

Exploring the role of photography techniques in shaping the image of political figures—taking Trump as an example

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Abstract: This essay explores the role of photography techniques in shaping the image of political figures, with a focus on the case of Donald Trump. Drawing on Arthur's (2009) perspective on technology as a cultural artifact, the study examines how photography, as a form of technology, influences public perception and understanding of political figures. The analysis highlights the emotional and discursive power of photographic images, exemplified through Trump's media presence and his portrayal in various photographic contexts. The essay further discusses how photography itself acts as a medium of influence, shaping not only the content but also the behavior and interactions within the political sphere. By examining the impact of photographic technology on Trump's political image, this study underscores the importance of technology in shaping public discourse and political identity. Ultimately, it argues that while technology is a powerful tool, the discourse and interpretation of images remain in the hands of human beings.

1. Introduction

The development of society and the dissemination of information cannot be achieved without technology; therefore, technology is often discussed and studied as one of the core elements in the fields of sociology and communication. However, the definition and scope of technology have sparked considerable debate in the academic world. This essay will utilize Arthur's (2009) perspective on technology as a theoretical foundation for discussion. He argues that every technology originates from an unexplained mental process, a form of 'creativity' or 'thinking outside the box' that enables it to exist and develop independently (Arthur, 2009, p. 15). This highlights an intriguing aspect of technology, namely 'creative problem solving,' which Arthur (2009, pp. 28-29) defines in three ways: first, as a means to a human end; second, as a collection of practices and components; and third, as a combination of devices and engineering practices available within a culture (Arthur, 2009, pp. 28-29). In its early days, photography was described as the act of capturing an image in a dark box (Benjamin, 1972, p. 5). As society developed, new forms of photography emerged, particularly with the advent of digital technology. Photography

frames moments and creates photographs. It solves the problem of people not being able to be there to see an event as it happens or as it exists. Thus photography fits the first definition. In its early days, photography was described as the act of capturing an image in a dark box (Benjamin, 1972, p. 5). Modern digital technology is also a combination of different optical lenses and charge-coupled devices (CCDs). It therefore meets the second definition. Photography often appears as a medium in communicative activities, reporting or transmitting specific cultural phenomena, and therefore photography also meets the third definition. Thus photography can be seen as a technology. In this essay, it will first introduce technology as a cultural artifact and examine its impact on human beings. Then the role of photograph (photography) in shaping the image of political figures will then be analyzed, using Trump as an example. Following this section, the photography technology itself will be explained as the message. Finally, the essay will taking stock and looking ahead for the future of technology.[1]

2. The role of technology

Technology is a form of technical artifact and can influence the public. As de Vries (2006, pp. 20-22) conceptualized, technology is a technical artifact, wherein designers leverage unique physical properties to create objects that fulfill specific functional requirements. For instance, in photographic technology, the use of lens sets and dark boxes (or digital processing techniques) facilitates the reproduction of light and images. According to Bery (2005, p. 80-81), from a differentiated constructivist perspective, the efficacy of technical artifacts stems partly from the material design structure of the object (which aligns with realism) and partly from social processes. Humans invented the camera, and its role in transmitting information is integral to the construction of the public sphere. The photograph does not merely exist as a product; rather, it possesses significant agency and discourse. It illustrates how technology can shape human perception and understanding of the world. Among the effects of photography, its primary impact lies in its ability to evoke personal emotions. Barthes introduces the concept of “studium” which refers to the specific details within a photograph that resonate with an individual's emotions, transcending the basic information conveyed by the image (Elkins, 2011, p. vii-xi). When viewing images, individuals do not merely observe facts and visual phenomena; they also connect with the feelings that these images evoke and reflect on their own emotional responses. This capacity to swiftly capture public attention and influence emotional states is significant (Sun et al., 2024, p. 1). It mobilises the emotions of the viewer, so that the viewer is infected by the photograph, and it shapes the image and identity of the people in the photograph, demonstrating the different power relations, and the political image is thus shaped.[2]

3. Political image of Trump

Trump also has a very delicate relationship with photography. The 2024 U.S. presidential election has recently come to a close, with Trump securing victory by a narrow margin of 270 electoral votes over Harris (CNN, 2024). [3]A review of Trump's political career reveals that it has been full of changes but equally legendary. He diverges from the conventional presidential archetype, consistently presenting himself as engaging and emotional in his media appearances. As an individual who has transformed the traditional image of the presidency he has triumphed in another U.S. election due to several factors, including the power of visual politics and the role of photographic technology in shaping and enhancing his political persona. Photographic technology has played a significant role in this process, as it has allowed for the creation and dissemination of images that reinforce his image as a strong leader and a disruptor of the status quo. [4]

As the product of photography, Images can function as a form of discourse. In public agendas, images are often employed as proxies for issues within political activities (Frohmann, 1992, p. 372). At the individual level of political activism, images serve as a discourse that shapes a person's political identity. Since the 1980s, Trump has cultivated an image of a charismatic strongman through magazine covers, photographs, and later, television appearances (Hodson, 2021, p. 521). This confident, self-assured image persists to this day. On the cover of the latest Time magazine (Fig.1) we can see his lips pursed in a hint of contempt, yet more so in confidence and satisfaction. His eyes are slightly narrowed as he casually looks toward the camera. The iconic red tie around his neck radiates a glorious sheen. Behind him is America, and in front of him are the fervent supporters, their cameras flashing in excitement. It makes the viewer feel as if they are in the middle of a sea of people. Looking up at the stage, Trump is what the crowd believes in (the working-class support for Trump is particularly fervent). In the midst of the buzzing crowd, Trump is with you. This is the discourse that this image conveys and shapes. He seeks to use the image to present himself as a successful, decisive leader—the only one capable of posing a challenge to Washington politics (Hodson, 2021, p. 521). This discourse is delivered with precision to the viewer's eyes as Trump looks to the camera; yes, you see him, and he sees you. It is as if you are intimately connected, and he is committed to fighting for you. Trump's emotional expression and the strength of his identity are powerfully conveyed in such a photo. [5]



Figure.1 Time Magazine, 2024

In addition, images have been associated with idolatry. The golden calf in Exodus (A chapter from the Bible) exemplifies the significance of symbols in the construction of idolatry. Such symbols can imbue emotional value and spiritual meaning, even conditioning the viewer to perceive them as 'sacred.' As Hodson (2021, p. 511) note, although the golden calf was burned, ground down, diluted, and forcibly consumed, its image endured (Mitchell, 2015, p.31).The same goes for Trump's images. Trump often appears in public making a pistol gesture (Fig.2). Typically, he uses this gesture to express his anger or to dismiss opponents. [6]This gesture conveys a sense of power, as only someone in a superior position has the authority to fire or express anger. However, Trump skillfully masks this power with an exaggerated expression, transforming it into a form of seductive charisma. The image was moulded, the golden calf was molten, and idolatry thus arose. This behavior is perceived as a comedic performance, eliciting intertextual responses from the audience,

who erupt into screams and cheers (Hall et.al, 2016, p. 79). When viewed through the lens of political photography, images—particularly those depicting people and incidents—often emphasize the influence of individuals in specific situations through powerful visual impact. This approach is also evident in Trump's political rallies. Supporters turned Trump's charismatic image into banners to support him. Through the politics of imagery, Trump elevates the emotions of his supporters to unprecedented heights, prompting them to obsessively follow him. It is as if he becomes a captivating performer who commands everyone's attention.[7]



Figure 2 Associated Press, 2006

The impact of a photograph often extends beyond its immediate visual representation; it serves as raw material for the creation of various forms of media. The process of displaying a photograph can be considered linear, as it allows the photographer to unilaterally convey a message to the audience. However, once the photograph is utilized as a source for further creation, the audience transforms into a creator, engaging in a dialogue that expresses additional information and perspectives. This interaction enriches the personal narrative of the individual being photographed. Although Trump is the leader of the United States, he also enjoys a substantial following in China. This popularity is not solely due to his presidential status; his personal charisma and image significantly contribute to his political persona. Searching for dichotomous videos about Trump in bilibili, many of which are inspired by Trump's images (Bilibili is a well-known video pop-up site in China, similar to YouTube's influence abroad). [8] Trump on China has garnered an impressive 27 million views. The cover image of this video is designed to capture viewers' attention visually (Wang & Li, 2022, p. 125). In this image, Trump stands with the American flag behind him, prominently displaying the character "China" on his chest, as altered by the video's creator. Cover images often utilize the most conflicting, dramatic, or visually striking visuals to entice users to click (Wang & Li, 2022, p. 125). The typical expression of Trump is evident, characterized by tightly pursed lips at a slight angle and eyes directed toward the camera, reminiscent of the recent Time magazine cover. However, in this particular image, he appears notably more relaxed, confident, and approachable. His open-handed gesture conveys a sense of smugness and self-assurance, with the emotion fully captured in the photograph. This portrayal aligns with his established political persona—humorous, outgoing, and confident (we call him "King Know It All" in China)—but it also incorporates an added element of calmness and graciousness. The widespread support he receives and the material generated about him are inextricably linked to the way this image communicates his influence, particularly his graciousness. In contemporary conflicts,

winning the hearts and minds of the populace has become a universal principle (Pratkanis, 2007). Trump's political imagery has effectively achieved this goal.[9]

During the recent assassination attempts, Trump displayed the image of a key fighter, which may have been one of the key reasons for his election. According to Foucault's (2008, p. 8-13) concept of Panopticism, society functions as a circular prison in which society keeps humans under full-scale surveillance. Although the president seems to be the administrator, but in reality, he is also in the centre of being watched in a circle. The people become the watchers and his every word and deed is recorded. Obviously, a strong performance will affect the rewards that the watchers will give him, such as trust, support, or votes. In the context of Trump's current presidential campaign, a notably strong performance was exemplified by his reaction to the assassination attempt. On the afternoon of July 13, 2024, Trump was shot in the right ear during a presidential campaign rally in Pennsylvania. Former Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Evan Wage captured the moment when Trump, protected by bodyguards, walked away while still raising his fist. This image closely resembles the composition of *Liberty Leading the People* (Sun et al., 2024, p. 1-3). The triangular composition used by the photographer brings Trump's personal political image into sharp focus. Much like the fervent spirit of the French Revolution, Trump clenches his fists and raises his arms amidst a crisis, conveying a sense of strength and conviction. He finds himself in this metaphorical prison, facing the unpredictability of public scrutiny, yet he is willing to confront it, eager to demonstrate his indomitable spirit to the watchers. This resilience inspires those who are also trapped in the same circular prison, instilling a sense of hope. Hope is the very essence of why people live and fight. Thus, the vivid image of the fighter comes to life.[10]

4. Media is message

In addition to the significant influence of the photographic result — namely, the image — photography itself serves as a powerful medium of influence. As McLuhan (1973, p. 13) states, the medium is the message. Personal and social consequences of technology arise not only from the content it conveys but also from the new scale it introduces. Photography is an event that transcends the final photograph produced; it exists as itself (Elkins, 2011, p. 162). [11]The technique of photography, including the photographer's chosen angle, inherently carries a message to communicate. For example, the photographer in the assassination attempt was shooting up to portray Trump as tall.[12] The photographer himself carries a subjective perspective and intent. Furthermore, the very technique of photography influences behavior. Moreover, Medium fosters an addictive-like habitus, shaping our behaviors and interactions. For instance, an African individual may listen to the BBC daily, not solely for its content but to engage with the medium itself (McLuhan, 1973, p. 21). [13]When individuals become immersed in a particular technology, they not only learn to appreciate its expression but also adapt their self-expression to align with that technology. This encapsulates the essence of McLuhan's assertion that media is message. [14]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, technology drives and transforms change in the public sphere, particularly within the political sphere. This paper broadly examines the attributes of technology before identifying the role of photographic technology in the political sphere, using Trump as a central figure. The first two paragraphs of this section address the nature and power of images as products of photography. Subsequently, the second-generation video in Bilibili is used as an example to illustrate how viewer agency shapes the impact of images. Finally, Foucault's theory of the circular prison is employed to analyze the images related to the Trump assassination. The concept that later in this section. In fact, both the technology itself and the manner and content of its delivery have, to varying degrees,

explicitly or implicitly influenced public debate and permeated the political sphere. It is gratifying to observe the changes that technology has brought to the public sphere; however, there are instances where confusing negative effects and abuses of power arise, leading to a perception that rationality, objectivity, and transparency are diminishing. In conclusion, this essay emphasizes that technology is ultimately a tool, and that discourse should remain in the hands of human beings, with photographic technology serving as a prime example of this principle. We determine how to present and report moments of history, thereby shaping the future.

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