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The Visual Presidency of Donald Trump's First Hundred Days:

Political Image Making and Digital Media

An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Arts and Letters

James Madison University

by Ryan T. Strand

December 2018

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at The National Communication Association Conference on November 10th, 2018.

Dedication

To my Grandfather, Thomas L. Burns:

Historian, beloved family man, and American Patriot.

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Acknowledgements

Many people played a part in developing this work on visuals from the first hundred days of the Trump Presidency. This work would not have been possible without the efforts of Dr. Dan Schill, my co-author and project advisor. Your diligence, guidance and mentorship have been integral to the success of this chapter. I would like to thank Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman, Lindsey Shook, and Emily Howe for their valuable insight and feedback which has helped me develop this research.

My sincere thanks to Dr. Eric Fife for securing funding for me to present this work at the 2018 National Communication Association Convention and the School of Communication Studies for supporting me throughout my time in the department. Additionally, I would also like to recognize Dr. Natalie Jomini for her greatly valued comments and suggestions for the work as she served as the respondent at the 2018 NCA panel, “Social Media at Play in Modern Politics: A 21st Century Agora or the Modern Theater of Dionysus?”

I would like to acknowledge Anastasia Veneti, Dan Jackson and Darren Lilleker of Bournemouth University for their inclusion of this work as a chapter in their upcoming book published by Palgrave Macmillan, *Visual Political Communication in the Digital Age*.

I am especially grateful to my parents, Paul and Susan Strand, for their valued support throughout this project and my time at James Madison University.

Abstract

From frequent scrum photos of the president holding up signed executive orders in the Oval Office to images of the president energetically sitting behind the wheel of a Mack truck parked outside his back door, like previous administrations, visuals have been central to Donald Trump's presidency. This chapter analyzes the visuals on White House social media accounts (i.e., Twitter and Facebook) in Trump's first 100 days office and explores how his administration used visuals as an essential vehicle for storytelling, image building, and persuading. Building on previous research on the communicative functions of visual symbols in politics, the chapter finds that the Trump administration used socially-mediated images to build an image based on success, power, and leadership and to legitimize his new administration.

Key words: Donald Trump, Visual Communication, Optics, Image Building, Legitimization

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Introduction

When Donald Trump announced his campaign for the presidency in the summer of 2015, his effort became rooted in visual imagery. Trump—a wealthy businessman and celebrity host of “The Apprentice” for fourteen years—recognized the importance and utmost necessity of looking presidential on the campaign trail. Trump’s highly-choreographed announcement took place in the opulent Trump Tower lobby and began with the future president and first lady grandly descending an escalator to cheering and adoring supporters (some of them apparently paid, see Bradley, 2017). The visuals communicated popularity, wealth, presence, celebrity, and strength, and the images were widely disseminated via live cable television hits and social media postings. Former Speaker of the House and Trump advisor Newt Gingrich (2017) noted the centrality of visual imagery in Trump’s announcement:

Trump understood that he was being covered live and the cameras weren’t going to turn away. So he forced the networks to cover him standing next to his supermodel wife, slowly descending the escalator into the ornate lobby of a building that had his name on it. Think about the image of success this visual conveyed to most Americans. (p. 2)

Trump biographer Gwenda Blair summarized Trump’s approach: “The words don’t matter anymore. The pictures matter” (quoted in Kruse, 2018, para. 8). From the Trump campaign’s start, visuals were primary, and words were secondary.

Paralleling the first day of his campaign, the first day of Trump’s presidency was similarly concentrated on visuals when side-by-side images contrasting the scale of President Obama’s first inauguration crowd with the comparatively smaller size of Trump’s crowd lit up social media (including on the National Park Service Twitter account – see Figure 1), where

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people added commentary about the relative size of the crowd. This visual juxtaposition challenged Trump’s authority and made his inauguration appear subordinate to his predecessor’s swearing in. The next day, the President admonished the “dishonest media” for showing pictures of empty spaces on the mall and sent White House press secretary Sean Spicer into the briefing room to spar with reporters and falsely claim that, “This was the largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe” (see Kessler, 2017; Trotta, 2017). Notably, Spicer and the president himself reached out to the National Park Service and asked for pictures that appeared to depict more spectators in the crowd, resulting in the agency editing the images (Wallace, 2018). Just like with his campaign, visuals marked the Trump presidency from day one.

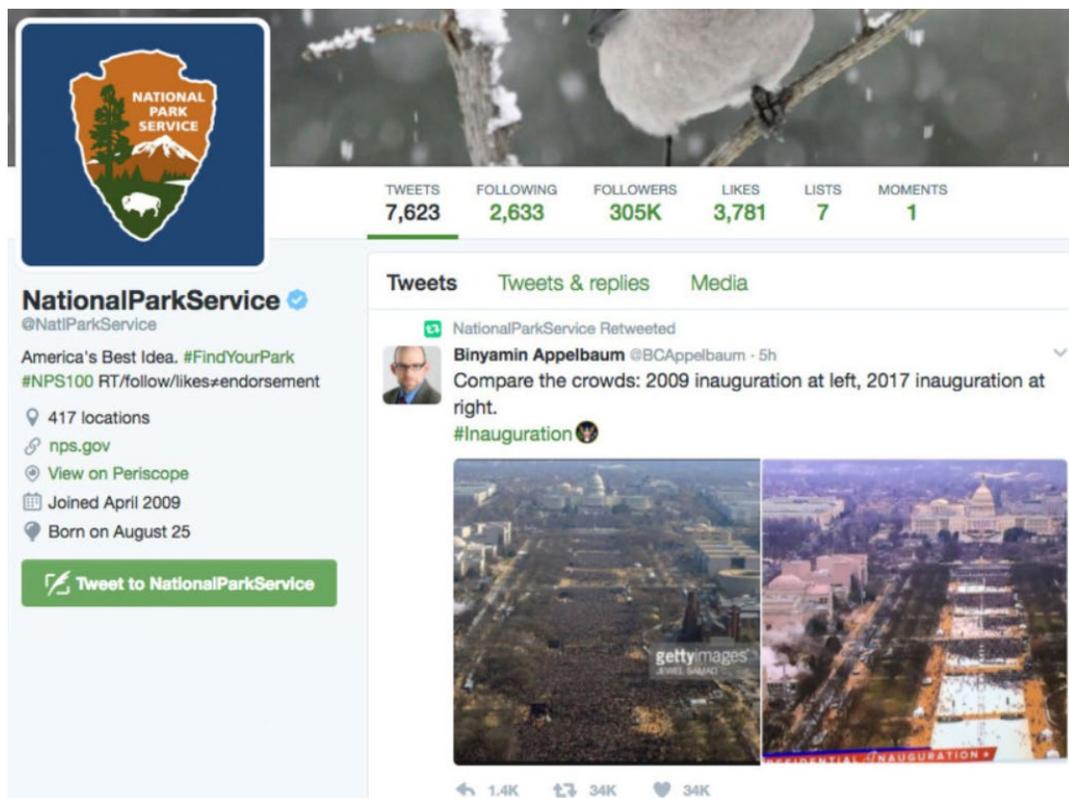


Figure 1. “Compare the Crowds: 2009 Inauguration at Left, 2017 Inauguration at Right.” @NatIParkService Retweet, January 20, 2017.

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While all contemporary U.S. presidents consider visual communication, Trump's is the first *visual-first presidency* where images are foundational and indispensable. *Politico* senior staff writer Michael Kruse (2018) observed: "Trump is a habitual television watcher who thinks ... in terms of building indelible imagery" (para. 3). Echoing this point, media reporter Jason Schwartz (2018) noted, "Trump is, of course, obsessed with television, and he manages no part of the government as obsessively as he manages his own image on the screen" (para. 15). Most presidents consider policy first, and then develop targeted messages (including visuals) that inform, persuade, and motivate citizens. Trump begins with the visuals, and picks policies that bolster the imagery or ignores policy all together. Longtime Trump political advisor Roger Stone (2018) confirmed this approach: "How you look is more important than how you sound. How you come across is more important than the words you use" (cited in Kruse, para. 6).

Trump doesn't leave the visual image-making to communication staff; he personally focuses on pictures and stagecraft. According to reporter Glenn Thrush (2016): "Trump never has walked off a set and said, 'how did I sound?'" All he wants to know is how he looks. The visuals for Trump are key" (27:33). Journalist Chuck Todd reported that Trump wants to see what he looks like in TV interviews. "He will watch the whole thing on mute," Todd said (cited in Thrush, 2016, 27:50). In campaign-trail rallies, Trump would rhetorically ask the crowd questions such as: "Do I look like a president? How handsome am I, right?" and "I think I look real good. I mean, I think I look like a president" (quoted in Diamond, 2016, paras. 2, 12). Additionally, while past presidents have viewed grip-and-grin sessions as a necessary evil, Trump delights in the Oval Office photo op, spending several minutes per sitting, taking variations of a photo with a single group, and inspecting the photos for details like the correct

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lighting (Dawsey, 2017). Similarly, Republican media consultant Larry Weitzner, who crafted Trump's 2016 TV message, said that Trump wanted high-energy, high impact ads that were not boring and that communicated the idea that the Trump campaign was a movement: "Mr. Trump is also a pro when it comes to production and lighting. We had to make sure lighting and set-ups were perfect on production shoots" (quoted in Cillizza, 2016, para. 5). President Trump extends his need for strong visuals to his staff as well, hiring people who "look and play the part" and complimenting staff for looking like they came "straight out of Central Casting" (quoted in Allen, 2018).

Red "Make America Great Again" hats, firm thumbs-up gestures from the showman himself, and packed rallies across the country marked a shift in political discourse that would decimate the other Republicans vying for the nomination who largely adhered to traditional forms of communication. There is little debate that Trump dominated media coverage throughout the election (Oates & Moe, 2018). Much of this attention was brought on by an unending cascade of tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account which relentlessly attacked a variety of political and social figures and promoted the Donald Trump brand. Trump most readily used Twitter to "hurl insults at his opponents and take on the mainstream media when they disagreed with him" (Schill & Hendricks, 2018, p. 13). Social media proved to be an invaluable tool of the Trump campaign and is evidence that its proliferation in mainstream politics is designating a new communicative norm of engagement (Katz, Barris & Jain, 2013; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Trump used visual communication and political image-making on social media in the first 100 days of his presidency. The first 100 days in a presidency are important because they sets the tone for a new commander-in-chief's administration. Images drawn from social and digital media are relevant because they represent

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the administration's primary means of communication. Political image-making strategies and crafted social media posts are a principal element of this structure and are vital to understanding President Trump's first years in office. Trump himself is a prolific Twitter user with tens of millions of followers across his social media accounts and additionally, visual content is distributed on administration and staff accounts. As Trump himself told journalist Maria Bartiromo, "I doubt I would be here if it weren't for social media, to be honest with you" (quoted in McCaskill, 2017, para. 2). The chapter begins with a review of the communicative functions of visual symbols in politics, moves to an analysis of imagery in the early Trump presidency, and concludes with a discussion of how Trump is expanding our understanding of visual politics.

Literature Review

Visual Political Communication

Previous research on visuals in political contexts has shown that imagery created by politicians and agencies serves as a central component of political communication (Schill, 2012), but also remains one of the least understood areas. Grabe and Bucy (2009) alongside other scholars have noticed “a dearth of visual analysis in an era of increasing media reliance” prompting “a small chorus of scholars to call for more research on the visual component” of modern politics (p. 6). These calls have been recognized by communication scholars and there is increasing research into this critical sector of political communication, such as this book.

In his overview of research in this area, Schill (2012) grouped findings into ten recognized functions of visuals in politics: visuals serving an argumentative function, an agenda-setting function, dramatizing policy, aiding in emotional appeals, serving an image-building function, creating identification, connecting to societal symbols, transporting the audience, and providing ambiguity. Further research has similarly found that the incorporation of visuals into political communication draws forth increased audience attention and that the “framing of visual news coverage can influence audience interpretation of the news, especially in the political context” (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017, p. 441). Scholars are still making sense of considerable changes to political communication in the past decade with the incorporation of new mediums in an increasingly connected and pictorial digital world. Research by Joo, Li, Steen and Zhu (2014), for example, used computer vision to identify nine dimensions of persuasive intent latent in images of politicians, such as social dominance, trustworthiness, and competence.

Broadly speaking, political communication itself has witnessed a substantial change in

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normative expectations and engagement with the introduction of recent technology (Chadwick, 2013; Katz et al., 2013). Such disruption has been met by fundamental shifts in the way that American citizens access and process their political news. The *Pew Research Center* focused on media and the 2016 presidential election, finding that “91% of adults in America acquire political news in a given week, but that information sources were scattered across 11 distinct types of media” (Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, & Mitchell, 2016, para. 1). This variance in information sources was marked by 35% of 18-29-year-olds and 15% of 30-49-year-olds receiving a majority of election information from social media. More recently, *Pew* found that in 2018, 69% of U.S. adults use at least one social media site, a statistic which has risen with each passing presidential election (para. 2). In short, the old influence of hierarchy has been shattered, replaced by a “new mosaic of influence in which social media play a growing role” (Powers, 2016, para. 7).

Paralleling how voters have turned to social media as a source for political information, visual communication scholars have turned their attention to visual persuasion online. Social and digital media dominate in the digital age of political communication. Recent research—such as the other chapters in this book—highlights how new mediums are digitally connecting politicians to their constituents, largely bypassing traditional media sources for image building and documentation.

These changes in the media-politics ecosystem are not only relevant for coverage of political campaigns; the trends also apply for governmental communication by the resulting administrations (Katz et al., 2013; Losh, 2012). The vast majority of research on visuals in politics, however, has been centered on understanding communication during political elections and analyzing the visual rhetoric of campaigns (e.g., Bucy & Dumitrescu, 2016; Enli &

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Skogerbo, 2013; Munoz & Towner, 2016) and there remains a paucity of research into nonverbal and visual communication of the executive branch outside of campaigns. Understanding the purpose and use of digital media by politicians is critical as it has become an entrenched form of communication that will remain relevant for the study of messaging in both presidential campaigns and administrations.

Research in this area has documented the watchdog function of visual journalists and found that the presence of reporters acting as the eyes of the public has readily been replaced by official releases from the White House and a distinctly incomplete narrative which undoubtedly portrays the commander-in-chief in a desirable light (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017). Photos on social media sites such as Instagram function as visual press releases where newsmakers disseminate flattering selfies, seemingly impromptu images designed to reveal the candid selves of politicians just as families share holiday greetings (Schwarz, 2018). While many thought the use of social media by politicians and presidential administrations would increase openness and public access, its growth has led to less transparency. Under the Obama administration, for example, despite statements by the president striving for “an unprecedented level of openness in government,” visual access to the president was stringently limited and replaced by steady streams of official photo releases (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017, p. 440).

The Trump administration continued this trend of visual branding through social media. Specifically, the multitude of visuals offered through official White House social media accounts serve a function of promoting identification, authority, and legitimacy of Donald Trump as president. As a candidate with a victory “generally unexpected by most analysts” (Oates & Moe, 2018, p. 209), Trump and his team used official presidential social media as an image making tool to represent legitimacy by highlighting the administration as successful and well-liked by

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government elites in Washington (Shaw, 2017). By using digital media as a forum for carefully regulated visual press releases, the administration has been able to utilize image making by carefully presenting “a controlled viewpoint that will only present the president in the best of lights” (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017, p. 445).

Scholars have already begun studying Trump’s visual communication and the multitude of posts featured on his social media platforms. Russell Scott Chun (2018), for instance, examined first-100-days-images released by the White House on Flickr, the photo sharing site. Based on Kenneth Burke’s dramatisitic pentad, Chun found that the Trump administration’s visual narrative echoed campaign rhetoric with allusions to authoritarian tropes, the singularity of President Trump, and visual claims of widespread popularity. This chapter extends Chun’s findings through a similar qualitative analysis of images on Twitter and Facebook, which is detailed in the next section.

Methodology

The present study is a grounded, qualitative study of visuals on President Donald Trump's most-followed social media services. All images collected and analyzed were found natively on Facebook and Twitter on the "Donald Trump" and @realDonaldTrump pages respectively. These two digital media sources were selected for their large following and high degree of user engagement, with Trump amassing 50.4 million Twitter followers and 24.5 million Facebook followers as of April 2018. All directly-posted pictorial elements shared between January 20, 2017 (Inauguration Day) and April 29, 2017 (100th day) on both platforms were individually screenshotted and collected in their original sequence. The images ($N = 254$ from Facebook and $N = 68$ from Twitter) were inductively analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify common themes among the images (see Chun, 2018). Grounded by Schill's (2012) functions, both authors independently analyzed the images using the constant comparative method and identified common thematic and visual elements that were compiled across the sample of photos (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The authors then compared their analyses, looking for areas of agreement and divergence. Thematic saturation was achieved in a second round of coding as no new themes or categories were observed in the data and all variation was accounted for and understood. The themes are described and discussed in the next section.

Results

Ten visual tactics were used most commonly in Trump’s visual presentation on social media: President Trump seated at desk/table, text overlaid across an image, signing a document, foreign leader, people clapping, linear perspective framing, “Make America Great Again,” Trump alone with a quote, direct Twitter repost, and military/veterans (see Table 1). Making up a significant portion of the coded images (96 of the 322 artifacts analyzed) were visuals of President Trump seated at a desk or table in a variety of perspectives, sizes, and locations. While many photos featured the famous Resolute desk, other visuals included miniature desks with an oversized presidential seal (see Figure 2, Image C), tables set up at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, and other desks in the White House. Included in many of these images are instances of the president signing documents, including numerous examples highlighting executive orders being signed (see Figure 2, Image A). From the 322 visuals captured, 33 pictures documented these signing ceremonies, often depicting a considerable crowd of White House officials or cabinet members located behind the president.

Table 1. Frequency of Visual Communication Tactics from Donald Trump’s Facebook and Twitter Accounts Over the First One Hundred Days of the Trump Presidency

	Facebook		Twitter	
	<i>N</i>	% of Images With Tactic	<i>N</i>	% of Images With Tactic
Desk/Table (Directly Seated)	51	20.07	45	66.17
Text Overlaid Image	92	36.22	30	44.12
Signing a Document	21	8.30	12	17.60
Foreign Leader	22	8.60	6	8.82
People Clapping	17	6.69	2	2.94
Linear Perspective Framing	25	9.84	27	39.70
“Make America Great Again”	56	22.05	3	4.41
Trump Alone With Quote	56	22.05	0	0
Direct Twitter Repost	35	13.78	0	0
Military/Veterans	15	5.90	3	4.41

Note: A total of 254 images and 68 images were posted on the Donald J. Trump Facebook account and @realDonaldTrump Twitter account, respectively, from January 20, 2017 (Inauguration Day) and April 29, 2017 (100th day).

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Figure 2. @realDonaldTrump Twitter Posts Exemplifying “Signing a Document,” “Foreign Leader,” “People Clapping,” and “Linear Perspective Framing” Visual Communication Tactics Image A: March 13, 2017; Image B: February 13, 2017; Image C: April 19, 2017; Image D: April 13, 2017

Relatedly, 52 of the 322 visuals used linear perspective to feature photographs of large groups of people surrounding Trump seated as a central figure. In these photos, Trump is prominent and a strong focal point with all visual lines converging to the centered Trump. Just as a depiction of Jesus Christ was centralized in Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* fresco, President Trump is an important part of these pictures as the single vanishing point while seated in the middle. A notable instance of this can be seen in Figure 2, Image D where President Trump is centered in a staged gathering of firefighters accompanying U.S. Department of Transportation Cabinet Secretary Elaine Chao. As discussed later in this chapter, this tactic was found to serve a critical role at centralizing and legitimizing President Trump as a figure of authority and importance in these posts.

Overlaid text on images was the most commonly used non-photographic element. Specifically, 37.88% of the total posts (122 of 322 images) contained a textual element of some

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kind over the main visual. This overlaid text served specific uses on Facebook, where it was used to display Twitter text reposts, identified as “Direct Twitter Reposts” and images of President Trump as a lone figure with a quote, labeled as “Trump Alone With Quote” (Images C and D in Figure 3 are examples of both tactics). Four exemplars of text overlaid onto images and reposting tweets on Facebook can be seen in Figure 3. These posts served as a unifying tactic to increase branding consistency by linking different social media accounts. Many of the quotes came from outside sources, such as Fox News and Fox Business, allowing Trump to use third-party validators and to share favorable business indicators. Image B in Figure 3 represents an instance in which economic data was supported with bold text, a background picture of an American flag and a poised President Trump looking into the distance. In such cases, text and image reinforced each other, amplifying and emphasizing the message.



Figure 3. Donald Trump Facebook Posts Exemplifying “Text Overlaid” and “Direct Twitter Reposts” Visual Communication Tactics. Image A: March 28, 2017; Image B: March 10, 2017; Image C: April 21, 2017; Image D: March 10, 2017

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Images featuring specific instances of people and actions surrounding the president were an additional theme. This included the presence of military/veterans (5.6% of images) and foreign leaders (8.7% of images). Image B in Figure 2 demonstrates both a military-coded and a foreign-leader-coded image, in which Trump was depicted embracing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau next to a flag-holding service member during a White House visit. In terms of actions, the people were frequently depicted clapping. Out of the 322 images on both Facebook and Twitter, roughly six percent of all visuals were devoted to photos of people (and sometimes Trump himself) clapping at pictured actions (e.g., Figure 2, Image C). The last major theme that emerged was “Make America Great Again” (MAGA). This visual tactic included instances of the Trump/Pence MAGA logo, MAGA apparel, and signs at rallies (such as Figure 3, Image A). MAGA imagery was included in just over 4% of pictures on Twitter in the first 100 days, but more notably in more than 22% of Facebook posts.

Clearly, political messaging has evolved over the past several presidential elections and these changes are evident in official communication from the White House. While President Donald Trump has long been a prolific and well-documented Twitter user, messaging from the White House through its social media feeds primarily employs the use of targeted visuals in its Facebook and Twitter feeds. Both platforms have provided an ample audience for the president to reach tens of millions of followers with direct, targeted messaging and then in turn have this communication receive national coverage through traditional media sources.

Discussion: Visual Image Building and Legitimacy

From frequent scrum photos of the president holding up signed executive orders in the Oval Office to images of the president energetically sitting behind the wheel of a Mack truck parked outside his back door, like previous administrations, visuals have been central to Donald Trump's presidency. Based on a careful examination of Trump's visual communication on social media during his first 100 days in office, two notable points of discussion emerge: Trump deployed images on social media to (1) build an image based on success, power, and leadership and (2) legitimize his new administration.

Trump's Visual Image

If you only viewed Trump's first 100 days in office through the lense of his social media accounts, a clear perception is created of a strong, successful, and likable president in control of his administration. Presidential messaging has been found to work to "visually simplify complex political issues, narratively interpret presidential agendas, synoptically reify presidential personae, and construct or mystify political realities" (Erikson, 1998, p. 141), and the Trump administration's use of visuals in 2017 were indicative of these patterns. In short, Trump's visuals simplified issues (if issues were present at all), narratively conveyed his agenda, and constructed a political identity and, indeed, a new political reality. Through clearly strategic--but occasionally faltering--image building, Trump and his White House team crafted visuals of a successful new president making good use of his time in office. From review of the images, clear rules were evident: branding was constant, success was documented, Trump was center, prideful supporters were featured, and visual messages were reinforced through text. Trump follows in a long line of contemporary presidents—notably Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W.

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Bush—who employed visuals to drive a narrative, garner news media coverage, and construct political images. As Schill (2009) asserted, visuals are “universal and ubiquitous in political communication” (p. 28). The case study in this chapter therefore confirms and renews previous understandings of visual image making

Much of Trump’s presidency has been concerned with optics--about communicating both popularity and success. Visits from a wide-ranging group of foreign dignitaries complemented an entire cast of all-American figures (from firefighters to small business owners to a Florida high school marching band). To a viewer of Trump’s Facebook and Twitter accounts, seemingly all of America supported the president and had stopped by the White House for a visit. Images were constructed to document things getting done: signing documents, working late into the night, and constantly meeting with his Cabinet and interest groups. These photos and moments likely felt authentic to the average social media consumer and for Trump’s most ardent supporters, thrilling examples of work being done and promises being kept. These visuals functioned to prominently feature a president and administration with power, prowess, and control--all things that the legacy media reported were lacking in the White House.

Trump himself was the principal subject in nearly every photo analyzed. Additionally, photos often employed linear perspective to depict President Trump surrounded by onlookers in a Last-Supper-like pose (See Figure 2, Image D). As presidential historian Douglas Brinkley observed: “In the way he does the photos, he’s a star in every one” (quoted in Dawsey, 2017, para. 20). Trump perfected this stagecraft on reality television and these images evoke the boardroom set of *The Apprentice*. Implementing compositional techniques of the High Renaissance, these images give Trump authority—his chair is noticeably taller than all others—and let him be in charge. “They let him bask in praise. They show him sitting up straight,

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crossing his arms, attempting to convey with his stern face a no-nonsense strength,” noted Kruse (2018, para. 13). Further, Thrush and Haberman (2017) argue that toughness is the most important attribute Trump has sought to project: “he wanted to look dour, and vetoed any campaign imagery that so much as hinted at weakness, aides said. Which is why every self-selected snapshot—down to the squinty-eyed scowl attached to his Twitter account—features a tough-guy sourpuss” (para. 14). Trump conceptualizes leadership as strength and communicates this authority nonverbally and visually. This supports Chun’s (2018) finding that “the Trump White House evokes the image of power and authority through the selection and presentation of staged photo ops that allow him to be in command of his surroundings” (pp. 28-29).

Trump’s visual-centric approach was honed over decades in the public eye and years in reality television. His iconic brand was equal part business suits, deal making, power scowls, and gold-plated opulence. Katy Tur (2018) described Trump’s history with visual branding:

Donald Trump’s whole life has been about creating an image of success. Image matters more than anything else. Trump hasn’t built buildings in a long time. He puts his name on them. He brands them. It’s the image he sells. It’s why so many of those buildings have brass polished to look like gold. Image is everything. He wants to appear strong. (para 1)

As this chapter shows, Trump transposed this success-power-strong persona from the world of business and reality television to the White House. The essential parts remained the same and were transferred to the not dissimilar context of politics.

Also notable is what is *not* in the visual record. Trump was rarely depicted with family or in personal settings. The Trump administration limited access to Trump’s golf outings and, of course, no images were provided of Trump watching television during “executive time” in the White House residence. Of course, no leader would distribute unflattering images, but Trump has

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shown no interest in “humanizing” visuals in his first 100 days. For example, nearly all past presidents used animals, especially dogs, to show their softer side, but Trump has shown no interest in a White House pet. Similarly, most presidents attempted to connect with citizens via visual plain folks appeals: Reagan and George W. Bush invited cameras to film them cut wood and clear brush, Bill Clinton was fond of McDonald’s stops and sweaty jogging outings, and Barack Obama periodically left the White House for fast food outings at Starbucks, Chipotle, and Ray’s Hell Burger (see Schill, 2009). Trump, on the other hand, has only his “strong businessman” and “authentic outsider” image.

His frequent signing ceremonies became a well-choreographed genre all their own. Trump would be seated at a small desk surrounded by his Cabinet or interest group members impacted by the order. He would then sign the executive order in his bold and visually striking signature and display the document for the camera, swiveling side to side and smiling to the reporters in the room. Then, in a moment of unison, the supporters would clap and then quickly disperse away from the president’s desk quietly. Trump managed to “give a requisite, mostly static scene from any modern presidency a more kinetic, compelling ‘look all his own’” (Kruse, 2018, para. 12). While clearly staged, the moment effectively used photography to frame the event in a distinctly favorable manner and share it to millions of followers on social media.

Authority and emphasis were also generated through the strategic use of text and the cross-posting of images on both Twitter and Facebook. Photos of Trump alone with a quote superimposed over the image represented nearly a quarter of all images posted to Facebook. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Trump declared that “I alone can fix it” and Trump’s visual messaging underlined the singularity of the president through this type of post. Many of these Facebook photos were reposts of tweets from the @realdonaldtrump Twitter account. For

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Trump, Twitter was the main online information channel (Enli, 2017) and Twitter's inter-media agenda-setting effect is observed with Trump's Twitter account setting the agenda for his Facebook page. Duplicating messages on Facebook allowed Trump to expand his audience reach and scale across communication channels with minimal cost and effort. Further, when one tweak of a service's algorithm can devastate your outreach, it is strategic to spread your communication across multiple platforms (Thompson, 2018). Twitter and Facebook are only two parts of an increasingly complex media ecology characterized by interdependency and interplaying influences (Jungherr, 2016).

In contrast to the highly polished and artful images in the previous administration, numerous photos analyzed within the first 100 days were out of focus, overexposed or displayed strange framing and composition (see also, Shaw, 2017). Just as Trump's staff-written Twitter posts feature purposefully bad grammar and syntax errors, the visuals on social media are occasionally crafted with a distinct element of clumsiness (Linskey, 2018). For example, text at times would dominate an image and overshadow President Trump (see Figure 2, Image A). This seemingly amateur communication in White House digital posts was also identified by Chun (2018), "the anti-design approach in the White House Flickr album is a framing strategy to avoid any 'artsy' affectation" and "is a reversal of the systematic, thoughtful, and rigorous design efforts of the Obama Presidency and campaign" (p. 34). Trump's "amateurish yet authentic style in social media points towards de-professionalization and even amateurism as a counter-trend in political communication" (Enli, 2017, p. 50). For Trump, kludgy photography communicates authenticity.

Trump's Visual Legitimization

In all forms of government, leaders must create legitimacy; the perception that they have the right and justification to exercise power (Buchanan, 2002). John Locke famously asserted that political legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed. This analysis finds that one aspect of establishing legitimacy in contemporary democracies is via *visual legitimization* (see also Max Weber's (1968) concept of charismatic authority).

Like former president George W. Bush sought to legitimize his image as commander-in-chief in military efforts in Iraq (Shepherd, 2008), Trump looked to visuals to testify to his firm control over political matters. Few presidents have had more to prove in a short amount of time and have faced attacks from so many political pundits, political groups, and even politicians from his own party. Trump did not win the popular vote and many Americans questioned the role of foreign interference in Trump's electoral success. For an administration under unceasing attack, the visuals released on White House social media feeds and Trump's personal accounts served as a safe harbor for positive coverage frequently lacking in mainstream media.

Moreover, Trump was not a traditional politician and was not expected to win. He needed to quickly build authority. This is why Trump was so concerned with pictures of his inaugural crowd. The shadow of the election loomed over his first 100 days. Prior to any policy decisions, Trump began by looking the part of a president. And the images on Facebook and Twitter allowed Trump to quickly embody the symbolic and practical duties of America's top executive. For the government to function, it is important that the citizenry have confidence in the competence of the new occupant of the Oval Office, and visuals can partially invite national acceptance of a new president. The issue is not truth, but legitimacy, and legitimacy is a core

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function of visual communication in political contexts. In his book on understanding Trump, Newt Gingrich (2017) argued that, “Visuals matter more than words. Style matters more than convention. The overall impression matters more than the details” (p. 2). While many Americans might never accept the legitimacy of a Trump presidency (see Azari, 2018; Frum, 2018), the overall impression created by visuals on Trump’s social media accounts was of a leader in command.

Conclusion

Social media and digital interaction with citizens and the public has become a centerpiece and primary means of communication for the Trump presidency. A nearly complete circumvention of legacy media control has led Trump officials and the president himself to operate in a “dynamic news environment that is no longer defined by the traditional gatekeepers of journalism and politicians” (Oates & Moe, 2018, p. 212). Direct communication with the public through social media has cemented political communication into a new era of visual political communication and has largely created moments of unprecedented openness and disregard for previous “rules” of integration.

As noted by Schill (2012), “Images clearly play a foundational role in the political communication process. Newsmakers not only consider their words, they also consider the messages they are communicating visually—they are constructing image bites” (p. 127). The expanding reach of social media across an ever-widening network of platforms has provided opportunities for snippets of visuals to be communicated in a realm separate from legacy media. Social media creates a new dimension to the traditional process of political communication by means of televised broadcast: “candidates now have a *direct* means by which to communicate with the voting public” (Dahmen, 2016b, p. 175). This evolution in the transmission of messages has revolutionized the long-held tradition of politicians’ dependence on media outlets both during and after their campaigns. This has given strategists the ability to “put an image in a voter’s mind directly through social media channels *without* the traditional news media as a filter or gatekeeper” (Dahmen, 2016b, p. 176). The Trump administration’s use of social media and visual communication evolved after its first one hundred days—both in terms of messages

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delivered and tactics deployed—but one thing is certain: visuals remained central and critical.

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