

Information Literacy in the Age of YouTube

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INTRODUCTION

My name is M.J. D'Elia. I haven't been back to Halifax since I graduated six years ago, so I'm really happy to be here. There's nothing quite like Halifax in the summer.

I'm currently working back in "Upper Canada" (as some of my friends used to say) at the University of Guelph as a business librarian and I teach a second year marketing course on information management. But today I'm here to talk about something completely different--and that's a good thing (for all of us).

I'm here to talk about why information literacy bothers me. Well, let me be clearer. It's not information literacy that has me concerned. Like most librarians, I believe that information literacy is an important component of education and lifelong learning.

INFORMATION LITERACY STANDARDS

Like many of you, I want to help people:

- Identify their information needs
 - Articulate the research problem
 - Locate potential sources
- Access that information effectively and efficiently
 - Develop good research strategy
 - Use appropriate tools
- Evaluate the information and sources they find
 - Measure reliability
 - Synthesize main ideas
- Apply information to a specific purpose, problem or puzzle
 - Use information to make decisions
 - Communicate solutions effectively
- Use information ethically
 - Understand socio-economic issues
 - Follow the laws

These are fine goals. If you're in an academic environment, these ideas should sound familiar--they were developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries and are often cited in library literature.

Improving information literacy skills empowers people to take responsibility for their own learning. It helps them find better information and make better decisions as a result.

What could be wrong with that?

TEXT-BASED INFORMATION

Nothing actually.

My problem is not with the standards per se. My problem is with how we read and apply those standards. While these standards provide a great foundation for education, I'm willing to bet that when most of us think of information literacy, we think of one type of information: text.

And now we're circling a little closer to the problem I want to talk about today. What has bothered me recently about information literacy is our profession's emphasis on text-based information. If isn't written down, frozen in the pages of a book, or published by a reputable publisher, then we librarians just don't seem interested.

Even though the ACRL specifically acknowledges graphical and aural information in their discussion of information literacy, few of us have noticed:

"information is available through multiple media, including graphical, aural, and textual, and these pose new challenges for individuals in evaluating and understanding it."

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm>

To put it crudely: If we don't catalogue it, we don't care about it.

KEEPERS OF THE BOOKS / CREATING, CONSUMING

Don't get me wrong, I know that we are the traditional keepers of the books. I know we play an important role in helping people find and use information--and most of the time that information is text-based.

I'm merely suggesting that when it comes to information literacy, "information" is broader. It applies to more than the just the printed word. Photographs, illustrations, icons, videos, and other multimedia are all part of our current information landscape. Ignoring these elements presents a very narrow definition of information literacy--and one that we would do well to avoid.

We must face the fact that the information environment is different. For example, just a few years ago, the popular video sharing website YouTube simply couldn't have existed. Not because no one thought of the idea, but because the technology wasn't mature enough and the costs of running such a service were too high (Born Digital, p. 230). But now, the site hosts over 6 million videos and is one of the most visited sites in the world. Times have changed. Or, more accurately: times are changing.

One thing is clear: we're creating and consuming more visual information than ever before. In response, we need to re-think our notions of Information Literacy in the Age of YouTube.

IMAGES

Today's presentation is a little different--if you couldn't tell already. I'm not reporting on a research project, I'm not talking about technology or library trends, and I'm certainly not presenting a fully-developed thesis. Today is simply an exploration--an exploration of what information literacy looks like in a visual culture.

Naturally, we need to focus on the most basic element of visual culture: images.

IMAGES TELL STORIES

Why are images so important? Well, to put it in three simple words: Images tell stories.

In mere moments, images can communicate an incredible amount of information. Let me show you what I mean:

An image like this [ultrasound] can make two people more excited--and more scared--then they've been in their entire lives.

An image like this [map] can tell you how to find it--or possibly explain why you haven't found it yet.

An image like this [black sheep] can tell you who is the black sheep in the family—sorry, I couldn't resist.

An image like this [lobster] can tell you that dinner is good, but market price is a lot higher than you think.

An image like this [man at toilet icon] can transcend language--and help clarify instructions (in case you weren't sure).

VISUAL BEFORE VERBAL

Our minds are incredibly sophisticated when it comes to processing visual information. But, we shouldn't really be surprised. When we enter this world, images are our primary language.

We see before we speak. We watch before we write. We're visual before we're verbal.

My daughter is almost two, and already she's developing an incredible vocabulary. Like any dad, I'm proud of her development, but I know that she loves her books because of the pictures not because of the words. Someday, she'll appreciate the words, but for now it is the images help her understand the story--and in some cases, the images **are** the story.

TWO CLAIMS

I want you to remember these two important claims. The first one I already mentioned: 1) images tell stories, and 2) stories help us understand. Without stories it would be hard to make sense of the world.

So it shouldn't surprise you that this presentation 1) contains a lot of images and 2) this presentation uses a classic story structure.

But unlike a typical story, I'm not planning a surprise ending, I'm going to tell you where we're headed.

MAIN CHARACTER

As you may have guessed, our main character for today's story is the image. Okay, so our story is a little unusual, but go with me on this. Of course, when I say "the image" I'm not referring to a particular image, but to any and all images taken together. In a visual culture, everything pivots on the image. The image, it would seem, makes a great protagonist.

STORY ARC

For any English majors out there this is called Freytag's pyramid.

We'll start with a brief introduction [Exposition / Introduction] to the main character, focusing particularly on how and why we use images. Then we'll highlight the tipping point [Inciting incident] which kicks off the image's rise to prominence [rising action]. Of course, it wouldn't be a story without a few complications, so we'll spend some time dealing with the current crisis in image making [Climax]. This crisis creates numerous dilemmas that need to be addressed [Falling Action], but with a little effort these issues can be resolved. That's where we come in [Resolution]. But this story doesn't resolve itself so easily [Denouement]. There are still some loose ends. If we've learned anything from Hollywood, we've learned that there is always room for a sequel.

EXPOSITION: "A picture is worth a thousand words"

WHY IMAGES?

Perhaps we should start with a rather simple question: Why do we use images? Images take a variety of forms, but what functions do they serve? Here are just a few possibilities:

We use images for documentation. Images are an important part of the historical record. Any occasion that we want to remember (war, vacation, grand opening) we document it.

We use images for identification. Images help us identify people, places and things. When it is important to tell one thing from another we use images (e.g. passport photos, architectural drawings, etc).

We use images for elaboration. We use images to help us explain complex concepts (e.g. schematic diagrams, graphs, charts, diagrams)

We use images to convey emotion. Sometimes emotion is easier to grasp in visual form (e.g. abstract expressionistic painters, art)

We use images for direction. Maps and icons provide a classic example of how we use images to help us navigate or tell us what to do.

We use images for acculturation. We use images to learn how to belong to our communities (e.g. Religious iconography, patriotism, local hockey team, symbols, etc.)

We use images for decoration [decoration]. Sometimes a picture or illustration just adds interest (graphic design, decorative illustration)

Ultimately, we use images for communication [communication]. Images become visual short forms that help us combat information overload.

We use images to show instead of tell.

THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

We've all heard it said that a picture is worth a thousand words. But, of course, the problem is that my thousand words and your thousand words are probably different. You see, if we rely too much on images, we end up with one key problem: the problem of interpretation.

Here's a rather simple example. I'm going to show you three icons that you can find in our library at Guelph and I want you to tell me what the icons are telling the viewer to do.

Any guesses?

Right. These icons appear on the hand dryers in our bathrooms and they're pretty straightforward.

The other day I walked into the bathroom and someone had redefined these images. Let's take a look: Press button, Grab bacon, Eat bacon.

I've used this hand dryer numerous times, and I can assure you it does not dispense bacon. My interpretation of these icons differs from those of the bathroom artist. Obviously, this is a silly example, but imagine how much more complex the issues become when it's an image like this [black teenager in a police car] or [people helping homeless man].

INCITING INCIDENT: "Picture perfect"

Okay, so it should be clear by now that using images for communication is not exactly revolutionary. Our ancient ancestors drew pictures on cave walls, monastic scribes illuminated their manuscripts with illustrations, Renaissance artists painted portraits of wealthy subjects, and early printers supplemented their text with lithographs and etchings. The course of history is littered with similar examples of image-making. It's in our nature to make images.

What is revolutionary is how images came to dominate our culture. Making images was once the profession of a few; now, it's the practice of the masses. We all play a part in image-making. How did this happen?

INTRODUCTION OF THE CAMERA

The answer is simpler than you think. If we look back to the industrial revolution--say the 1830s and onward--we can see the seeds of our current visual culture in a single piece of

technology. Any guesses? Which piece of technology is responsible for the widespread use of images in our culture?

Right, the camera.

The invention, introduction, and adoption of the camera launched the image revolution as we know it. The camera's ability to create perfect pictures and reproduce reality trumped all previous image-making technologies. Pen and ink, or paint and canvas are good--they're just not that good. Modern technology fundamentally altered image-making and we'll never be the same.

RISING ACTION: "Seeing is believing"

ANALOG TO DIGITAL

At one time the only way to view a photograph that you took with your camera was to get your film developed. Now, we've dispensed with the film entirely. To view your image, you just have to look at the back of the camera.

Image making is no longer an analog activity. Welcome to the digital world. And in the digital world we can afford to "waste" images. Take a picture. Don't like it? Delete it. It's as simple as that.

PRODUCTION/DISTRIBUTION

The camera may have started a revolution in the production of images, but that's not the full story. We're also experiencing a revolution in the distribution of images.

When you add the Internet to the mix, you have you have a global network able to transmit images to millions of people in seconds. We've reached a whole new level.

ORALITY/TEXTUALITY/VISUALITY

Kevin Kelly, co-founder of Wired magazine, wrote an interesting article in the New York Times Magazine that talks about the idea of screen literacy. For him, it's not just that we use technologies like cameras to make images, it's that we also use technology to view images. We need to face the reality of the screen. Think about it, an increasing number of images you see are mediated through a screen—including this presentation.

Kelly claims that if we look back centuries ago, we'll see that human civilizations relied on the oral tradition. In the oral tradition, we developed skills like memorization, recitation, and rhetoric. We communicated through discussion. We passed information on through stories. In a sense, the knowledge we shared was more fluid. We were more comfortable with ambiguity and subjectivity.

Of course, as we developed writing, we started to shift our values. And the introduction of the printing press changed our civilizations forever. We started to emphasize logic, linear thinking, and authority. The knowledge we shared was fixed--even frozen--in place. We were interested in the facts and complete objectivity.

Kelly argues that we are currently undergoing a shift from textuality to visuality. Images are forcing us to abandon the printed world--or, at the very least--reduce our commitment to it. Images, especially moving ones, have much more influence than they've ever had. But so far we're not entirely sure what we will come to value. Here's the interesting part: Kelly claims that this new visual culture is much more fluid. In fact it's more like our early oral tradition, than our print tradition. We're returning to an era of subjectivity.

In this new world, it would seem that "seeing is believing."

Now you're free to disagree with him, but if he's right, then we're in trouble. Librarianship is situated square in this middle area here. The print world is where we're most comfortable. This is where information literacy has lived and breathed for decades.

We need to negotiate this transition to visuality like everyone else.

CLIMAX: "The Moment that Never Was"

REVISIT TWO KEY CLAIMS

Now we're at the pinnacle of the drama, so let's revisit the two claims I made earlier:

- 1) images tell stories
- 2) stories help us understand the world

Here's a perfect example for you. [Walski photo]

WALSKI PHOTO

This photograph was taken near Basra, Iraq in March 2003. This photograph was taken by Brian Walski, a staff photographer at the Los Angeles Times, who was an embedded photojournalist in Iraq at the time.

If we look at the photograph we can see that it depicts a British soldier standing over Iraqi civilians. The soldier looks like he's telling them to seek cover, while one man carrying his child appears to plead with the soldier. Even without the context that I just gave you, it's a striking image--with an obvious power dynamic between the two central figures.

This photograph ran on the front page of the Los Angeles Times, the Hartford Courant and was prominently featured in the Chicago Tribune.

There's only one problem with this photograph. This moment never existed--at least not exactly like this.

WALSKI PHOTO BACKGROUND

Let's dig a little deeper into the story that's behind this image. Walski began the day near Basra shooting 150 images of British troops battling Iraqi paramilitaries. He shot another 150 images of panicked civilians fleeing the fighting. Later when he was reviewing his images, he realized that none of the photos really captured the feeling of the day.

WALSKI MANIPULATION

Faced with a pressing deadline, Walski looked back over his shots of the day and selected two photos.

He took this photograph [original 1] and this photograph [original 2] and did a little digital painting.

Without doubt the combined version is a better photograph. Unfortunately, the composite image contradicts the events of the day and misleads the viewer. The cause-and-effect relationship that is implied is false.

WALSKI CAUGHT

Perhaps you're wondering how he got caught. Well, an employee at the Hartford Courant noticed several civilians crouching in the background appeared twice.

The following day, the newspapers published the three images along with apologies and editor's corrections.

REACTION TO WALSKI

As you might imagine, reactions to this photograph were quite varied. On one end of the spectrum, people felt that Walski committed a cardinal sin. His manipulated image violated the trust of the readers and tarnished the integrity of his entire industry. On the other end of the spectrum, people felt that Walski was completely justified. All he did was improve his image to convey a more accurate sense of the events. For them, he was improving his photograph in the same manner that a journalist improves a story.

EDITORS REACTION

In the end, Walski's employer was in the first category. Although the two photographs were shot moments apart, Walski broke the rules. He was shooting a hard news image for a leading newspaper, yet he ignored his better judgement and altered the photo on the front lines. The fact is that photojournalists are not artists.

When the issue was reported to the editors, Walski was simply fired.

WALSKI COMMENTS

Walski has a number of comments about the event, here's one:

"After a long and difficult day, I put my altered image ahead of the integrity of the newspaper and the integrity of my craft. These other photographers are there [in Iraq] risking their lives and I've just tarnished their reputation." - Brian Walski

WALSKI HIGHLIGHTS

I haven't used this example to pick on Brian Walski or on photojournalism. I've used this example because I think perfectly illustrates the issues around image making in our current culture:

- This story shows how easily images can be altered.

- Walski edited this before sending it to his editor (the editor had no idea it was a manipulated image)
- This story demonstrates how subtle manipulation can change the entire meaning of an image.
 - The images were shot moments apart, but the new image sets a different tone
- This story questions our assumed “objectivity” of images.
 - It’s published in a newspaper so we tend to believe it as we see it.
- This story points to the importance of the image maker’s credibility and integrity.
 - Walski was a professional photographer working for a mainstream newspaper, potentially his behaviour damaged the entire profession
- This story highlights the fine line between acceptable “manipulation” and deceptive “manipulation.”
 - Photographers need to crop, resize and correct color - and all of those things can change the content of the image too. If he was working in a different context, like advertising, no one would batted an eye.
- But this story isn’t all about Walski. It’s also about our culture and our appetite for increasingly dramatic images.
 - A simple photograph of the war in Iraq wasn’t enough, it had to be an incredible photo to be published.
 - Perhaps our steady diet of entertainment images have led to this demand.
 - Not to mention the demand to sell newspapers

DIGITAL INFORMATION

Of course, the real reason that we’re even talking about Walski is due to the nature of digital information. When it comes to digital photography, each image is essentially a montage of square electronic dots (known as pixels).

Once these pixels are encoded in binary code (0s and 1s), changing the photo is simply a matter of changing a few zeroes and ones. It’s simply a matter of rearranging the blocks.

In other words, the dilemmas we face in an increasingly visual culture are closely tied to the inherent flexibility of digital information.

LIQUIDITY

Sheila Reaves has written a lot about the digital manipulation of images and she has this to say:

“To most people the great philosophical question is ‘what is truth?’ But to many people, photography was as close as you’re going to come to as being truthful. There were clear cut and dried areas. And now, we no longer have this metal formed by light, we have liquid pixels, we have controlled liquid photos...This is the major revolution. It’s a quiet one. It’s a technological one that people don’t understand.” Sheila Reaves (as quoted in Parker, 1988, p. 59).

ANONYMITY

On the internet, the issue isn't just the liquidity of the information that we need to be concerned with; it is also the anonymity of the image maker. In Walski's case, we know who took the picture and we know who published it; in the online world, we're not usually so lucky.

LONELYGIRL15

Take the case of this young lady, Lonelygirl15. Lonelygirl15 is better known as Bree, a young teenage girl who used YouTube to post short videos about her life. She talked about her strict parents, troubles with her boyfriend--you know the typical drama of a young girl's life. In essence, she created a video diary of her life and posted it online for everyone to see.

Her videos were quirky--or in her terms "dorky"--but she was a hit. Fans loved her and before long she had thousands of subscribers who waited eagerly for her next video.

LONELYGIRL15 FICTION: PEOPLE DIDN'T CARE

But just like Walski's photo, Bree doesn't exist. Well, Bree doesn't exist as an actual person. Bree was actually an actress named Jessica Rose and her scripts were written by a 27-year old named Mesh Flinders.

It took an army of suspicious viewers to expose the series as fiction. Here's the interesting part: Even after the series was exposed, people didn't seem to care. They viewed it as entertainment, even if it wasn't true--it resonated with the viewership because it was true enough. In this environment, the line between fiction and reality becomes blurred even further.

Hopefully, you can see the trouble here. Instead of knowing whether or not something is true, we just use our instincts to tell us whether something sounds true, or looks true. We're taking a cognitive shortcut.

FALLING ACTION: "If you can imagine it, you can image it"

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

So what should we do? How should we handle the "liquid" state of the image? How might we deal with the anonymous state of the image maker?

Here are three suggestions:

- 1) things are not always as they appear.
- 2) content and the context.
- 3) Recognize that visual culture is in its infancy.

Let's take these one at a time.

NOT AS THEY APPEAR

First we have to train ourselves to remember that things are not always how they appear. Images don't have to be manipulated to mislead--there are plenty examples of images that have been staged, but presented as reality. Remember that we're born visual, so it is going to take

some conscious effort to learn to question images as rigorously as we question the words we read.

We also have to embrace subjectivity--even if we don't necessarily endorse it. As we've seen, images are subjective and stories are subjective. But in the visual world, subjective doesn't have to mean unreliable. Quite the opposite actually. Images provide an incredible opportunity for discussion and learning.

CONTENT AND CONTEXT

Second, it's not enough to focus on the content of the image. We need to focus on more than the people, places or things depicted in the image. We also need to remember the context. Where did we find the image? What type of image is it? Is there a reason to suspect it? The context provides clues to reliability--and these details can be especially important when the identity of the image maker is unknown.

Understanding how and why images are manipulated can go a long way to helping us decode the images we see. For example, if we know that advertisements regularly manipulate images to convey emotion, we can put less stock in their ability to represent reality.

VISUAL CULTURE IN INFANCY / BOOK INNOVATIONS

Lastly, we need to recognize that visual culture is still in its infancy--we're still trying to figure out how to deal with it. If you think about it, our current print culture evolved over centuries. Now we have a whole system and syntax for the book or the printed word, but this wasn't always the case. For example:

- We use quotation marks to indicate that we've borrowed text from someone else
- We use the Table of contents as a map to the book's topics.
- We use an index to cross-reference topics that are more granular than the Table of Contents.
- We use page numbers in conjunction with the Table of Contents and the Index to find things easier.
- We use footnotes to introduce tangential information and explanatory notes.
- We use bibliographic citations to indicate sources and point people to related material.

IMAGE INNOVATIONS

In part we can participate in the world of the book because we understand such strategies. In a visual culture, we simply haven't developed the same cues. We don't really have established syntax or standards.

- If you're making a movie, how do you "quote" from another source so that it's apparent to the viewer?
- How do you "index" each scene in a television show, or even every item in an image?
- If you're an animator, how do you add extra information for interested viewers?

These are not simple questions. It'll take time to develop new methods of communicating with visual images. Here, it would seem, patience is a virtue.

RESOLUTION: “Learning a new language”

FURTHER RESEARCH

If you’re interested in digging into this topic further, you’ll find that there are a lot of “literacies” devoted to non-textual information. I’ve got a bibliography here and I’ll make sure it’s posted on the conference site (if it’s not already).

You might read about media literacy (which tends to be tied to information produced and delivered by mass media), you might read about digital literacy (which tends to be tied to information technology and computer skills), you might read about screen literacy (which focuses on how technology mediates our visual experiences), or you might read about visual literacy (which focuses almost exclusively on visual stimulation).

IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION LITERACY

While these literacies have incredibly useful perspectives--and we should certainly consult them—I’m not sure they have enough breadth for the digital age. I believe that information literacy is perfectly adequate to handle the challenges of the visual age.

We don’t have to rewrite the standards, we simply have to remember that the “information” in information literacy is bigger than we typically imagine. We need to help people:

- Identify their visual information needs
- Access that visual information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate the visual information and sources they find
- Apply visual information to a specific purpose or problem
- Use visual information ethically

DENOUEMENT: “Where do we go from here?”

IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIANS

Of course the other huge advantage that information literacy has over these other literacies is librarians.

While there are those who educate people about media literacy, digital literacy and even visual literacy, they occupy relatively small niches. In contrast, librarians are spread far and wide in public, school, academic and special libraries. We have championed the cause of information literacy for decades.

Marion the librarian may have been the stereotype, but the profession is changing.

In my opinion, librarians are best suited to carry the commitment to literacy into the visual culture as well.

Thank you.