Visual Representations of Literacy in the Press

Summary Report to the Leverhulme Trust

February 2001

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I The Grant

This project investigated the ways in which literacy practices are represented in visual images in a range of British newspapers. Pilot work has suggested a mismatch between text-based stories and visual representations of literacy practices in the press: whilst text-based stories present a view of literacy as a neutral, technical, cognitive skill or deficit, the visual representations show it to be embedded in everyday social practice and to carry powerful ritual and symbolic as well as functional meanings.

The project was designed to co-incide with the National Year of Reading (NYR), a national initiative in which the media were mobilised to put across promotional messages about literacy to children and adults.

The project was based at Lancaster University and funded by the Leverhulme Trust with a grant of £28,734 (Ref F/185/AJ). The project ran from March 1st 1999 to 31st March 2000.

II Objectives

The three aims of this research were: a) to contribute to theoretical understandings of literacy as socio-cultural practice and their implications for educational policy discourses about literacy b) to offer a framework and new data about the construction of visual messages in the media. c) to develop computer-based methodologies for dealing with visual data which are of relevance to social research more generally. The following specific questions guided the data collection and analysis:

> What kinds of literacy practices are represented in visual images appearing in the UK press?

> What are the underlying themes and narratives about literacy presented and what do these tell us about the significance of literacy in our society?

> Are there consistent differences between newspapers in the themes presented?

> How are elements of literacy practices used in the construction of the media narratives, and especially, what is the role of the visual images of literacy practices in these processes?

> What are the perspectives of media professionals on these data and how can they be used to extend the analysis of media images?

How do these visual representations relate to textual stories about literacy carried in the media and to policy discourses of literacy?

III Research Activity

The project involved two main kinds of activity: (1) selecting a sample of images in which literacy practices are represented, applying agreed coding categories to each image and entering these into an Atlas-ti project (2) interviewing and shadowing photojournalists and editors of national newspapers. In addition, we collected contextual information about the policy initiatives and media coverage of literacy during the National Year of Reading, both text stories and visual images.

A The Image Corpus

A total of 400 images were selected from four national papers providing a range of contrasting approaches to news photography: the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail, the Sun and the Guardian. We limited the sample to photographic and news related images and included four categories of image:

Literacy events: (122 instances) images containing interactions between people and texts or other literacy artefacts

Literacy in the environment: (168 instances) images where written texts or other literacy artefacts appear in the visual context surrounding human participants but without any physical contact or interaction appearing to take place between them

Writing on the body: (113 instances) the wearing of texts on the skin or clothing

Reproductions of Documents: (57 instances) images of literacy artefacts without people or other surrounding visual context

Images were photocopied from each newspaper together with all the textual material which surrounded them. Image and caption were then scanned into the computer for access within *Atlas-ti*, a type of software that enables us to code and analyse the images on-line. We developed an indexing system for searching the corpus for narrative themes about literacy. Full details are contained in the Technical report of the project.

Three types of data were produced from this activity: a searchable online corpus of images and interview transcripts, indexed and coded; profile reports for each image, that provide a summary of the coding, stored with the photocopies of the image in the context of its page layout; coding charts that provide summaries of the incidence and patterns of coding across particular subsets of images, enabling interrogation of the theory on the basis of both minority and dominant codings.

B Interviews with Media Professionals

A small sample of 12 media professionals were interviewed in order to complement

the researchers' own analysis. The focus of the interviews was on production rationales and processes and awareness of the ways in which literacy elements are used in the creation of the visual messages. A sample of media items were presented and discussed during the interviews.

Negotiating access to a planned sample of media professionals was much more difficult than we had anticipated and extremely time-consuming. The increasingly widespread use of freelance photojournalists by national newspapers and the prevalence of syndicated photographs meant that it was impossible to track down the professionals responsible for a specific image. However, the persistence and flexibility of the research associate produced excellent data from the interviews, showing the high value of this research approach despite the difficulties.

IV Conclusions and achievements

A major achievement of the project has been to develop a three-part model for analysing visual representations of literacy in the media.

The first part of this framework generates **literacy content** codes (covering participants, artefacts, settings and domains) which enable us to identify "cumulative cultural narratives" about literacy.

The second part of the framework codes the **mediational processes**. This analysis covers both the interpretative and technical aspects of the construction of the newspaper photographs. This involves both compositional elements within a given image but also the ways that the visual representations are contextualised within news items and on the newspaper page.

The third part of the framework deals with **news production values and practices**. These codes are grounded in literature on photojournalism and photographic and media theory more generally as well as incorporating themes that emerged from the interviews with media professionals.

A. Understanding the Production of Images in the News

i) Themes Emerging from the interviews

Photojournalism was described as an uncertain art that operates within a number of challenging constraints. These include: timing; available light; technologies of the production process; access to the subjects and events that are central to the story; finding visually striking ways of presenting routine or text-based events such as meetings; lack of communication between the different professionals involved in the production chain; commercialism and design-led publishing; overcoming the limitations of the still photograph as a "frozen moment" which cannot easily convey the sequence of a set of events or narrative; coping with visual distractions from the main storyline - avoiding or removing unwanted detail. A good news picture is one that can tell the story as defined in the journalistic brief. This is not the same as an aesthetically satisfying picture, nor is it one that necessarily presents the photographer's own view of what is happening. However, good photojournalism aims to incorporate all three of these features.

ii) How Literacy gets incorporated into images

Interviewees explained how decisions are made in producing news photographs. This enabled us to match our four categories of literacy images to the deliberate ways in which literacy practices are used.

Literacy related "props" are routinely used to establish location and identity and help to tell the story visually. Some are found at the scene, others are carried to the scene by the photographer or brought by participants for the photo-opportunity. Signs in the environment, props like letters or "giant cheques", lettering on T-shirts, are deliberately used (or sometimes avoided) depending on whether they contribute to the narrative quality of the photograph.

Literacy events or artefacts in the form of reproductions of documents are commonly used as a way of visually telling the story, as they are often the material representations of a narrative that can most easily be captured by still photos. These interactions or artefacts are offered as evidence claims, as proof that events took place. However, this is done without any intention to make a point about literacy itself – it is a means to a different end.

Writing on the body was rarely explicitly used in the composition of the picture. Instances appear frequently in the domain of sports photography, which focuses particularly on the body in action. This domain is intensively colonised by corporate sponsors to display their logos and raises two important issues for literacy studies: the role of literacy in the commodification of culture and the ways in which literacy can be used by the subjects of news pictures (and their sponsors) to control the messages put across in them.

iii) Image, Text and Technologies - changing relationships

This theme emerged as an important one in the interviews. The issue of the physical separation of image and text in the production of news has a long history. The introduction of new digital technologies is shifting the relationship between image and text and also changing the division of labour within the production process of the newspaper. Pictures - already enhanced and captioned – can now be transmitted over long distances. There is a growing gap between the production and technical manipulation of the image (the work of the photographer), and the editing and interpretative framing of the image within the news item and layout of the newspaper (the work of the sub-editors and editor). The fractured nature of the production process is at odds with the appearance of the finished newspaper page which, paradoxically, is ever more seamlessly presented. More flexible framing of items on the page and overlay of graphics and text, offer the illusion of a very tightly constructed message, disguising the multiple authorship that lies behind its production.

B Identifying Cultural Narratives of Literacy in the Press

One of the main objectives of the study was to identify the cultural narratives about literacy that circulate in the public domain and to identify variations between

newspapers. Some of the most notable findings are:

1. An increasing coverage in the broadsheet press of electronic literacies (based on computer, visual, screen-based technologies) within a narrative that polarises the threats and advantages of these in relation to print literacies. This theme was not present in the tabloid press in our corpus.

2. Across all newspapers, and within the policy discourse, literacy is identified with literary culture, especially books.

3. Literacy (defined as above) is a symbolic attribute of personal and professional status which is often represented (especially in the tabloid press) as in opposition to sexuality, sport and celebrity glamour and humour. It plays a significant role in public ritual.

4. Print Literacy is also a central symbolic attribute of education, through representations of the activities of teachers and learners. Computer-based literacy is beginning to take on a similar symbolic importance within education, but is not yet securely embedded.

5. Current policy initiatives associate print literacies (books) with positive emotions. However, in representations of everyday practices, literacy is also clearly associated with negative emotions such as threat, anxiety and lack of control: literacy is a source of authority and can be used in opposition to authority; it is a powerful source of bureaucratic evidence and can be a device for synchronising group behaviour

The Sun and The Times contained regular coverage of the National year of Reading due to the News International *Free books for schools campaign.* A special analysis was carried out of the text and images in this campaign in the two papers. While both papers emphasised the positive features of literacy, The Sun campaign tried to counter the exclusive and literary image of literacy by associating it with popular entertainment and sporting celebrities whilst the Times coverage unintentionally re-enforced the elitist and authoritarian associations of literacy.

C Methodology: Evaluating the Atlas-ti Software

Our full evaluation of the Atlas-ti capability is contained in the Technical Report of the project. Briefly, the software was adequate to our needs for storage of the images, retrieval and output of codes, although the procedures were sometimes clumsy and time consuming. Several editing stages were required to achieve output formats that were clear and easy to use. We were effectively pioneering the use of Atlas-ti for a mainly image-based on-line project and therefore little guidance was available from other users or from the developer. The open-ended flexibility of Atlas-ti is double-edged: whilst it allows for creative theory-building it makes no demands for structure. Consequently, unstructured code lists can quickly proliferate. Concept-mapping software (such as INSPIRATION) is therefore a good complement to Atlas-ti.

V Publications and Dissemination

A full Project Report and Technical Appendix have already been submitted to the Trust. Several papers are planned for academic journals in the areas of educational policy, media and cultural studies. A methodology piece will evaluate the capabilities of Atlas-ti and the experimental strategies we developed in relation to on-line images.

A paper dealing with the media coverage of the National Year of Reading was presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual conference Sept 7-9th in Cardiff. It focussed on the detail of the "Free Books for Schools Campaign" coverage from the TIMES and The SUN, looking at how the two different papers promote the issue of reading within the policy context of the National Literacy Strategy

A presentation "Image, Text and Technologies in Newspaper Production at the Millennium" was made to academics and practising media professionals at the 1st Annual Conference of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) Sheffield University Jan 7-9th 2000 and will be published in the proceedings of the conference.

A website for the project has been created at
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/edres/net/vislit.html

This will be maintained and integrated into other active web-pages hosted by Lancaster University and new groups such as participants in the current series of ESRC Seminars on Visual Evidence. An account of the project has been posted onto the National Literacy Trust web database and will be updated as new publications are produced from our findings.

VI Future Research Plans in the field

This project is intended to be the first of a series of studies analysing public and policy discourses of literacy. It touches on a cluster of related issues - for example debates about the tabloidisation of the media and the nature of news; the nature and definition of visual literacies; social policy analysis in the area of education. The corpus set up in this project will be used and supplemented to follow up key themes that have arisen but which were not central to its outcomes.

Analysis dealing with the image in its wider context is an important task for future work. We will explore the relationship between image and text more systematically than was possible within the scope of the present project.

Finally we will make use of the archive of material collected during this project to analyse the text coverage of the National Year of Reading and literacy policy more generally.