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Chapter 19: Peripheral cues and the power of simple images

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Abstract

Images have always played an important role for human civilisation, in particular through their ability to convey complex and emotionally-resonant ideas far more easily than words. Political ideas and arguments, in the current era, are often communicated through simple images, collages, mash-ups and memes. The question this chapter focuses on is why these matter in terms of their impact. Drawing on literature which has highlighted the power of heuristics, and experimental research showing images can shape the responses of participants, the chapter uses the case of the anti-Covid 19 restrictions to explore how images can have helped to build this movement. We show how the use of images of masked children, smiling unmasked faces and simple slogans may have led those who found restrictions a greater burden than they found infection a threat to join develop sympathies with the anti-restriction movement and potentially break rules and guidelines imposed to restrict the spread of the virus.

Peripheral cues and the power of simple images

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Introduction

Images are deemed to be highly powerful and have a been a feature of human communication since the days of cave painting. The ability of an image to convey a complex message in a reasonably simple way is due to the power of pictures to elicit an emotional reaction. The intense emotional responses an image can elicit means images can be used for the purposes of manipulation causing citizens to be misled, become misinformed and form inaccurate and potentially harmful attitudes (Farmer, 2021). Political news, advertising and public relations is heavily reliant on imagery, all aligned to the way political communication is designed to inform, persuade, or manipulate their audience. The persona of a politician, the societal groups they are courting, and the logic of their messages are all conveyed through images. But do these images have the impact one might imagine? Due to the complexities of the modern-day communication environment, with a diet of on-street and billboard signs and advertising across television, newspaper, social media and other online platforms, it is possible to exposed to some degree to hundreds of persuasive images per hour. One survey estimates exposure to 6,000-10,000 advertisements a day for example[i]. How many of these images resonate and have any impact on cognitive or behavioural patterns is difficult to ascertain. To determine the effect of any single image necessitates us to isolate that image from all the other images one can be exposed to and use experimental methods to test its impact on cognition and behaviour. This chapter discusses why images are expected to be impactful, it reviews relevant empirical data which indicates the power of images and then explores the use of imagery and its potential impact drawing on a small study of how images were produced to build momentum behind opposition to measures introduced to reduce the spread of Covid-19 during the 2020-21 global pandemic.

The heuristic power of the image

Gazzaniga (1998) proposed that human brains were not built to read text, rather they were designed to process images and interpret them according to needs. Learning to read often involves combining words with images to aid learning the meaning of words and their relationship to the everyday world (Samuels, 1970). The processes the brain works through involves identifying the items we see, the relationship between prominent items and how we as an individual interprets the overall scene. Perception thus is a key part of the process. Perception can be individual (a memory of a personal moment), shared with a small number (specific to a group or subsection) or very common context

shared with many individuals with only few common factors (national symbols for example). Perception can also be inaccurate; the readings of images and scenes can rely on personal or popular culture information to aid interpretation. Therefore, while our eyes may not often deceive us, our brains can. Cognitive processes interpret the information collected by the eyes. Just as one can perceive an empty desert as scary or liberating, the interpretation of constructed images can lead to differential interpretations. Grabe (2011) argues that confusion can occur between an image and reality during the initial seconds of exposure. Specifically, her research indicates that the more lifelike, negative, and compelling the image is, the more likely it will be perceived as being an accurate portrayal of the physical world.

Thus, while an image maybe perceived as a representation of reality, images can also be highly misleading. Images can also be used cognitively as evidence even when they do not actually reinforce any aspect of the accompanying argument. The reason that images have the power to mislead is because they act as powerful heuristics, the correspondence between an image and text is embedded in our consciousness due to early learning processes (Gazzaniga, 1998). Popkin (1994) theorized that humans limit their cognitive energy for important decisions and so develop automatic processes and strategies to reduce expending cognitive effort as they navigate the social world. Popkin's theory, and a wealth of supportive research (Norris, 2011; Joo et al, 2014), suggests citizens with low emotional investment in a decision may seek shortcuts to aid decision-making and under such conditions are prone to being manipulated.

The heuristics and bias approach to cognitive psychology suggests visuals are routinely used by humans to form perceptions which are at best incomplete and at worst false. Perceptions are often formed about a specific situation based on existing beliefs and knowledge. Scholars of media frames, for example, argue that the frequency by which an association is made between Muslims and terrorists, the more likely it is that if someone sees the word Muslim, or sees an image of a person who appears to be a Muslim, the more likely they may perceive them as a threat (Powell, 2011). Such practices map onto basic mammalian instincts to identify sources of threats and link well to the notion of automatic information processing at the heart of the concept of the cognitive miser. Kahneman (2011) developed this in his conceptualisation of system one and system two thinking. System one information processing involves forming quick perceptions, perhaps due to emotional hot cognition (Lilleker, 2014) with minimal critical reflection. In contrast, system two involves careful and critical reflection and logical deduction. While this suggests a link between simplistic evaluation and emotionally driven processing, the argument is not just a juxtaposition between emotion and logic. Rather, an image that has strong affective resonance will invoke an intense emotional response, such a response does not permit the opportunity for reflection. Hence the desire among citizens to find a

shortcut for complex decision making, and the campaigner's desire to persuade may conflate to make images an important tool for manipulation.

Research suggests some people are inherently more likely to rely on system one thinking, the cognitive reflection test (Toplak, West, & Stanovich, 2014) was specifically designed to test an individual's proclivity to devote serious cognitive effort to logic questions and links between failing this test and being manipulated by images is found in research. While low cognitive reflection is often viewed as innate (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), it can also be caused by an unwillingness to invest cognitive effort to a being right but considering the instant gut reaction is sufficient. Where any real data is unavailable or inaccessible, or where the perception formed is consistent with existing beliefs the power of the image to manipulate is enhanced.

The dual system model is consistent with dual-process models which also prioritise the willingness to invest in cognitive effort as an important variable. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) demonstrated that people with low interest in a topic or possessing a lower ability to comprehend alternative or more complex interpretations will absorb basic impressions which if uncontested combine over time to form beliefs and attitudes. The peripheral processing dimension of the model demonstrates how visuals can lead to the formation of powerful impressions that can easily shape attitudes and drive behaviour. The more memorable the image, and more consistent images are over time, the more likely that attitudes harden, hence the concerns regarding associations between Muslims and terrorism. In turn, once a perception becomes dominant and accepted as the norm, it can determine selective processing of information. Here confirmation bias determines the extent to which alternative perceptions are considered, extant biases means interpretations are made that aid attitudinal consistency and reinforce existing biases (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004). Thus, simple images which are consistent and reinforce beliefs can have significant power over decision making in a range of contexts. Given the low engagement and interest in politics (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), in this specific arena there are serious fears that political behaviour is increasingly driven by heuristics as opposed to critical evaluation and logical evaluation of a range of pluralist information sources.

Testing the heuristic power of images

Politics is seen as particular prone to heuristic decision making due to the decreasing reliance on public service broadcasters (Newman, 2011), and diminishing trust in mainstream journalism (Lee, 2013). Hence what constitutes reliable news and what may be fake is increasingly blurred (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). There is concern that much material shared on social media is democratically

dysfunctional (Chadwick et al, 2018) misinformation or disinformation at worst or at best clickbait, which uses emotionally resonant images and text to attract an audience (Lazauskas, Jacka, & Kažemėkaitė-Vitkauskienė, 2018). Political campaigners also contribute in various ways to the misinformation and clickbait environment. All vie within the attention economy to use images and slogans to elicit some form of engagement. Research purely from the perspective of political communication on social media finds that posts by parties which contain visual content prove more likely to be shared by their online communities (Koc-Michalska et al, 2021) a finding reinforced by marketing communication research (Villarroel Ordenes, 2019). Analysing the content of imagery that proves popular shows that to go viral an image must be emotionally resonant, especially if it provokes anger (Guadagno et al, 2013). Such findings chime with the notion that images that produce a strong emotional reaction may have a lasting effect on attitudes and behaviour (Brady et al, 2020). Specific patterns in user engagement with posts are often context specific and the impact of images hard to disaggregate when accompanied by text. Sahly et al, (2019) demonstrate that posts containing arguments that focus on morality and conflict were engaged with most by followers of Clinton and Trump during the US 2016 presidential election. The research also notes that most posts contained an image, however due to the automated coding the authors note it was impossible to determine what impact the image had in relation to the effect of the text when influencing engagement.

The gaps in understanding of the impact of images is best filled by experimental research. While it cannot replicate real life processing of images, it can show the impact an image has if it is viewed and cognitively processed. Images depicting the facial expressions of a politician can lead viewers to make assumptions about the character of that politician, forming positive attitudes towards them if depicted smiling (Sülflow & Maurer, 2019). While this effect is moderated if the image is audiovisual, it shows that the combination of a positive claim and an image of a politician smiling may increase the likelihood of the claim being expected. Similarly negative claims about a politician will usually be accompanied by an image of them looking crestfallen, worried or incompetent, again providing evidence of the claim and bolstering its impact (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Even the subliminal use of symbols is found to have an effect, the use of a nations' flag increases support for policies that reinforce the power of the nation for example (Hassan et al, 2007). Similarly, graphic images following acts of terrorism was shown in experiments to increase US citizens' approval of President Bush's war on terror even among Democrat supporters (Gadarian, 2014). Hence while limited, evidence suggests that images in political communication have an impact on an audience and can be used to shape perceptions and invoke thinking processes which can drive attitudes.

Data from experimental research also proves that an image can be assumed to provide evidence even when it has little relevance to the text. One experiment involving true or false trivia statements

(Newman et al, 2015) found that when accompanied by a relevant image even if the image did not confirm the statement more people responded that the statement was true. Newman and Zhang (2021) found people were more likely to respond that the statement 'magnesium is the liquid metal inside a thermometer' was true if accompanied by a picture of a thermometer. They suggested that the accompanying relevant image was seen as confirmatory even when it contained no evidence. Similarly, research (Zhang et al, 2021) demonstrated that when respondents are requested to estimate the value of raw materials included an image of one of those raw materials leads those respondents to estimate the depicted material as having the highest value. Again, this suggests images direct thinking and judgments if only in fairly anodyne or low-involvement contexts. Such findings may be moderated by the propensity of the individual to assess evidence, as measured by responses to the cognitive reflection test (Newman & Zhang, 2021: 104) as do warnings that the image may not be evidential or that all statements may not be true (Jalbert, Newman & Schwarz, 2017). The participants in these experiments are likely to have had minimal personal investment in being correct, but one must ask if similar cognitive mechanisms are at play when the individual does not know what is true and what is not. Within complex communication environment, where there are alternative perspectives as in political communication, and when communication processing may be instantaneous and uncritical, there is a real danger that images act as cues to the truthiness or falseness of a statement. Just as an image of a celebrity lead respondents in experiments to say they were alive rather than dead (Newman & Zhang, 2021), a confirmatory image can act as a heuristic to prove whether any claim is believable. Put simply images appear to add weight to claims and so may drive attitude formation. A picture of a politician looking ridiculous will add confirmatory weight to a claim of incompetence; a picture of a derelict factory will confirm a claim of failure in economic policy; imagery of a crowd of demonstrators can confirm a claim that the masses are opposed to a government or government policy. We thus consider how these lessons apply to the circulation of images and statements which challenge the official narratives regarding the preventative measures instituted during the Covid-19 pandemic with a focus on Greece and the United Kingdom.

Challenging narratives using images

The pandemic involved massive changes in the lives of people of every country across the globe. Social distancing, self-isolation and lockdown became a norm for many, as did the wearing of facemasks. The majority of citizens accepted the rules as necessary to prevent suffering and death, in particular among the most vulnerable members of their societies. According to a Metron (2021) poll published in March 2021, 55 percent of the Greek public believed restrictive measures were helpful for tackling the

pandemic. However, a small but highly vocal and often prominent minority actively protested against the measures. The protests were most marked in the US and enjoyed significant coverage in mainstream media, but similar protests took place in a range of countries during July and August 2020 including the UK. US protesters' main opposition was based on the way that such measures impeded the freedoms enshrined in the US constitution, echoing a human rights theme many protestors would draw upon. Many of the images of protests posted by activists presented pro-freedom messages alongside the national flag making a clear association between the words and the flag. These chime very much with the research of Hassan et al (2007) who demonstrate how national symbols can invoke feelings of patriotism and national identity.

Our case study focuses on protests in two nations with similar trajectories for the introduction of measures: the UK and Greece. In the UK, the largest protests were the Unite for Freedom rally in London on 29 August and a series of protests across UK cities organised under the banner of Resist and Act on 12 September. Both of these inspired events across provincial cities, often organised through social media by groups formed specifically for that purpose. Events attracted a range of speakers including conspiracy theorists and right and left activists[ii]. Similar marches against restrictions took place in Greece. In late August and on 06 September 2020, thousands of people gathered in several Greek cities protesting the measures taken by the government to contain the spread of the coronavirus. In addition, several groups were created on social media and especially on Facebook expressing their anti-mask, anti-vaccine views and thus opposing government policy.

We collected images and visual messages used in protests in the form of placards as well as images posted on Facebook by relevant groups. Specifically, there are sixty-eight images from UK protests taken directly from the pages of protest groups on Facebook and Instagram. We collected thirty-nine images and visual messages from Greek protests, twenty-eight of them are photos that were published online by news websites depicting protestors holding placards and signs in marches, while eleven of them were posted and widely shared on relevant Facebook accounts.

While in the UK the protests appeared part of a national political effort involving a range of organisations that has formed a loose coalition, most of the marches in Greece were organized by parent groups protesting the decision of the Greek government to force students to wear facemasks as a prerequisite to attend school classes. Hence, most of these protests took place in late August and in the beginning of September 2020, a few days before the official start of the new school year. The relevant Greek Facebook groups, which either have not updated their pages or have removed the page or some content, focus on the same issue. The UK online groups, in contrast, have a stronger link to conspiracy theories and the notion the pandemic is part of a wider plot to limit individual freedoms.

Many UK protestors however echoed the sentiments of their Greek counterparts who created groups with names 'We Say No To The Mandatory Use of Masks at School', 'No Kid With a Mask at School', 'Neither Vaccine, Nor Sealing' and 'No Masks and Tests in the Schools of the city of Komotini'[iii].

According to the content of the collected visual messages, the majority in both nations, included slogans against the mandatory use of facemasks by students and to a lesser extent against mass testing and vaccinations for containing the spread of the virus and securing the protection of the most vulnerable. In the UK the words hoax or 'plandemic' were prominent on placards. Symbols were often incorporated. One Greek meme appearing like an information poster claiming facemasks kill or protestors carrying signs including the World Health Organization logo accompanying claims they 'admit it's a lie' or challenging their credibility. But largely the images were symbolic. Images claiming masks as unnecessary or ineffective were accompanied by smiling, mask-free protestors. One image of a queue of people in masks looking miserable but compliant is contrasted with on showing happy protestors. Individual freedoms, depicted through not wearing masks, gathering in public, or hugging were promoted; nationalistic imagery, symbol and flags featured rarely[iv].

Focusing on the themes of the visual messages most, either in the form of photos of placards used in marches or images from protests posted online, concentrated on projecting anti-COVID measures as a means to restrict or remove citizens' liberties and questioned their justification. Government measures against the spread of the pandemic were frequently framed as creeping fascism. Medical symbols were used in conjunction with slogans and text claiming the mandatory use of facemasks prevented people from breathing freely, potentially awarding the message greater credibility. Protestors were also depicted with children, linking the message of health to the happy and smiling unmasked child. Individual freedom was also a theme, with facemasks referred to as 'muzzles'. Children were a particular feature of the Greek online protests, due to the focus being on opposing mask wearing in schools. The montage of children with the text 'I breathe freely. It is my right' has emotional resonance[v]. On another a female child looks out from a masked face accusingly accompanied by the text 'I will never forget that you allowed them to muzzle me for educational reasons'.

Analysis and Conclusions

The small case study offers insights into public political communication and the way that simple images are posted to social media in order to reinforce arguments. The pictures of UK protestors largely focus on making a political statement, such as wake up, or a message relating to well-being 'a lack of love kills, lies kill' or challenging the science 'they admit the lie, when will you'. These images to an extent challenge their audience: Do you accept the dominant, government narrative, or do you

wish to consider an alternative? However, the images also act as confirmatory. The juxtaposition of sad or accusing images of 'muzzled' people, with sullen eyes peering over the top of face masks, and the happy, energetic and hopeful looks on the unmasked faces of protestors can lead some to question their own fears of infection as well as the veracity of measures. If the same cognitive processes are drawn upon as were evidenced in the experiments of Newman and Zhang these images will add weight to the arguments opposing measures. Other images circulating which liken the compliant to sheep, clones or drones, each with their own images of the mask wearing citizens, similarly create simple associations which stimulate gut reactions and can lead to attitude formation when asked to comply with rules (Powell, 2011).

While the campaign in Greece was more focused, similar strategies are at play in the design and dissemination of images and texts. One meme invokes the phrase 'I can't breathe' making an explicit reference to the last words of George Floyd, the man who died under the knee of a US police officer sparking Black Lives Matter protests globally[vi]. The link is thus made to a broader human rights infringement. The use of images of miserable looking children wearing masks also has confirmatory power, while the concerned parents holding banners adds a weight and credibility that can reinforce the argument as parents largely focus on protecting their children. Furthermore, using symbols associated with public health services or the WHO offer an impression of being public information as opposed to a message offering a counter narrative.

Hence all these images have the potential to have some form of emotional resonance. Many societies witnessed a form of affective polarisation (Lilleker et al, 2021). A significant number were anxious about Covid-19 and largely trusted the experts and science and complied with measures. Online they would attack the arguments of the protestors and their supporters. However, there were also a not insignificant number that were more anxious about their personal circumstances. These people were more likely to have poor financial security and be laid off from work, have lower education and be naturally more mistrusting of government and elites (Lilleker & Ozgul, 2021). For them the broad coalition of young and old, male and female who came together in protest against the measures rejecting compliance may have felt empowering, realising their attitudes towards restrictions reflected a broader current of thought. The messages anti-restriction imagery could therefore have acted as a corollary for holding populist attitudes, building a distrust of scientists, scientific evidence, relevant institutions as well as governments and political elites, both at a national and supranational level.

For the time being, such attitudes have not translated into a serious political movement and they remain unrepresented since credible political forces have avoided expressing the concerns of voters

protesting the measures against the containment of COVID-19. Even the most extreme parliamentary parties have so far appeared reluctant to openly back those turning against the protection of populations from the spread of the pandemic, although opposition to restrictions have been voiced by a number of populist and far right parties including the German AfD and UK's Reform Party (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). However, while these parties remain on the fringe of their nations' polities, challenges from populists lie ahead because of the economic recession generated by the pandemic and the essential restrictive measures. If a hardly insignificant part of the public believes anti-COVID measures taken by the governments were unnecessary or unjustified, then the negative economic implications resulting from the pandemic could be regarded as the result of policies pursued by malign or incompetent elites. In other words, those who were frustrated with the anti-COVID measures may blame the governments and the political elites for the recession and the hardships which populations experience in the post-pandemic period. Therefore, a new and probably larger challenge from post-pandemic populism may emerge challenging not only the economic policy of the governments, but also the whole government narrative and strategy which attempts to address the wider social and economic implications of COVID-19. In this context, public demand might attract or create a political supply. The arguments, reinforced by images of protestors flagrantly displaying their 'freedom', can only bolster such feelings if tensions rise as the impact of a post-pandemic settlement is felt.

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