan's larger social networking sites, with about 26 million users. Its primary concept is bringing user groups together with shared interests, news stories and entertainment. Mixi's orientation is something of a combination

of Vkontakte and Sina Weibo. There is a small log-in box on the right hand side, but it is positioned lower, indicating that the user who is scanning the website may be starting on the right hand side. Its formatting is extremely sparse, and its information is presented with little iconography and some hierarchal ordering. It has a community portal first, then links to games, with a small menu on the right hand side for blogging, news, and so forth. While Mixi is definitely more minimal and hierarchal in its structure, the primary language present is still Japanese, and like Taringa, it represents something of a reconciliation of holistic and analytical thought. One gets the sense that Mixi may be an older site as well, as there are little ads or graphics present on the website.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

| | Orientation | Layout | Icons | Knowledge Orientation | Cultural Design |
|---------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sina Weibo | Right to left | Graphic/image rich | Thumbnails, otherwise few | Non-hierarchal | Holistic |
| Vkontakte | Left to right | Minimal | None | Hierarchal | Analytical |
| Taringa | Left to right | Graphic/image rich | Thumbnails, some icons | Non-hierarchical | Holistic |
| Mixi | Right to left | Minimal | Thumbnails | Non-hierarchical | Both, but slightly more holistic |
| Facebook (control) | Left to right | Minimal | None | Hierarchal | Analytical |

Table 1.1. Results of Data. Data resulted from criteria that concerned above factors in webpage design.

Analysis shows that the expected results were dead-on in some cases, with surprises in other cases. As expected, Sina Weibo and Mixi featured layouts that were oriented with a holistic mindset, with several links across the screen instead of displaying hierarchically designated information. The ‘left-right’ reading orientation was essentially a nonissue. All sites except

Vkontakte featured a log in area to the right, or in the upper right, like most websites have in contemporary web design. What was surprising was the amount of ‘crossover’ between different sites, like Taringa and Mixi, the former combining holistic interface design, and in the latter, more Westernized design. Whether this is due to simple website design, or because the information is unclear, but it is worth considering that both Mixi and Taringa have been on the internet for some time. A quick check on archive.org, which archives ‘screenshots’ of websites throughout time, shows that the site design hasn’t changed greatly over time. Taringa is a website that enjoys a wide user base throughout Latin America, so it’s possible that there are different cultural expectations presented in its design. Vkontakte remains a curiosity, borrowing its entire layout from Facebook, but remaining a site used mostly by Russian-speaking individuals. Even the user profiles on Vkontakte resemble Facebook’s around 2008, and suggest that its mimicry is sticking with ‘what works’, existing as a platform for Russian and Slavic language-speaking individuals to network. Finally, Sina Weibo’s seems to be the most stylistically designed site with regard to initial expectations; its design is very holistic, and knowledge is not disseminated in a hierarchal framework. The site’s almost sprawling layout and information suggests a way of thinking that absorbs the whole, rather than the sum of smaller parts.

With these sites in mind, it’s also important to recognize that many speakers of a foreign language simply use Facebook and Twitter. Both of these sites have gateways at the sign-in page to different available languages, and many users simply opt to use these existing social networks. As I mentioned earlier, I had originally selected to analyze Ibibo, an Indian social networking site, but it has since shifted its focus entirely to becoming a traveling agency’s website. Puzzling as this transition is, one cannot help but wonder if interest shifted away from Ibibo due to the

ubiquity and popularity of sites like Facebook and Twitter. Still, the presence of these social media sites indicates that many users still prefer a website predominantly in their home language.

THE FUTURE OF INTERFACE DESIGN

A study by Noam Tractinsky showed that non-English speaking individuals preferred using interfaces presented not only in their own language, but in a localized vernacular (11). A translation of the page can be used as a last resort, but this literal translation is clunky and certainly not a working fix. Until recently, adaptable user interfaces were all but unheard of, but a recent journal by Katharina Reinecke and Abraham Bernstein demonstrates an adaptable user interface called MOCCA, which automatically alters a website interface based on the nationality of the user in question. Tractinsky notes that localized interfaces are expensive and time-consuming to produce by manufacturers (12). Reinecke and Bernstein corroborate this problem, noting that many popular websites had been “rejected by Internet users from other countries in favor of local alternatives” (427). This may account for the enduring popularity of the social media websites discussed above, like Sina Weibo. In developing MOCCA, Reinecke and Bernstein hoped to account for the complex national ambiguities of Internet users today, using the example of an Indian who had lived in Belgium for several years being forced to choose between a Belgium or Indian-based interface, a reconciliation of the two would ultimately be desirable. This essentially amounts to a kind of digital code-meshing.

By using a set of predetermined cultural preferences—a more holistic layout, for instance—Reinecke and Bernstein input these parameters into a set of adaptations in the program. After the user enters their information, MOCCA determines their cultural ‘score’ and creates a layout based on the web ontology language OWL (435). OWL is a flexible ontology language that can account for several different parameters in a user’s preferences, like our

hypothetical Indian living in Belgium. MOCCA would account for all of these places of residence, previous and contemporary, and apply them to the ontology language within the algorithm. These preferences and scores are then entered into an algorithmic process. Much of the designing itself for interfaces was created directly by individuals themselves, who cut out different pieces of paper and assembled their own interface design to their preference (442). This method of design is wise, as it places the design in the hands of the users that it will affect, giving Reinecke and Bernstein a good idea of the culturally determined frameworks they must work within. This method also reciprocates the kind of “low fidelity prototyping technique” described by Robert Johnson in his text, “Audience Involved” (99). Creating a UI (user interface) that is grounded in a more user-oriented mindset not only allows for a more effective final product, but it takes the actual individual into account.

Reinecke and Bernstein present this process in three steps: “at first, the application has to read out the user's scores, and possibly, other information about the user's cultural background. Second, it has to look up the corresponding adaptation rules in the adaptation ontology by traversing the interface elements for ones that correlate with the user's scores...after this comparison has been completed, the application can compose the UI [user interface]” (438). This interface is an ambitious one, especially considering the flexibility required, and while the interface they used in the experiment was a simple “to-do list” application, the results were encouraging, with 60.1% accurate predictions based on the user (450). Despite remaining in its nascent stages, MOCCA could prove to be a revolutionary tool for adapting sites like Facebook or even shopping sites like Ebay to a broader user base that without the need for either native or localized sites. Most importantly, Reinecke and Bernstein’s research proves that such a design is feasible and works. Localizations or even directly translated websites may become a thing of the

past. Reinecke and Bernstein identify this potential as well, concluding that MOCCA “provides a major building block for improving the international access to websites and applications--a goal that is not only sensible from a business side, but has the potential to help overcoming the international digital divide” (450). If a greater financial investment is placed into programs like MOCCA, the disparities between sites like Sina Weibo and Vkontakte, for instance, may become irrelevant altogether.

The potential of programs like MOCCA also fulfill a crucial aspect of user design Johnson describes, “user-centered design of computer products: a goal all technical communicators should strive to reach” (100). An ever-increasing number of individuals using the internet, coupled with the advancements of technology means that the door is open for technologies like MOCCA. Hopefully this will facilitate a more user-centered interface and web design. Overall, the distinctions in foreign-language websites truly come down to the major criterion Johnson identifies: usability of design, which in turn should be focused on the needs of the user themselves. In another journal by Johnson, he remarks sharply that “the idea of a ‘user’ is a lip service concept that justifies the need for the technology” (196). It is easy enough to stress ease-of-use in the design of programs like Windows (one may recall the Paperclip assistant that would incessantly appear in earlier versions of Word), but truly involving the user means taking in their personal, human factors. To Johnson, this means “understanding what constitutes the users’ situation, and this, in turn, means defining the scope of this situation” (198). It is not a stretch to argue that the users’ situation could easily include nationality and cultural context, which is what makes programs like MOCCA potentially useful, especially since the algorithms are dictated specifically by user-submitted information. This could also account for the complexity of personal cultures identified by Chang and Su, and with any luck, a user-centered

interface design will alleviate some of the more awkward problems with ‘one-size-fits-all’ interface designs in the future.

CONCLUSION

Returning to my personal example of the student who had no familiarity with the interface whatsoever, I still feel like this research can also apply here. In this case, it is a matter of going beyond the interface and using direct communication to ascertain the needs of the user in question. The student’s understanding of the technology developed well, but personal instruction was required to provide a basis of understanding and usability for the reader. Should interface designers account for users with zero knowledge of the interface in the first place? One of the greatest issues in interface design, and technical writing by extension, is the importance of communication and the culling of information from that communication. In a study, Steven Fraiberg likened the efforts of technical communicators to “‘knotworkers’ tying and untying texts, tools, actors, and objects” (23). This an extremely fitting metaphor, as many of the PTW journals we’ve looked at this year focus on studying the relationships between workers, writing, interfaces, and language itself. Fraiberg also calls attention to the importance of broadening approaches to how communication practices are studied, suggesting that technical writers also pay attention to conversations around the water cooler or in the break room, for instance (24). By addressing these conversations and relationships, there is a greater potential to develop a better understanding of workplace concerns and communication. Likewise, by having users submit their own data to develop interfaces like MOCCA, the needs of the user are directly established and assessed. To recall the Dobrin article from the beginning of this semester, technical writing is about accommodating a user to technology, and in this case, MOCCA is a step in the right direction.

Given the range of sources and research, initial expectations of this survey were not met. While most of the sites I selected adhered somewhat to the predictions of my criteria (orientation, cultural design and so forth), the data from articles by Reinecke and Bernsetein or Chang and Su proved that analysis of web design, especially that of a foreign language, is especially difficult to do, as we cannot determine the personal culture of the individual using the web site. We can make generalizations in accordance with our expectations. For instance, it isn't surprising that Sina Weibo features a more holistic web page design with rich graphics, given the cultural precedent of Chinese users, but it doesn't account for users like Chang and Su's hypothetical Chinese user who was more familiar and comfortable with Western design interfaces; that user may simply use Facebook. Accounting for the presence of social media networks like Facebook and Twitter can make the differences in interface design difficult to ascertain. It is a safe assumption that some users will prefer using sites based in China, especially considering the long list of blocked websites on Chinese servers. Still, all of this research points towards the core concern of interface design: usability towards the user. Nonetheless, the prospective future does look bright, given the advancements of programs like MOCCA as we have seen above. With any luck, interface design will truly be about the users' needs, and not a matter of 'lip service'.

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I work at a company called Townsend Learning Center, a small company that rehabilitates individuals who cannot return to their previous work due to physical injuries. We teach them basic to intermediate office program skills, like Microsoft Word, Excel, and Powerpoint. Individuals involved within the program are usually from the Department of Labor or Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, and are working in a simulated office environment. The familiarity with the programs differs. I specifically recall one student who had no familiarity with using a mouse whatsoever; the terminology of the ‘desktop’ and the ‘Start Menu’ were alien concepts as well. The individual who was struggling with the program had no prior knowledge of these standards in interface design (‘mouse’, ‘desktop’ ‘log-in’), but this was a symptom of their unfamiliarity with the program itself – within a few weeks, they became more acclimated to the features of Windows and the Office programs. Regardless, this experience still left an impression on me: the alleged ‘accessibility’ and ‘ubiquity’ of programs like the above could seem completely alien to a user uninitiated with the function (and jargon) of these programs. Selfe and Selfe address this in their article, “The Politics of the Interface”, tracing the origin of many interface features to being grounded in “predominantly male, white, middle-class, professional cultures associated with the military-industrial complex” (433). While this is an extreme stance to take, it is difficult not to see some truth in it: many of the common items associated with a basic computer interface are framed within a white-collar perspective: manila folders, files, documents, spreadsheets and so forth. The design caters to the socioeconomic category of the individuals who programmed it. By that token, these issues with interface design also apply outside of a socioeconomic issue within the United States; they also apply across different

cultures, especially when it comes to the interface design of websites. Selfe & Selfe provide an important landmark document in considering the politics of interface of computer programs, but I wanted to look at the differences in non-English websites, specifically social media networks. As my research determines, different cultures require different interfaces and site designs that account for differences in fundamental ways. It follows that like computer desktop interfaces, website design has been influenced by Western cultural needs since the nascent stages of web-design. I am setting out to determine if foreign-language social networks feature more specialized interface design, beyond the standards present in Western website design. From there, I examine alternatives and developments regarding changes in interface design.

ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL WEB DESIGN

Interfaces govern all of our actions when physically interacting with a website or a computer program, but they also affect our mental processes. In fact, it is arguable that interfaces not only echo but maintain existing colonial and Western concepts, motivations and elements. It is possible that these “gestures of domination and colonialism”, as Selfe and Selfe term it (433) are merely the byproduct of our ways of thinking as citizens of the United States. In other words, this interface design may simply be a mutual design limited to English-speaking / Western cultural norms. But, evidence supports the notion that Western interface design is present worldwide and may have pervaded interface design in other countries. While Selfe and Selfe investigated the politics of the desktop design itself, I realized that this design has not changed greatly since. Rather, I am opting to analyze something that is rapidly changing in design and style: websites. Specifically, social media networks, though not necessarily new, could prove to be a good litmus test to the accommodations made if the user base is from a culture removed from Western or English-speaking traditions. I reason that examining foreign interface design

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Comment [23]: this is still a leap for me

against a set of criteria of typical Western interface features would be an effective determinant in whether or not these gestures of colonialism truly were not only present, but pervasive, within foreign website design. Given the ubiquity of social media sites, I figured that foreign language social media websites would be a consistent model to compare and contrast against a control which I felt embodied many elements of what one would consider a “Western” design – Facebook.

The need for a more diverse sense of website design is not a new development. In their excellent study, “Trends in Culturally Relevant Interface design features for Latino Web site users” Sachau and Hutchinson make the valid point that “most instructional designers will need to design instructional interfaces targeted for an audience that comes from a different cultural background than the designer. This will require the designer to know what interface features might be indicative of the given culture” (1034). Given that their study specifically engages the issues of accommodating interfaces for Spanish-speaking individuals on US food stamp websites, their research is of particular relevance today, especially given the rising demographics of Spanish-speaking individuals within the United States. However, while they do address the need for more research into foreign-language interface design, they also note that more research is needed into determining how designers should develop culturally differentiated web design (1035). Sachau and Hutchinson’s study is admittedly rather narrow-focused, as it was comparing US food stamp web sites with Mexican government web sites. However, they still identify core problems with cross-cultural interface design, noting the greatest difference between the two being that interfaces on US websites often featured little indication to the location of the Spanish language gateway. Sachau and Hutchinson determine a number of possible visual indicators that could aid Spanish-speaking users:

These visual cues alone make an interface more accommodating in a cross-cultural sense. On the same page they also make the important conclusion that national culture may influence web design itself. While it is true that US government sites might not see a pressing need to adapt their websites to accommodate another country's culture—as it is a government site, after all—small modifications like the above can make interfaces more cross-cultural. Wikipedia might represent a step in the right direction; its home page features a number of different languages presented in the native speaker's written native language, clearly indicating the gateway.

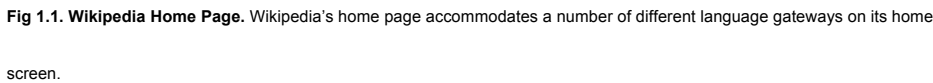


Fig 1.1. Wikipedia Home Page. Wikipedia's home page accommodates a number of different language gateways on its home

But a website like Facebook uses many more cues and cultural signifiers than Wikipedia's page. There are subtle cultural implications behind website design that goes beyond simple language, over even visual cues.

Emily Thrush identifies such a cultural cue in her essay "Multicultural Issues in Technical Communication," specifically pointing out that a disparity exists between the thinking of say, a citizen of the United States and a citizen of China, in low-context versus high-context thinking. Chinese, or high-context thinking, does not need extra information or supplemental information; everything is a part of a greater whole. For instance, Yiqin Wang and Dan Wang give an example of a Chinese injection system (45), which features graphics that are accompanied by text that provides information not implied by the graphic itself; the information was entirely independent of the graphic, but as a whole, it provided a great deal of depth about not only the assembly of the injection system, but also its function. Low-context thinking, a more Western thought process, works the opposite, piecing together parts to eventually arrive at a whole (Thrush 418). Returning to the example of the injection system, a low-context culture would have directions that had a high amount of correlation between the graphic and the information related to it. The graphic for the injection system, hinged with the closely-correlated text information, provide the full meaning of the information. Thrush warns that extensive writing or information, in the wrong cultural context, could insult the reader's intelligence by over-explaining information. Wang and Wang also determined that between different cultures, a high context versus low context disparity exists. They propose a handy if-then proposition: "[i]f the synthesis thought pattern [high-context] predominates in one culture, a system of a component should be structured in the technical document with interrelations and context. If the analysis thought pattern [low-context] is predominant in another culture, it should be constructed

with specific and separate elements (48)”. Thrush and the Wang’s give us a sense of the high demands and cultural sensitivity required in creating cross-cultural website designs. The question remains, however, as to whether or not website design in social media networks accommodates these culturally diverse ways of **thinking**.

The nature of technology itself poses interesting implications for cultural differences as well. Proctor et al. noted that the use of technology itself develops at different paces with different cultures, for entirely different motivations. For instance, they write that “the Internet was put to use very early in India for horoscope construction and matching. Matrimonial web sites sprang up swiftly” (177). While it is safe to say now that many Indian individuals use the internet for far more personal and social reasons, Proctor et al. provides a vivid example of the different cultural expectations that come into play with interface design – different cultures create different imperatives. In the design of websites, the same principle applies. Different cultures require different design needs on websites. For instance, Proctor et al. also address the cultural differences in the Chinese-German example, finding that Chinese users preferred rich layouts on web pages, with several advertisements present, whereas German users preferred more simplified, bare styles (174). To a high-context user, having all of the information present as a whole is preferable to hunting through empirically/hierarchically oriented lists of information and gateways; the German user will appreciate the categorization and structured approach to information distribution. Again, this points to different cultural frameworks and mindsets at hand, holistic and analytic, frameworks that designers need to keep in mind when designing interfaces.

In an effort to truly examine how disparate these differences are, I developed an analysis of different foreign-language social media sites. The challenge was to continue this analysis of

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Comment [24]: Good additions above

European-Asian differences in thought patterns and cultural expectations, but I also wanted to include the popular Spanish language site Taringa as a point of contrast as well, considering the Sachau and Hutchinson article. By doing a comparative analysis, my hope is that the differences indicated above might manifest themselves during the analysis. Similarities will also be taken into account.

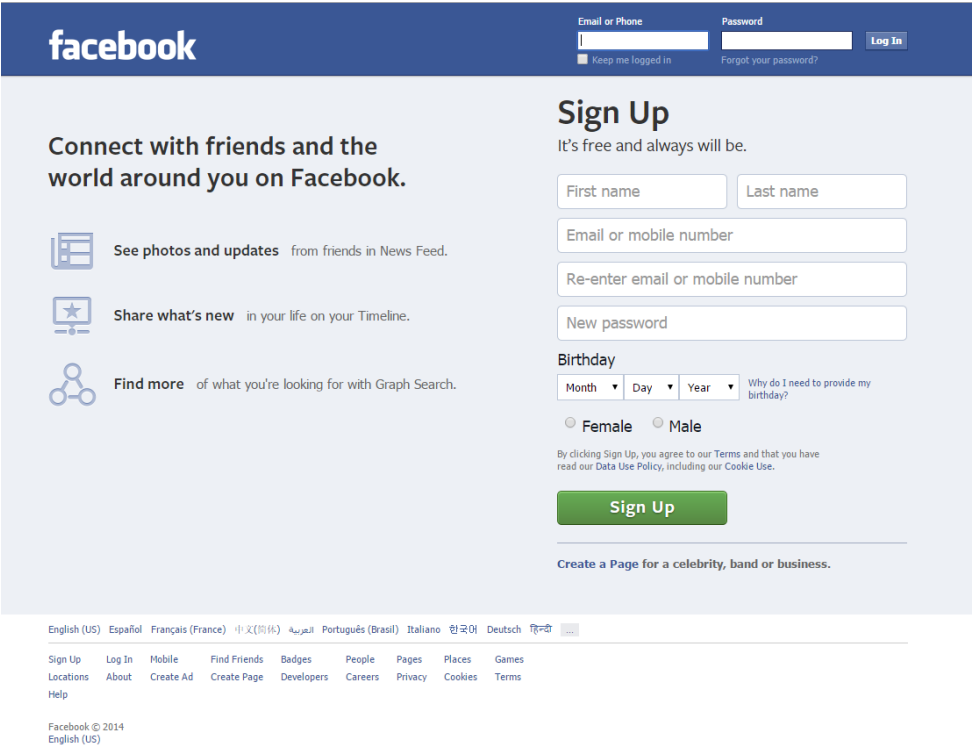
ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SOCIAL NETWORKS

I attempted to select a range of websites that were not only diverse, but those with a substantial user base as well, with the intention and hope that a larger user base would be more indicative of the cultural trends and accommodations that website contained. I chose four of the most popular foreign-language social media websites available: Sina Weibo (China), V Kontakte (Russia), Taringa (Argentina/Spanish) and Mixi (Japan). Originally, I had selected the Indian social networking site Ibibo for the sake of a diverse comparison, but it has puzzlingly become an online travel company since my initial research. Each of these websites enjoys a massive user-base, and are each distinct in their layout and web design. I will compare each of these websites to Facebook by sake of comparison, arguably the most popular social networking site worldwide. I developed a list of criteria based upon the sources above to determine whether or not the site in question had an interface that was more accommodating to the culture in question. The criteria are as follows: page orientation (is it read left to right?), page layout (rich graphics or simple design?), icons (what kinds are used, what do they represent?), how knowledge and information is represented (Selfe and Selfe, 437), and whether or not the website is designed with holistic or analytical thinking in mind. By 'holistic,' I mean thinking more in line with Asian cultures like China, who prefer high-context information, and websites with a higher and denser amount of information; by 'analytic', I mean countries like the United States or Germany,

who prefer more minimal, structured information with graphics and text that are highly correlated (Thrush 418). With the criteria listed, I expected many of the findings by the above articles to be reciprocated with some relativity. After all, many social media networks bear resemblances to one another, especially those modeling themselves after Facebook and Myspace due to the success and popularity of those sites.

As the control, I decided to use Facebook, as it was an American-based company that possesses a largely American audience. The features of Facebook were mostly in line with my predictions, as far as Western design goes. While its information orientation is left to right, its

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structure, graphical minimalism and hierarchal knowledge ordering all point to an analytical, or

Fig 2.1: Facebook Homepage. Many features of the site adhere to Western site standards.

more Western design. Its place as a control only exists as a point of reference for later conclusions.

Sina Weibo



Fig 2.2: Sina Weibo homepage. Columns contain different media and options for users, such as (left to right) related pages, news and quick previews of microblogs.

Sina Weibo is a Chinese blogging site that is something of a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook. It is currently China's largest Chinese-based social network. The site does not feature much of a "left to right" orientation, but its log-in is located in a similar position to Facebook's, in the upper-right corner. There is a link to the main site in the upper left corner that leads back to the

"top" of the page. True to what Proctor et al. noted, the page does feature a large number of different links and options. A menu bar separates the top of the page (topics) with areas of interest in columns: microblogging links, recent news in the center column. Scrolling down gives even more options to browse news centers, a news scroll, and recent microblog topics. Scrolling further still results, like Facebook, in an 'endlessly' loading stream of noteworthy microblogs from users of the site. The icons used are predominantly ones from Western site design, a small house indicating the 'Home' page, a small portrait of a person that navigates to the user page, and even a small "FB" icon to link a user's Sina Weibo account to Facebook. Knowledge is not presented hierarchically, but rather spread evenly down the page, presenting a number of ideas simultaneously; while it uses Western iconography, this website certainly is designed with a Chinese thinking format in mind.

Vkontakte

While Vkontakte (Contact) is primarily a Russian site, it bills itself as "The largest European social network with more than a 100 million active users". The site is remarkable for a number of reasons, the first being that it is almost entirely identical to Facebook's early page layout. Its orientation is even reminiscent of older web sites, with a log-in on the left hand side (beneath a 'Home' gateway). There is a sign in area for newcomers, like Facebook, with the added

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Comment [26]: Good additional development

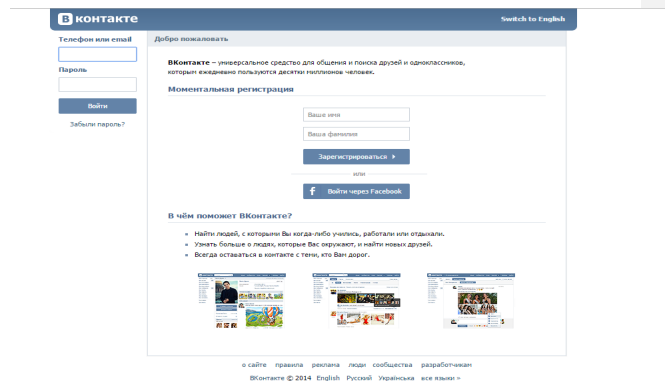


Fig 2.4: Vkontakte homepage. Its simple log in page and color scheme are highly derivative of Facebook.

absurdity of a "Sign in with Facebook" button as well. Its formatting is definitely more Western, with simple colors, layout and page design. Aside from the Facebook logo and Vkontakte logo, there is little iconography present on the page whatsoever. In a more Western sense, knowledge is presented hierarchically, with the information reading from log-in to additional information at the very bottom of the page. Whereas Sina Weibo's information continued indefinitely, Vkontakte's layout ends with hardly a mouse scroll. The website's very minimalist design suggests a more Westernized cultural framework. It's safe to say that the design in mind is 'analytical,' though its design is so minimalist it's almost difficult to say whether this design was culturally inclined or not. The website also prominently features a clickable gateway that will change the website into English, presenting some globalized concerns on part of the designers of Vkontakte.

Taringa

The screenshot shows the Taringa website interface. The header is blue with white text for navigation: "TARINGA!", "Posts", "Mi TI", "Comunidades", "TI Música", "Juegos", and "Tops". There are also buttons for "INGRESAR" (Login) and "REGISTRARTE" (Register), and a search bar. Below the header, the page is divided into three main sections. The left section, titled "Lo más destacado" (Most highlighted), lists several posts with titles like "Hice una pecera tropical desde cero", "Datos Curiosos (2ª parte)", "10 Curiosidades acerca de los buhos", "Sabías que estamos en el futuro??", "20 cosas construidas por animales", "Se acabó la mentira: Greenpeace destruye lugar histórico", "Porque la aldaos no cuenta?", "Slam Dunk las imágenes que siempre buscaste.", and "Jen Selter te enseña hacer ejercicio Top!!!!". The middle section contains a "¿Tienes algo para contar?" (Do you have something to tell?) prompt with a "Crea tu Post ahora!" (Create your post now!) button, a "Taringa! Juegos" (Taringa! Games) section with a "Juega Gratis!" (Play for free!) button, "Resultados del Staff" (Staff results), and "Lo más reciente" (Most recent). The right section shows "Estadísticas" (Statistics) with 26,363,910 registered users and 237,672 connected persons, a "Shouts" section, and a "Seguir a @taringa" (Follow @taringa) button.

Fig 2.5: Taringa Homepage. The homepage features a number of different links and information.

Taringa is an Argentinian-based social networking service that enjoys, at time of writing, 26,000,000 registered users. Taringa is unique in that it promotes content sharing exclusively, rewarding users with points per original content shared. Users who share content then receive feedback from the Taringa community. Taringa's log-in orientation is more reminiscent of Facebook, and its font and color scheme at the top is even reminiscent of Facebook's log-in page as well. Its orientation is left to right, with a rich layout ironically similar to Sina Weibo's site: in columns. Newest items stream 'endlessly' on the left column, new information, staff picks and top videos in the center column, and user information on the far right column. Taringa uses a several different icons, including a small crown to indicate a newly added "Games" section. Most of the other images are either user avatars or thumbnails for the news itself. Information is definitely represented in a more even layout, though there are hierarchical elements at hand, with the "Top Users" lists and so forth. Given the large amount of information and options at hand, Taringa honestly jukes towards a more holistic thinking layout.

Mixi

Mixi is one of Japan's larger social networking sites, with about 26 million users. Its primary concept is bringing user groups together with shared interests, news



Fig 2.6: Mixi Homepage. Features minimal design, but also a more holistic orientation like Sina Weibo.

stories and entertainment. Mixi's orientation is something of a combination of Vkontakte and Sina Weibo -- there is a small log-in box on the right hand side, but it is lower, indicating that the user who is scanning the website may be starting on the right hand side. Its formatting is extremely sparse, but its information is presented with little iconography and some hierarchal ordering. However, the layout of the links is more reminiscent of Sina Weibo, suggesting that there is less need for a truly hierarchal order like Vkontakte. It has a community portal first, then links to games, with a small menu on the right hand side for blogging, news, and so forth. While Mixi is definitely more minimal and somewhat hierarchal in its structure, the primary language present is still Japanese, and like Taringa, it represents something of a reconciliation of holistic and analytical thought. One gets the sense that Mixi may be an older site as well, as there are little ads or high-resolution graphics present on the website.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

Analysis showed that the expected results were dead-on in some cases, with surprises in some other cases. As expected, Sina Weibo and Mixi featured lay outs that were more oriented with a holistic mindset, with several links across the screen rather than hierarchically designated information. The 'left-right' reading orientation was almost a **nonissue**. All sites except Vkontakte featured a log in area to the right, or in the upper right, like most websites have in contemporary web design. What was surprising was the amount of 'crossover' between different sites, like Taringa and Mixi, which both consisted of a combination of holistic interface design in the former, and more Westernized design in the latter. Whether this is due to unconscious website design or because of the information and media presented on these websites is unclear, but it is worth considering that both Mixi and Taringa have been on the internet for some time. A quick check on archive.org, which archives 'screenshots' of websites throughout time, shows

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Comment [27]: even on Sina Wabo/Mixi?
They are read right-left.

that the site design hasn't changed greatly for either site. Taringa is a website that enjoys a user base throughout Latin America, so it's possible that there are different cultural expectations presented in its design. Vkontakte remains a curiosity, borrowing its entire layout from Facebook, but remaining a mutually used site by Russian-speaking individuals.

Gary Heba 12/22/2014 4:09 PM
Comment [28]: the table is a nice addition

| | Orientation | Layout | Icons | Knowledge Orientation | Cultural Design |
|---------------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sina Weibo | Right to left | Graphic/image rich | Thumbnails, otherwise few | Non-hierarchal | Holistic |
| Vkontakte | Left to right | Minimal | None | Hierarchal | Analytical |
| Taringa | Left to right | Graphic/image rich | Thumbnails, some icons | Non-hierarchical | Holistic |
| Mixi | Right to left | Minimal | Thumbnails | Non-hierarchical | Both, but slightly more holistic |
| Facebook (control) | Left to right | Minimal | None | Hierarchal | Analytical |

Table 1.1. Results of Data. Data resulted from previous criteria concerning factors in webpage design.

Even the user profiles on Vkontakte resemble Facebook's around 2008, and suggest that its mimicry is sticking with 'what works', existing primarily as a platform for Russian and Slavic-speaking individuals to network. Finally, Sina Weibo's seems the most stylistically designed towards what initial expectations were; its design is very holistic, and knowledge is not disseminated in a hierarchal or Western framework. It's almost sprawling layout and information suggests certainly appeals to a way of thinking that absorbs the whole, rather than the sum of smaller parts.

With these sites in mind, it's also important to recognize that many speakers of a foreign language simply use Facebook and Twitter. Both sites have gateways at the sign-in page to

different available languages, and many users simply opt to use these existing social networks. In my research, I had originally selected to analyze Ibibo, an Indian social networking site, but it has since shifted its focus entirely to becoming a traveling agency's website. Puzzling as this transition is, one cannot help but wonder if interest shifted away from Ibibo due to the ubiquity and popularity of sites like Facebook and Twitter. Still, the presence of these social media sites indicates that many users still prefer a website predominantly grounded in their home language.

THE FUTURE OF INTERFACE DESIGN

A study by Noam Tractinsky showed, unsurprisingly, that non-English speaking individuals preferred using interfaces presented not only in their own language, but in a localized vernacular (11). A translation of the page, as I did with Google Chrome when analyzing websites, but this literal translation was clunky and certainly not a working fix. Until recently, adaptable user interfaces were perhaps unheard of, but in a recent journal by Katharina Reinecke and Abraham Bernstein, they demonstrate an adaptable user interface called MOCCA that automatically alters a website interface based on the nationality of the user in question. Localized interfaces are expensive and time-consuming to produce by manufacturers, as Tractinsky also noted (12). Reinecke and Bernstein corroborate this, noting that many popular websites had been "rejected by Internet users from other countries in favor of local alternatives" (427). This may account for the enduring popularity of the social media websites discussed above, like Sina Weibo. To make things more difficult, a study by Chia-Lin Chang and Yelin Su determined that a localization wasn't always the ultimate solution in providing usable interfaces to users. Just as attempting a 'one size fits all' user design in translation, a localization can be difficult to create because culture is such an amorphous and shifting element in users' lives. Chang and Su write that users "can share the same group culture under certain contexts...one can belong to numerous

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Comment [29]: review grammar

cultures at the same time" (87). A Chinese user may actually be more comfortable with American interfaces, than Chinese interfaces due to their personal background and history, for example. Reinecke and Bernstein recognized this difficulty, and hoped to account for the complex national ambiguities of Internet users today, posing the example of an Indian who had lived in Belgium for several years being forced to choose between a Belgium or Indian-based interface, where a reconciliation of the two would ultimately be desirable. This essentially amounts to a kind of digital code-meshing.

By using a set of predetermined cultural preferences—a more holistic layout, for instance—Reinecke and Bernstein adapt these parameters into a set of adaptations in the program. After the user enters their information, MOCCA determines their cultural ‘score’ and creates a layout based on the web ontology language OWL (435). OWL is a flexibly ontology language that can account for several different parameters in the user, like the Indian living in Belgium. MOCCA would account for all of these places of residence, previous and contemporary, and apply them to the ontology language within the algorithm. These preferences and scores are then entered into an algorithmic process. Much of the designing itself for interfaces was created directly by individuals themselves, who cut out different pieces of paper and assembled their own interface design to their preference (442). This method of design is an especially good move, as it places the design actually in the hands of the users that it will affect, giving Reinecke and Bernstein a good idea of the culturally determined frameworks they would work within. This method also reciprocates the kind of “low fidelity prototyping technique” described by Robert Johnson in his text, “Audience Involved” (99). Creating a UI that is grounded in a more user-oriented mindset not only allows for a more effective final product, but

it takes into account the actual individual, like the hypothetical Indian living in Belgium that was presented at the beginning of Reinecke and Bernstein's study.

Reinecke and Bernstein present this process in three steps: "at first, the application has to read out the user's scores, and possibly, other information about the user's cultural background. Second, it has to look up the corresponding adaptation rules in the adaptation ontology by traversing the interface elements for ones that correlate with the user's scores...after this comparison has been completed, the application can compose the UI [user interface]" (438). This interface is an ambitious one, especially considering the flexibility required, and while the interface they used in the experiment was a simple "to-do list" application, the results were encouraging, with 60.1% accurate predictions based on the user (450). Despite remaining in its nascent stages, MOCCA could prove to be a revolutionary tool for adapting sites like Facebook or even shopping sites like Ebay to a broader user base that eschews the need for either native or localized sites that are used instead. Most importantly, Reinecke and Bernstein's research proves that such a design is feasible and works in the first place. Localizations or even directly translated websites may become a thing of the past. Reinecke and Bernstein identify this potential as well, concluding that MOCCA "provides a major building block for improving the international access to websites and applications--a goal that is not only sensible from a business side, but has the potential to help overcoming the international digital divide" (450). If a greater financial investment was placed into MOCCA, the disparities between sites like Sina Weibo and Vkontakte, for instance, may become irrelevant altogether.

The potential of programs like MOCCA also fulfill a crucial aspect of user design Johnson describes, "user-centered design of computer products: a goal all technical communicators should strive to reach" (100). With the increased number of individuals using the

internet, coupled with the advancements of technology, the door for technologies like MOCCA will hopefully facilitate a more user-centered interface and web design. Overall, the distinctions in foreign-language websites truly does come down to the major criterion Johnson identifies: usability of design, which in turn should be focused on the needs of the user themselves. In another journal by Johnson, noted sharply that "the idea of a 'user' is a lip service concept that justifies the need for the technology" (196). It is easy enough to stress ease-of-use in the design of programs like Windows (one may recall the Paperclip assistant that would incessantly appear), but truly involving the user means taking in their personal, human factors. To Johnson, this means "understanding what constitutes the users' situation, and this, in turn, means defining the scope of this situation" (198). It is not a far stretch to argue that the users' situation could easily include nationality and cultural context, which is what makes programs like MOCCA somewhat remarkable, especially since the algorithms are dictated specifically by user-submitted information. This could possibly even account for the new difficulty identified by Chang and Su of the complexity of personal cultures, and with any luck, using a user-centered interface design will alleviate some of the more awkward problems with 'one-size-fits-all' interface designs in the future.

CONCLUSION

Returning to my personal example of the student who had no familiarity with the interface whatsoever, I still feel like this research can apply to that situation as well. In this case, it was a matter of going beyond the interface and using direct communication to ascertain the needs of the user in question. The student's understanding of the technology developed well, but personal instruction was important to provide a basis of understanding and usability for the reader. Should interface designers account for users with zero knowledge of the interface in the

first place? One of the greatest issues in interface design, and technical writing by extension, is the importance of communication and the culling of information from that communication. In a study, Steven Fraiberg likened the efforts of technical communicators to “knotworkers' tying and untying texts, tools, actors, and objects” (23). I found this an extremely appropriate metaphor, as much of the PTW journals we've looked at this year focus studying the relationships between workers, writing, interfaces, and language itself. Fraiberg also calls attention to the importance of broadening approaches to studying communication practices, suggesting that technical writers also pay attention to conversations around the water cooler or in the break room, for instance (24). By paying attention to these conversations and relationships, there is greater potential to develop a greater understanding of workplace concerns and communication. Likewise, by having users submit their own data to develop interfaces like MOCCA, the needs of the user are directly established and assessed. After all, to recall the Dobrin article from the beginning of this semester, technical writing is about accommodating a user to technology, and in this case, MOCCA is a step in the right direction.

Given the range of sources and research, initial expectations of this survey were not met. While most of the sites I selected adhered somewhat to the predictions of my criteria (orientation, cultural design and so forth), the data from articles by Reinecke and Bernsetein, or Chang and Su proved that analysis of web design, especially that of a foreign language, is especially difficult to do, as we cannot determine the personal culture of the individual using the web site. We can make generalizations which accord with our expectations. For instance, it isn't surprising that Sina Weibo features a more holistic web page design with rich graphics, given the cultural precedent of Chinese users, but it doesn't account for users like Chang and Su's hypothetical Chinese user who was more familiar and comfortable with Western design

interfaces; that user may simply use Facebook. Accounting for the presence of social media networks like Facebook and Twitter makes the differences in interface design difficult to ascertain. It is a safe assumption that some users will prefer using sites based in China, especially considering the long list of blocked websites on Chinese servers. Still, all of this research points towards the core concern of interface design: usability towards the user. The prospective future does look bright, however, given the advancements of programs like MOCCA as we have seen above. With any luck, interface design will truly be about the users' needs, and not a matter of 'lip service'.

Gary Heba 12/22/2014 4:19 PM

Comment [30]: Sam -

Nice job analyzing the websites. Good reformatting to include the graphics within the text. I did have trouble seeing a couple of them fully - format sometimes changes when files are submitted online, so I don't think it was anything you could have done differently.

My suggestion for revision is to make your criteria more fully explained. Including more details about what you are looking for under each criterion would aid the reader in understanding them. Doing so may even help you add further detail to your analysis.

All in all, good performance this semester, and I appreciated your thoughtful DB posts.

Good luck with your academic goals -

30/30

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