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The levels of visual framing

Lulu Rodriguez
Daniela V Dimitrova
Iowa State University, Ames, IA

Abstract

While framing research has centered mostly on the evaluations of media texts, visual news discourse has remained relatively unexamined. This study surveys the visual framing techniques and methods employed in previous studies and proposes a four-tiered model of identifying and analyzing visual frames: (1) visuals as denotative systems, (2) visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems, (3) visuals as connotative systems and (4) visuals as ideological representations. These four tiers are defined and the process of identifying frames at each level is explicated. The proposed system can be applied to analyzing any type of visual media content or audiences' perception of that content.

Keywords: visual analysis, visual framing, visual interpretation, visual framing typology

Introduction

Despite the increasing number of framing studies, the tenets of framing theory have been applied mainly to analyzing texts (Berger, 1991). The question of how issues are framed through images that stand alone or accompany text has remained relatively under-researched (Bell, 2001). This imbalance has to be corrected considering that images as modes of communication have properties that either "enhance or mitigate their consequences" (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 215) or sometimes even override the messages embedded in the text (Wischmann, 1987). As Coleman recently noted, "visual framing provides an important new direction for theory building and future research" (2010, p. 233).

The idea of framing first appeared in Goffman's seminal work in 1974, which postulated that the context and organization of messages affect audiences' subsequent thoughts and actions about those messages. Later, Entman (1991), one of the framing pioneers in mass communication, proposed that news frames exist at two levels: as mentally stored principles for information processing (audience frames) and as characteristics of the news itself (news frames).

Many consider audience frames as mental maps people form to cope with the flood of information to which they are subjected everyday. According to Goffman (1974), audiences actively classify and organize their life experiences to make sense of them. These "schemata of interpretation" or "frames" that enable individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" the world around them (p. 10). Hence, he defined audience frames as mental structures that are closely related to the ideas of scripts and schemas from the social cognition literature.

According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987) a news frame is the "central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events… The frames suggest what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143). The general idea is that a news frame is an ever-present discursive device that channels the audience as it constructs the meaning of particular communicative acts. Entman (1993), elaborating on how frames function, argued that they can promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Gitlin (1980) took a functional approach to framing, defining frames as devices that facilitate how journalists organize enormous amounts of information and package them effectively for their audiences.

As a theoretical proposition, framing suggests that the presentation of news events in the mass media can systematically affect how recipients of news come to understand these events (Price, Tewksbury & Powers, 1995). According to Entman (1993), "frames call attention to some aspects of reality

while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions" (p. 55). News organizations use different words, phrases, and images, including those mentally produced through the use of metaphors, to define and construct different issues or events, and these depictions may shape people's reasoning and attitudes about these issues or events (Nelson et al., 1997).

Scheufele (1999), who answered the call to consolidate what many have criticized as a "fractured paradigm" and provide order to the conceptualization of framing as a legitimate theory, differentiated studies that examined media frames as an independent variable from those that looked at them as a dependent variable. Such studies deal with the various factors that influence the frame-building process (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2008). These factors include "social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures of interests groups, journalistic routines and ideological or political orientation of journalists" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 109). Research on media frames as independent variables examines the influence of framing devices on individual audience frames (Entman, 1993). Hence, such studies look at individual frames as "outcomes" of particular media frames in the process of frame-setting.

The Importance of Visual Frames

According to Hertog and McLeod (2001) frames derive power from their symbolic significance as they use recognizable myths and metaphors in the narratives. They also carry "excess meaning" as they activate some related ideas or thoughts, and they have an accepted shared meaning within a culture as they resonate with its members. Images are powerful framing tools because they are less intrusive than words and as such require less cognitive load. Therefore, peripheral rather than central processing may be activated and audiences may be more likely to accept the visual frame without question. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that when there is conflict between textual and visual framing, visual frames often win (Ferguson, 2001). This may be due not only to the fact that visuals such as photographs seem closer to reality, but also because they have the power to create stronger emotional and immediate cues. After all, historically, seeing preceded the use of language. Because of their high attraction value, images seen on a page, Web site, or screen often give the first impression of a story, and they are readily remembered (Rogers and Thorson, 2000). Visuals are good framing devices because, according to Wischmann (1987), they are "capable of not only obscuring issues but [also] of overwhelming facts" (p. 70).

One of the main reasons why there are relatively few studies that employ visual framing compared to textual framing is that there is a great deal of

confusion as to how visual frames are supposed to be identified in the first place. To this day, identifying visual frames remains a challenge; the methods of doing so cover the gamut. While most tease out themes (i.e., Borah and Bulla, 2006 and 2007; Patridge, 2005), others expose the ideological positions favored by some manner of visual presentation (i.e., Griffin, 2004; Griffin and Lee, 2005). Indeed, a cursory look at visual framing studies shows lack of conceptual and methodological consistency even when common variables are examined. The meager literature that explores visual frames offers a hodgepodge of methodologies and a glut of approaches that may impair, rather than assist, our analysis of visuals as important framing mechanisms. This study surveys the visual framing techniques and methods that have been employed in previous studies and proposes a four-tiered system of identifying and analyzing visual frames in the news.

Visual Framing Research

Drawings, illustrations, photographs, photo-illustrations and other graphic devices are collectively referred to in this study as "visuals" or "images" that can be examined or evaluated for the frames they convey. Visuals, like text, can operate as framing devices insofar as they make use of various rhetorical tools—metaphors, depictions, symbols—that purport to capture the essence of an issue or event graphically. Through the application of these devices, a salient idea becomes easier to understand and easier to remember than other ideas (Entman, 1991). As Gamson and Stuart (1992) argued, visuals offer "a number of different condensing symbols that suggest the core frame" of the issue (p. 60). Visuals help render a large amount of detail into practical frameworks that are relevant and appropriate to people's understanding of the everyday world. In this sense, visuals channel discursive possibilities for making sense of social phenomena; they legitimize (and thus facilitate) the grounds upon which some interpretations can be favored and others impeded.

Visuals have three distinguishing characteristics that pose both challenges and opportunities to their capacity to frame news issues and events. According to Messaris and Abraham (2001), these properties are (1) the analogical quality of images, (2) the indexicality of images, and (3) the lack of an explicit propositional syntax in images.

The analogical quality of images refers to the fact that associations between images and their meanings are based on similarity or analogy. The audience's task of recognizing objects in photographs does not require "prior familiarity with particular representational conventions" (p. 216). Messaris and Abraham (2001) submit that because images are relatively analogous to the real objects they represent, no grammar or rules of usage have to be learned

first to understand them. They caution, however, that because images are more natural and closely related to reality than words, they make it possible for viewers to overlook the fact that they can also be "artificial" constructions.

Messaris and Abraham (2001) borrow the term indexicality from Peirce (1868), who used it as an attribute to differentiate photographs from other images. The true-to-life qualities of photographs are what Peirce calls "indices." Because of their indexicality, "photographs come with an implicit guarantee of being closer to the truth than other forms of communication" (p. 217). Thus, they become evidence for something. Due to indexicality, most viewers of photographs may not question what they see; what they see is what they believe to exist in the real world. However, there is considerable evidence that shows how photographic practices can mislead a viewer with unacknowledged staging or manipulation. More commonly, much simpler photographic practices are used in visual framing, such as the basic acts of selection and cropping. Photographers can choose one view over the other, or editors can select one image over numerous others.

Visuals may not be as explicit and as accurate as text in being able to explain propositions such as cause-and-effect relationships, an attribute that may pose a challenge in the identification of frames because claims are less likely to be perceived in visual depictions of reality that stand alone (without text). Photographers and editors, however, may well feel they are creating a specific visual syntax through the editorial choices they make. Viewers mostly make sense of images with the help of contextual or other cues and might be less conscious of being presented with pre-selected information that omits certain visual cues.

The Levels of Visual Framing

Considering the foregoing literature, this study provides an exhaustive review of previous research that has employed visual analysis to determine frames. From this compendium of studies, we identify and propose four levels of visual framing that progressively become more sensitive to the assignment of meanings to visual depictions as a basis for the identification of frames. The four levels of visual framing are then individually defined, and the theoretical propositions behind their applications are discussed. We contend that the proposed system can be applied whether the unit of analysis is any media material (media frames) or audiences' individual perception of the overarching message of a visual (audience frames).

Level 1: Visuals as denotative systems

At this level, images are examined as "visual sensations or stimuli that

activate the nerve cells in the eyes to convey information to the brain" (Lester, 2006, p. 50). Here, frames are identified by enumerating the objects and discrete elements actually shown in the visual; frames result from recognizing design elements and by organizing or combining visual sensations into "themes" following some principles of organization. Visual materials at this level are basically described. What they mean to both audience members and the communicator, however, is relatively untouched.

This level reflects Barthes' (1973, 1977) concept of "denotation," his first layer of meaning in the analysis of visual messages. Panofsky (1970) refers to it as the "primary or natural subject matter" (p. 53). To arrive at this first reading of visual stimuli, one answers the question "who or what is being depicted here?" This first level of framing relies heavily on what Messaris and Abraham (2001) call the analogic and indexical attributes of images. Because photographs, for example, are perceived as closely analogous to reality, they provide a one-to-one correspondence between what is captured by the camera and what is actually seen in the real world. Although frames are deciphered by recognizing who or what is actually depicted, framing at this level is constrained by the fact that people recognize only what they know.

Frames derived from the denotative or representational meanings of that which are depicted are established by the titles, captions, inscriptions, or other textual descriptions that accompany the visual. They are also readily recognized through visual intertextuality or their similarity to people, places or things in other pictures. Because images can be described at different levels of generality depending on context, the target audience, and their purpose, it is always useful to add more context into the visual reading. Thus, a more involved version of this approach capitalizes on the application of gestalt principles of proximity (items are likely to be grouped together according to their nearness), similarity (those that look the same unite), closure (the tendency to perceive multiple elements as a totality, to close gaps and to form wholes) and equilibrium (every visual field tends toward order and precision). Viewers take advantage of these principles to group elements together into organized wholes and to establish coherent relationships between and among them (Kearsley, 1998). Following gestalt arguments, after having recognized the individual elements of a whole, the viewer seeks a coherent interpretation of the total image.

This approach also uses the precepts of Hochberg's (1970) constructivist theory in which the results of "the viewer's quick focal fixations combine with short-term memory to help build a mental picture [or blueprint] of the scene" (as cited in Lester, 2006, p. 53). Based on gestalt laws of organization and the tenets of constructivist theory, objects or elements that constitute a visual can be

classified into discrete groups to stabilize the visual field. The categorizations or themes emanating from this process constitute visual frames.

For example, in a qualitative analysis of newsmagazine photos about stem cell research, Smith (2006) found four themes that emerged as news frames—science, politics, medical and religion. Analyzing images of hurricane Katrina, Fahmy et al. (2006) recorded more portrayals of emotionally distraught victims and African-Americans from Louisiana on the front pages of US newspapers than on wire service photos. Comparing the photo offerings of the Associated Press and Reuters against the pictures that ran on the newspaper front pages, they found significant difference in the presence of frames that relate to "timeframe, location, victims, race, emotional portrayal, officials, aerial depictions, death, and portrayals of officials" (p. 12). Borah and Bulla (2005) analyzed the visual coverage of the Indian Ocean tsunami in two English-language newspapers in India during after the disaster and found that *The Hindu* focused on "naked savagery and human loss" while *The Times of India* concentrated on "the sadness and dignity of survivors" (p. 10). The most common frames identified were "destruction (physical devastation), grief (people in misery), dead bodies, crowds (on the beach and on the streets), relief work, politicians, tourists and celebrities" (p. 10).

The authors continued their visual framing analysis of the aftermath of natural disasters by examining how five newspapers from different parts of the world (*The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from the US, the *London Times* from the UK, and the *Times of India* and the *Hindu* from India) depicted the Indian Ocean tsunami and hurricane Katrina. The salient frames identified across the five papers fell under six categories: lives lost, lives saved, physical damage, emotional frame, and political frame (Borah and Bulla, 2006).

To determine how newspapers from the US, Britain and Russia visually framed the Beslan school siege in Russia in 2004, Patridge (2005) examined all photographs about the incident and their captions that appeared in six selected national newspapers across the globe. Her analysis revealed six frames the newspapers used to report this unfortunate event to their respective publics—(1) how the siege was carried out, (2) the actions the government took in response to the siege, (3) military tactics and actions, (4) civilian responses and actions, (5) the history of Chechen terrorist acts and the future of terrorism in general, and (6) those responsible and blamed for the siege.

In a content analysis of photographs depicting the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan, Fahmy (2004) found differences in visual framing between

This level also takes into account the stylistic conventions and technical transformations involved in representation. These include how pictorial

conventions and styles gain social meanings, such as when a close-up shot signifies intimacy, a medium shot signifies personal relationship, a full shot signifies social relationship and a long shot signifies context, scope and public distance (Berger, 1991). An example is Fahmy's (2004) content analysis of Associated Press wire photographs during and after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In this work, she examined five stylistic variables—"visual subordination, point of view, social distance, imaginary contact, behavior and general contact" (p. 91)—to define how Afghan women were depicted in AP photos. She found that after the fall of the Taliban, women were portrayed as "more involved, interactive, socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer" although they were still depicted as "still wearing their *burqas,* indicating a less simplistic version of Afghan women's liberation" (p. 106)

In another study, Archer et al. (1983) created a "face-ism" index that allows researchers to measure the prominence of the face in a photograph. This technique argues that displaying the face in a photograph more prominently leads to higher perceptions of the person's intelligence and ambition. On the other hand, if the body is displayed more prominently, the subject is perceived as having more non-intellectual qualities such as attractiveness or emotion.

Among the pictorial conventions analyzed as framing devices, the more common are social distance, visual modality, and subject behavior (Bell, 2001). Social distance is related to Hall's (1966) concept of proxemics or the psychology of people's use of space. Hall has shown that differences in people's "invisible boundaries" correspond to different fields of vision: "At intimate distance we see the face or head only. At close personal distance we take in the head and the shoulders. At far personal distance we see the other person from the waist up. At close social distance we see the whole figure. At far social distance we see the whole figure with space around it" (as cited in Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998, pp. 129-131). Thus, six values can be assigned to social distance based on how the human subjects' bodies are represented in the frame: intimate, close personal, far personal, close social, far social, public.

Visual modality results from the degree to which certain means of pictorial expression (color, representational detail, depth, tonal shades, etc.) are used to enhance realism (Bell, 2001). Each of these dimensions can be seen as a scale, running from the absence of detail to maximal deep representation. Modality, therefore, can be rated as high, medium, or low based on how closely each identified design element resembles reality.

Subject behaviors—actions and poses depicted in frames—create interaction between the viewer and the people shown in the images. These "image acts" relate to the ways in which visuals make "offers" or "demands" from viewers (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). For example, when models

look directly at viewers' eyes, contact and direct connection between the two are readily established. Following a different theoretical perspective, Goffman (1979) distinguished between several poses that demonstrate "rituals of subordination" or "infantile" acts among advertising models. These include head canting (tilting the head down or sideways while looking up) and bashful knee bending (where one knee is bent). Such behaviors, he explains, signify powerlessness, and place the viewer in a position of superiority with respect to the model.

Some researchers have also looked at other pictorial style variables, including the tightness with which a subject has been cropped; camera position or the extent to which the viewer is at the same level with the subject, a major factor in achieving visual proximity (Lister and Wells, 2001); the dominant aspect or focal point, which is often the largest, the most in focus, or the closest object to the camera (Lester, 1995; Meggs, 1992).

This was largely the approach taken by Hardin et al. (2002) when they looked at post-1996 editorial photographs in the magazine Sports Illustrated for Kids to determine whether post-Olympic female athletes received more favorable coverage than in the magazine's inaugural issues. Their analysis of editorial photos during a three-year period finds that the gender gap in the magazine has widened, continuing to perpetuate stereotypes and sexual difference. One of the ways by which this was reinforced, they observed, was through the use of active or passive poses, and with the deployment of up (dominant) and down (submissive) camera angles. Men also dominated photographs depicting individuals in sports leadership roles (i.e., coach, official, team owner).

Level 3: Visuals as connotative systems At this level, persons and objects shown in the visual not only denote a particular individual, thing or place, but also the ideas or concepts attached to them. In this content-driven tier, news visuals are analyzed as signs, and their relationships with other signs within the sign system are assessed (i.e., Schapiro, 1996). According to Peirce (1868), there are three non-mutually exclusive types of signs—iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In this approach, however, visuals are examined more in terms of the third type of sign—as symbols that are able to combine, compress and communicate social meaning. Frames evolve by critically examining the perceived signs for their more complex, often culture-bound interpretations. Consequently, the meaning one gets from a symbol is highly personalized and distinct. According to Peirce (1868), because symbols often have deep roots in the culture that produces and/or sees a particular work, they evoke stronger responses from viewers than iconic or indexical signs.

This level also captures Panofsky's (1970) notion of "secondary or

conventional subject matter." Here, frames are identified by analyzing the presence of symbols in the pictorial field. These symbols, according to van Leeuwen (2001), are of two types: the abstract symbols that are often shapes and objects that have symbolic values (i.e., the cross) and the figurative symbols or represented persons, places, and things with symbolic value (i.e., the Dalai Lama). Such figurative symbols are often given "a conspicuous place in the composition, or made extra conspicuous by lighting, contrast in tone or color, etc." (pp. 107-108) which enhance frame identification. For example, for some viewers, the toppling of Saddam's statue symbolized the end of authoritarian rule and the liberation of the Iraqi people.

The use of visual metaphors as frames also falls under this category. A visual metaphor is often defined as a representation of an abstract concept through a concrete image that bears some analogy to the concept (Lule, 2003). An example is the use of the US flag in news photographs to symbolize patriotism, military might or to heighten people's sense of place. In el Refaie's (2003) analysis of Austrian political cartoons, the concept of immigration as an aggressive assault on the majority population was depicted by shiploads of immigrants and ethnic groups staking flags of their country of origin on Austrian territory. In another study, Neal (2003) reports the extent to which images of disease and sickness dominated the British newspapers' responses to the publication of the Scarman report 25 years on. She posits that the salience of the disease metaphor is a reflection of the extent of social anxieties in the country in 1981.

Level 4: Visuals as ideological representations

Closely related to Barthes' (1977) notion of "iconographical symbolism," this level threshes out ideological meaning. To analyze frames at this level, in Panofsky's (1970) words, is to "ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion" (p. 55). It draws together the symbols and stylistic features of an image into a coherent interpretation which provides the "why" behind the representations being analyzed. According to Pieterse (1992), those in search of frames at this level are looking for answers to questions related to access and ideology: "What interests are being served by these representations? Whose voices are being heard? What ideas dominate?" These questions refer not only to measurable economic and political interests but also to "relations of a subtler nature in cultural, emotional and psychological spheres, and to the various ways in which these relations figure in the phenomenon of subordination" (Pieterse, 1992, p. 10). This level tackles how news images are employed as instruments of power in the shaping of public consciousness and historical

imagination (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2007).

Gilens (1996) used this approach to study how photos in the two leading newsweeklies as well as images in 50 network television news stories depicted poverty. He found that African-Americans made up 62% of the poor people shown in the magazines and 65% in TV news stories. In reality, African-Americans make up 29% of the poor in the US. Gilens concludes that by amplifying blacks as poor, the media thus framed poverty as the seemingly exclusive lot of blacks. In another study, Messaris and Abraham (2001) also examined the depiction of African-Americans and found slight stereotyping in those images, implying an association between race and societal problems. Harris and Lester (2001) arrived at the same conclusion in assessing how a Newsweek cover photograph taken during the riots following the Rodney King verdict in 1992 perpetuated the stereotype of young African-Americans as criminals. This is because, according to them, "it is easier and quicker for a visual journalist to take a picture of an angry African-American during a riot than to take the time to convey in words and pictures the underlying social problems responsible for the civil disturbance" (p. 54). Gilens (1996) suggests that such frames are likely to bring about fewer audience members who will empathize with the poor and disadvantaged than if there were an equal number of whites displayed in the same stories.

Using a combination of textual and visual framing, Entman (1991) contrasted news frames to explain two similar military incidents—the Soviet downing of a Korean Airlines (KAL) passenger plane in 1983 and the gunning down of an Iran Air flight by a US Navy ship in 1988. In both cases, all passengers and crewmembers were killed. The study analyzed two issues of Time and Newsweek magazines after the KAL and Iran Air incidents, along with editions of the CBS Evening News for the same time period. Entman (1991) found that by "de-emphasizing the agency and the victims and by the choice of graphics and adjectives," the news stories about the Soviet downing of a Korean jet was depicted as a "moral outrage" and the US downing of an Iranian plane as a "technical

Moriarty and Show (1995), examining the visual depictions of Operation Desert Storm in three US news magazines (Newsweek, Time, and US News & World Report) concluded that the first Persian Gulf War was framed based on an ideology of war. More than one-third of the images they examined portrayed war technology such as "smart" bombs and new combat planes. The media's fascination with technology, they explained, connected easily to science fiction imagery. Such frames disparaged a very serious conflict and hindered the public's ability to understand the real cost of war.

In a more nuanced analysis of the nature of the US newsmagazines' photo

coverage of the "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and the military invasion of Iraq, Griffin (2004) observes that the published pictures most often "offered prompts for prevailing government versions of events and rarely contributed independent, new or unique visual information. Despite the claims for a 'live' and spontaneous coverage, photographs from Afghanistan and Iraq, like those from the Gulf War in 1991, are characterized by a narrow range of predictable, recurrent motifs. Repetitive images of the mustering and deployment of the American military arsenal overshadow any fuller or more complex range of depiction" (p. 381).

An examination of the photographic news coverage of 9/11 by Griffin and Lee (2002) also in US news magazines found that the pictures buttressed President Bush's views regarding terrorism, effectively "masking" the resulting intervention in Iraq and the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion. In an earlier study (1995), the authors found that only two percent of total images used to depict the Gulf War showed images of wounded or killed American soldiers. The failure of the US media to present military casualties and the suffering of the Iraqi people provides empirical evidence that the media supported the government's stance on the war by helping maintain public support for military actions.

Reynolds and Barnett (2003) arrived at the same assessment of CNN's breaking news coverage of September 11. Combining keywords, sentences, images and sources from the first 12 hours of CNN coverage, the authors identified three thematically reinforcing clusters: war and military response, American unity, and justification. Overall, the plethora of thematic elements and content the network used created a powerful, dominant frame—that a US military-led international war would be the only meaningful solution to prevent more terrorist attacks, consistent with the government stance. In this case, CNN provided an example of how the media were complicit in narrowing, rather than broadening, meaningful discourse about America's response to September 11, a situation in which a crucial political issue is "warped to fit the confines of an elite debate, stripping ordinary citizens of the tools they need to be informed, active participants in a democracy" (McChesney, 1999, p. 11).

The Four Framing Levels Applied

The four levels of visual framing indentified in previous research and outlined above can be used to analyze any news image in any type of medium. We use a randomly selected example provided in Appendix A, a photograph of displaced Sudanese women with their children to illustrate the application of the four-tier system of identifying visual frames. Because the procedure entails the coding of manifest and latent content, the extent to which multiple coders derive equivalent results or the extent to which their interpretations

are in agreement can be determined through standard measures of intercoder reliability (e.g., Scott's pi, Krippendorff's alpha).

When the government-backed militias known as the janjaweed swept into Darfur with so much fury more than two years after violence erupted in that part of Africa, Khaled el Fiqi of the European PressPhoto Agency (EPA) took this picture to dramatize a letter from Khartoum filed by Marc Lacey for the New York Times on May 18, 2005. The article discussed the horrific aftermath of atrocities that have produced wildly divergent death tolls in this continuing trouble spot.

Level 1: The picture shows in great detail two women in the throes of misery, having just been driven out of their homes in Darfur and desperately trying to protect their equally terrified children. Their images fill the field of vision, starkly interrupted by the child in the foreground that seems to be cowering in fear. The picture "humanized" a disaster brought not by a natural calamity but by people's cruelty to each other by showing palpable grief following a generic "emotional" frame. In doing so, it created what Fahmy (2004) calls an "imaginary contact" between the reader and the victims of the disaster (p. 93). The themes of misery and suffering emerge.

Level 2: This medium-shot photograph is marked by its apparent lack of artifice (i.e., no artificial lighting, no elaborate arrangements or set up) that is characteristic of photojournalism's power to provide direct evidence of events. Despite the rather playful colors evident in the women's attire, the viewer's attention is captured by the child's direct although partially covered gaze into the camera. This gaze of supplication adds a narrative dimension to the picture—something is happening outside of the space and the moment of the photograph to which it nevertheless alludes. The camera angle places the viewer above the subjects in obvious distress. The main signs of this distress are the despairing hand-over-face gesture, bodily positions and stance. The hand that holds the woman's face on the left signifies something in the sphere of exhaustion. There is no great sense of physical proximity here; the viewer is not necessarily "face-to-face" with the subjects, but is made to feel as a casual observer of their suffering. The camera's point of view, therefore, is high. They sit; we stand. Overall, the depth of field is sharp, showing textures in clothes and the grittiness of the brown sand in the foreground.

Level 3: Much of the charge of this picture comes from the dress conventions or physical appearance of the subjects. For Western viewers, the "ethnic" dress and swathed faces of women mark them as "other." That the focal points are women suggest the feminization of hunger and poverty not only in Africa but throughout the so-called Third World.

The obscured faces of these women—just two of the many displaced

victims in Darfur—create symbolic anonymity, seemingly preventing audiences from feeling maximum empathy. The mothers are shown as faceless, symbolizing that any African woman can be in their spot. The child is barely clothed and is pictured barefoot, tell-tale signs of the absence of basic supplies for refugees.

Level 4: At this level, the point is to see the ideological weight pictorial conventions carry, especially when they operate as parts of a complex photographic code. This image adds to the archive of pictures that facilitate constructing a Eurocentric view of Africa and its people as economically and technologically weak; victims of yet another armed uprising, military coup de etat or natural disaster. A view of Africa and Africans is constructed which renders their normal self-sufficiency and culture invisible. At the same time, the manner in which famine and displacement are presented ignores the role of capitalism and the history of imperialism in bringing about a situation in which African economies are crippled by long-term debt repayments, inept local governments that are muddled with corruption and give birth to armed militias, the use of fertile soil to grow cash crops for export, and dependency on short-term emergency aid. Indeed, these ideas etch the images of the "Third World" in the viewers' mindset. Whether in text or pictures, they include such schemas as poverty, babies dying, devastating monsoons, disease, drought, refugees, death, dirty water, malnutrition, kids with pot bellies, mud huts, and HIV/AIDS.

Conclusion

The need for conceptual clarity and methodological rigor is noticeable in the area of visual framing, which has tremendous potential but also carries significant challenges for scholars. This article attempted to offer an approach to identifying and analyzing visual frames. Our goal was to extend framing research by creating a typology of visual framing and proposing a four-tiered framework for frame identification and analysis. Such a framework takes into account the tangible elements in images as well as the latent meanings and cultural experiences audiences bring to the analysis. The proposed framework can be applied to the study of both audience frames and media frames, regardless of type of visual and type of medium. The advantages of such an approach for future research lie not only in its ability to compare findings across multiple visual analyses and offer conceptual consistency, but also in the potential to better understand the effects of visual frames on audience frames. Future research should expand on this model by developing specific measures and applying them to different domains of images.

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