Chapter 10
Narratives and Optics: Communication Dynamics Political Leaders Face Today

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Abstract In this chapter, we focus on the emerging language used by the contemporary media in their considerations of political leadership and what that language says about the situations leaders face today as they seek to transmit their messages to the public or to specific constituencies. Analysis of media coverage of leadership indicates that these leaders communicate through a combination of "narratives" and "optics" and that a tension exists between the two—to communicate messages/visions through "narratives" that use the words/stories to which we are bound or through images/videos that seek to move beyond words/stories. We conclude that leaders are moving increasingly toward the immediacy of "optics" to communicate messages but must inevitably resort to the more protracted messaging of language-bound "narratives." Some thoughts are also offered about communication—by leaders but also in general—for the coming decades.

10.1 Introduction

In recent years, media coverage of leadership and political leadership in particular has focused on what leaders *say*, on the one hand, vis-à-vis what those leaders and/or their supporters *project visually*, on the other hand. Put in terms of the language that has emerged in the media and seeped into our culture, the focus is on leaders' *narratives,* their verbal statements or messages, vis-à-vis their *optics*, their images or visual performances. The two prongs of the focus may work in synergy with each other or, in some cases, may provide opposing perspectives. In addition, both may be intentional—consciously devised as strategic communication; shaped by possible biases of the specific media outlets (e.g., liberal or conservative newspapers,

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television, or popular social media); or simply perceived and interpreted by constituents or the public at large in a particular way.

One could argue, of course, that *optics* are elements of a broad, overall *narrative* and that a silent movie or a "photoplay" can provide a *narrative*. Likewise, it may be argued that a *narrative* is elicited by or evoked by *optics*. To be sure, the two communication types may overlap and provide mutually supportive messaging. Such was the case with the silent movies that were accompanied by subtitles more than a century ago (1891–1931), and such is the case when political leaders today deliver verbal messages and also cultivate a visual context for those messages. Nevertheless, in this chapter we argue that the two can generally be considered conceptually distinct and that they offer, because they are distinct and in tension with each other, a unique means of approaching communication in contemporary political leadership—as verbally expressed/interpreted messaging or as visually projected/interpreted messaging.

In addition, we propose that these two communication modes have become important means of understanding leadership in a broad sense today, regardless of the sector (i.e., for-profit or non-profit), the movement (i.e., social), or the leadership contexts in the United States or abroad. Furthermore, as society moves increasingly toward a more visual mode of communication (*optics*) and away from centuries of reliance on a verbal mode of communication (*narratives*), the predominance of *optics* ("a picture is worth a thousand words" carried to new levels by contemporary imaging) is becoming increasingly apparent. The social fabric today seems to yearn for the immediacy and materiality of images rather than the time-bound and immaterial nature of words, almost as though people in general, and leaders in particular, want to collapse time, leap beyond the problems of interpretation that have often characterized communication from the days of scriptural hermeneutics forward, and arrive at a visually immediate, sensorially graspable means of communicating. In brief, in the tension between the two forms of communication, *narratives* and *optics*, *optics* seems to be winning the battle about how leaders communicate and about how people desire to receive leaders' messages. Seeing is believing and, perhaps unfortunately, listening and/or reading are becoming far less effective in eliciting belief in the 21st century.

10.1.1 Research Approach

During the two-year period, January 2017–March 2019, we watched television news coverage presented by a major national/international network (i.e., MSNBC) carefully for approximately four hours per day on most days. This time period corresponds roughly with the first two years of Donald Trump's US presidency, a period during which presidential leadership in particular was certainly a principal focus of MSNBC and other cable networks (e.g., CNN, Fox News) as well as the print media, though other foci included US Congressional leadership (e.g., various hearings), US Supreme Court leadership (e.g., the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the confirmation of Supreme Court nominee Bret Kavanaugh), and the inter-

actions of US leaders with European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2005–), French President Emmanuel Macron (2017–), and British Prime Minister Theresa May (2016–); Asian leaders, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2006–2007, 2012–) and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un (2011–); and Russian President Vladimir Putin (2002–2008, 2012–).

We did not establish any predetermined themes to guide our viewing of the network coverage. We watched that coverage without any initial research intent in mind. Nevertheless, several themes pertinent to our lifelong interest in leadership emerged over time and particularly piqued our interest. Three such themes included:

- A new way of approaching the attribution theory of leadership with US President Trump as leader attributing leadership to himself and seeking credit for policies and/or actions he may or may not have caused (in contrast to Meindl and Ehrlich's 1987 original formulation of the attribution theory of leadership whereby followers attribute leadership to individuals).
- The purposeful, intentional, and relentless obfuscation of truth, facts, and empirical evidence by leaders to further advance their personal aims and desires and/or political agendas.
- Leaders' Image Management (IM) in a media age of sound bites and tweets.

Each theme seemed worthy of our attention and research in its own right. However, we decided to focus on what became increasingly apparent and intriguing to us and what seemed to embody significant communication questions: (1) To what degree do political leaders, as depicted by a cable news network (e.g., CNN, Fox, or MSNBC), communicate through intended or unintended "narratives," through intended or unintended "optics," or both communication forms?; and (2) What role do the news media play in displaying or interpreting the "narratives" and the "optics," and are those media reporting objectively, through a politically biased lens, or, perhaps more alarmingly, from the point of view of a leader who is using or manipulating them? Those two questions guided much of our television viewing approach.

The issue of "narratives" vis-à-vis "optics" became increasingly interesting and compelling to us during this two-year period. Nevertheless, we chose to forego any systematic collection of data—that is, documenting each mention of "narratives" or "optics" and their contexts. Our purpose took shape as an unfolding consideration of what the two terms—both used extensively by the media—mean, what they suggest about the ways in which leaders choose to communicate today, how the media are attracted to and perhaps even complicit with what leaders "intend" to say, and what the developing dynamic between "narratives" and "optics" may suggest about the way human communication in general may be evolving in today's political environment. In brief, we purposefully did not adopt any formal qualitative research protocols. Rather, our interest lay in exploring some of the possible implications of verbal ("narratives") communication versus visual ("optics") communication, and how political leaders may consciously choose either or both of these communication forms or be interpreted through them via the television news media.

In essence, this exploratory research, then, sought to probe the way(s) many people experience communication by political leaders or by those political media

analysts and pundits who interpret the way(s) political leaders communicate in a special way. At the same time, our research sought to consider where human communication may be headed, with a specific focus on political leadership. When Guttenberg (1400–1468) invented the printing press some 600 years ago in the 15th century, he inaugurated the era of "narratives." Is it highly possible that today we are headed for a major revolution in communication—Communication 2.0, 3.0, or even 4.0—a significant revolution that transports us way beyond text and the Guttenberg "narratives"?

10.1.2 Narrative

By definition a "narrative" is "a spoken or written account of connected events: a story … a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values" (Merriam-Webster.com). Thus, a narrative has a close association with fiction or story-telling, and it is often value-laden or heavy with the advancement of an agenda or perspective. It does not claim to lay out empirical truth or to represent "reality." Indeed, some current literary scholars, for whom the notion of narrative has long been familiar, might argue that all communication in language is a narrative that offers only an interpretation (or a mis-interpretation) of reality, which in itself is a concept that has no ground or legitimacy (see Derrida 2016).

Traditional notions of narrative, which stem from literature and literary analysis, include elements such as plot, character, setting, and point of view. Literary genres (e.g., the novel, short story, fantasy, drama, autobiography, biography, and narrative poetry) are often noted as belonging to this tradition. More recently, narrative has come to include journalistic accounts, blogs, and sometimes even texts or tweets or a series of texts or tweets. At times, too, narrative today is associated with images, films, television shows, and videos, though for the purposes of this chapter, we are leaving such visual media to what we will develop as optics—visual presentations of an event or a series of events that include a leader or leaders—as opposed to narrative, defined as a "spoken or written account." To be sure, optics and narratives may have some common ground and are even sometimes used interchangeably today by semioticians who focus on meaning making through "signs" and on *both* verbal and non-verbal signs as communicating meaning (Barthes 2013). We believe it is useful, however, to keep them conceptually distinct—that is, to consider *optics as what is seen* and *narratives as what is spoken or written with language.* Given that differentiation, it is worth noting that cultural context may be crucial to any consideration of narratives. Some cultures rely heavily on oral narratives, other on written narratives, and, in some cases, on oral narratives that have become written narratives over time (see Homer, *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* 8th BC/2011).

In the past several decades, there has been a serious discussion about the importance to human life of narrative or storytelling. "Evidence strongly suggests," Flanagan (1992) argues, "that humans in all cultures come to cast their own identity in

some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers" (p. 198). Within the broad areas of "philosophy of mind" or psychological approaches to narrative, a person's entire identity is frequently conceived as a narrative. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) have even suggested that humans make use of "conceptual metaphors" to simplify data and present compelling narratives for broad, meaningful phenomena (e.g., Trump's "wall" or "swamp" as metaphors that convey his narrative succinctly and powerfully).

Through its association with fiction and stories, narrative, as used today, assumes that what is expressed is not true—not necessarily false, but certainly far from empirically verifiable and usually promoting an idiosyncratic point of view. "Any creation of a narrative," Pasupathi says, "is a bit of a lie" (quoted by Beck 2015). Clark (2012) even suggests that narrative has evolved "from the world of literature to that of politics," and he associates it with the kind of "misinformation" that political parties and their leaders use to advance their own interests: "The long journey of narrative [from literature to politics] … arrived so conspicuously in the barrio of spin doctors, speech writers, and other political handlers."

More recently, scholars and writers have specifically associated narrative with what leaders—and political leaders in particular—do to present their positions. Mayer (2014), for example, argues that leaders use stories to bring people together, create common understanding, and promote collective action. Similarly, Tolchard (2017) claims that "narratives or larger stories about the way the world is, are essential to political candidates," while Ewing (2016) sums up the infectious use of narrative by the media to describe what political leaders and their followers/voters do today:

> Study the current [2016] election for a week or two and you'll notice one word turn up again and again in the commentary: *narrative*. Politicians control the narrative, they reinforce the narrative, they seize the narrative, they reshape the narrative, they build the narrative, and that's before the voters get their say, at which point they might defy the narrative, overturn the narrative, confirm the narrative, or perhaps just get heartily sick of the narrative and stay home ….'The narrative' really does matter. Candidates need to find a story about themselves and the country that feels credible, that they have permission to tell, and that voters want to come true. The one who can do that, and who uses the media effectively to put that story across, will win ….Using narrative well is not persuading people of the story you want to tell. It's about finding the story they already believe – or are close to believing ….

The narrative, then, can be something the leader creates, something the media offer as an interpretation of what the leader says or writes, something followers (or perhaps opponents) interpret in their own way and that may or not reflect their personal narratives, or all these simultaneously.

The narrative, it seems then, resides within the mindsets as well as in the language that reflects the mindsets of the leader, the media, and the followers, and it may or may not be consistent across those three. Since language is always interpreted, what the leader intends as a narrative may or may not reflect how the media perceive and interpret the narrative and then present it to the followers or the general population, who may or may not resonate with the narrative as it is expressed to them by the leader and/or the media. In short, what we have is storytelling that involves the original storyteller (the leader) and layered interpretation of the story by the media

and the followers/population. It is even quite possible, of course, that the media may create the narrative by presenting its interpretation more forcefully or more repeatedly than the leader's original story, assuming a story, composed as it is of language and tropes, can ever have a distinctive origin; likewise, it is possible that the followers/population may create the narrative by disseminating it, in one or more interpretations, via social media.

Thus, narrative can get bogged down in layers of interpretation, misinterpretation, and consequent misunderstanding. Because it is comprised of language and because language is expressed as a time-bound medium, narrative can be messy and confusing. Moreover, everyone knows that it is a *story*—a "lie," a fabricated account—from the start, after which it may become many different stories or as many stories as there are listeners or readers (Fish 1982). Yet, narratives can be powerful and highly influential when used effectively and repeated again and again, almost like a refrain in a poem or song. Stockley (2011) notes some political narratives that took hold and had a huge impact upon entire nations and the world: "Ronald Reagan versus the evil empire. Margaret Thatcher versus the Argentinian generals and, later, the miners. Tony Blair versus Gordon Brown …. The West versus Al Queda." Or in today's political environment, Trump versus the "fake news"; Trump versus the "investigators"; or the use of the words "wall" and "swamp" as powerful Trumpian metaphors that call up entire narratives. An interesting side note: the *Journal of Narrative Politics* was launched nearly five years ago in 2014 to explore narrative "as a mode of knowing."

Stockley (2011) suggests that there are four features that characterize political narratives:

> First, the story and the events must affect people and their world views. They must evoke an emotional reaction …. Second, political storytellers should explain the world to their listeners and enable them to understand their place within it …. Third, a true political storyteller will give people hope – or at least, reassurance about themselves and their future …. Fourth, politicians need to remember who owns the narrative.

Those four characteristics sound much like what leaders should do to create an effective vision (see Bennis and Nanus 1985). They represent perhaps the most positive view on narrative, whereas, in fact, much narrative in political life today generally means a story that is a fabrication and an attempt to persuade people to accept a biased point of view. In that sense (and contra-Stockley), a narrative seeks to bring people to an understanding of their place in the world, and that world tends to coincide with the world of the leader expressing the narrative. Such a narrative may give people hope, but it is all too likely to provide a false sense of hope (e.g., in a wall as a means of solving the complexities of the US immigration problem, or in tax breaks for the middle class when these tax breaks may actually benefit the most affluent people).

In general, narrative, as used in the realm of political leadership, has become synonymous with "story", "fiction", "falsehood", "fabrication," a self-aggrandizing account that may have little relationship to "empirical truth," "facts," or "reality." Nevertheless, "narrative" is a term as well as a concept used today as much as any

other word to describe what political leaders say, as if those leaders are weaving rhetorical worlds of their own with the intent of persuading followers/population to accept the rhetoric literally and as more truthful, more factual, and more real than anything the opposition may be saying.

People, it seems, are often eager to believe and to find some meaning in what political leaders say, something that resonates with their values or with their sense that current policies and practices are unfair, corrupt, undemocratic, or inegalitarian. As Ellerton (2016) puts it:

> What we value most in politicians is not that they tell the truth, but that they agree with us, or at least that the worldview they espouse resonates with our own …. We care much more that our narratives provide us with meaning than that they are true …. The problem is that often the truth does not speak for itself – it has to be interpreted through a narrative. This means facts alone are not enough.

Such a conclusion has profound implications for the way political leaders communicate today. It suggests that those leaders should *follow* the people and express what the people may want to hear or read, rather than what may be "true" or "right" or perhaps in the best interest of the people or society. Moral or ethical considerations may take a back seat to the interests of the leader, the political party, or the donors who are funding the leader or the party. For example, President Trump has even asserted that his narrative may be more truthful than what his opposition presents through evidentiary investigation and facts: "Don't believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news … What you're seeing [optics] and what you're reading [narrative] is not what's happening" (broadcast on most major cable networks, July 24, 2018). This leadership communication approach seeks to construct a reality that is dramatically at odds with what other people may see, hear, read, or believe, suggesting that politics is up for grabs today, may be unaccountable to empirical data, and may question empirical reality over socially-constructed reality. At times, science, evidence, data, and facts may become secondary to the story that the leader creates.

10.1.3 The Use of "Narrative"

The use of "narrative" by the media underscores its meaning as a fabricated, though often powerful and compelling story (Selected examples below are listed in chronological order from January 2019 to February 2019, with parenthetical comments).

- "He (Trump) was telling a narrative that he could stomach" (Tim O'Brien, on MSNBC, January 26, 2019) [Narrative is a palatable account that may reluctantly acquiesce to opposing people or groups]
- "[It is] a false narrative" (President Trump, tweet of January 31, 2019, on the news media) [Note the redundancy here, as if a narrative, which is itself a story or fabrication, is doubly false. This may lend legitimacy to the idea of narrative as a contrast to "false narrative"]

- "He (Roger Stone) seems to be able to get his narrative out there" (Shelby Holliday, on MSNBC, February 2, 2019) [Narrative is a personal interpretation or story]
- "If they [facts] are not convenient to his political narrative, he simply ignores them" (Ben Rhodes, on MSNBC, February 5, 2019) [Narrative may be inconsistent with facts and may intentionally ignore facts]
- "… Mueller builds a narrative" (Phil Rucker, on MSNBC, February 5, 2019) [Narrative is a constructed or interpreted account of evidence]
- "A narrative that advances whatever one wants" (Mya Wiley, on MSNBC, February 8, 2019) [Narrative can be a personal, self-aggrandizing expression]
- "[He] could be painting a narrative" (Berit Berger, on MSNBC, February 15, 2019) [Narrative here becomes an expressive art form, painting]
- "[It is] a narrative that this administration has tapped into" (Michael Steele, MSNBC, February 15, 2019) [Narrative may exist within the minds of the followers/population and be used by political leaders]
- "[He] has created a narrative about bad people coming over the border" (Ali Velshi, on MSNBC, February 17, 2019) [Narrative is one interpretation of events or situations]
- "I'm not interested in one narrative against another. I'm interested in the truth" (Tulsi Gabbard, on MSNBC, February 20, 2019) [Narrative is something different from truth]
- "… a narrative… a version of facts that didn't exist" (Andrew McCabe, on MSNBC, February 20, 2019) [Narrative is interpretation of facts, not an expression of facts themselves]
- "That narrative is easy to fall into" (Zerlina Maxwell, MSNBC, February 24, 2019) [Narrative is set out as an effort to manipulate, a trap]
- "It's a way to control the media narrative" (MSNBC, February 24, 2019) [Both leaders and the media may advance narratives, supporting or opposing each other]
- "I touted the Trump narrative for over a decade" (Michael Cohen, Congressional hearing, February 27, 2019) [Narrative is one specific story among possible stories].

At times, leaders who construct a narrative may seek to "change the narrative" because of challenges, shifting circumstances, or "pushback" from a significant opposition group. In that case, the narrative may be amended, altered substantially, or perhaps even denied. Once the followers/population have found a leader's narrative meaningful and consistent with their personal narratives, they may give the leader a degree of flexibility that allows the leader to shift the narrative, with that new narrative becoming legitimate in its own right. Sometimes the narrative shift is referred to as "moving the goalposts," a unique football-related metaphor that some people may accept as a change, while others may oppose it, depending on their "team" affiliation.

Changing the narrative may occur at will for political purposes, as if a given narrative becomes too constraining or too restrictive for effective messaging. Though some people may try to hold the leader accountable to an embedded narrative and ask for consistency, a charismatic leader may be able to change the narrative to suit personal or political purposes. This is equivalent to a novel, similar to Cortázar's

Hopscotch (1987), where the narrative can be read in different ways and different orders, or to Beckett's *Unnamable* (2009), which continuously begins again and revises itself.

10.1.4 Language Related to Narrative

Though "narrative" may be a dominant way of discussing what political leaders (and the media) use to express meaningful messages, there are related expressions that could be described as part of the same messaging system. Some legal language, for example, has insinuated itself into political discourse and become part of this system. Messages are often "litigated," "re-litigated," or "adjudicated." "Messaging" itself is sometimes used synonymously with "narrative" and, like "narrative," is conceived as in opposition to facts and "truth": "I'll give you the facts and then the messaging" (Garret Haake, MSNBC, January 16, 2019).

At times, narrative is reduced to its basic components: "words." As Trump has argued in terms of the "chyrons"—the narrative of words that scroll across the bottom of TV monitors, perhaps in support of or in opposition to the "optics" we see on the screen—words, in fact, do matter: "It's those words, those sometimes beautiful, sometimes nasty words that matter" (Russo 2019). Furthermore, chyrons (narratives), in conjunction with the visual images above them (optics), are together a concise representation of what we propose in this chapter—both the narrative and the optics are important today in conveying a message. A chyron demonstrates that the two may be present simultaneously, though chyrons may or may not relate to the visual images we see in the news, and chyrons may be a message from a leader or from the network itself. Nevertheless, chyrons may serve as evidence to support the ultimate conclusion to be drawn from this chapter: While the narrative may matter, the optics (the immediacy of visual images) seems to capture most of our attention and to diminish the narrative.

10.1.5 Optics

In contrast to narrative, grounded in language and the amount of time it takes to hear or read language, optics may provide a far more immediate, visceral, and engaging means of communicating today, especially for political leaders who are often highly sensitive to image management. We live in an age in which text seems to be dwindling in length and impact, giving way to shorter and shorter forms and even to abbreviated formats. Long speeches and documents are rapidly being replaced by far shorter "texts," tweets, and even emoticons that convey messages in succinct visual fashion. Even email messaging, still highly prevalent in 2019, is losing significant ground to Twitter (with limitations on the number of characters per message), Facebook (with wide use of images and videos), Instagram (with photos and videos), and

other social media that reflect a culture which values immediacy, visual as opposed to verbal messaging, and time-saving devices that obviate centuries of reliance on books and book repositories (libraries).

"Optics," both the word and the visual messaging it represents, is used increasingly by the media, by commentators, and by political leaders themselves. Optics can be a kind of messaging that political leaders, well aware of the power and immediacy of visual stimuli, use intentionally to influence followers/general public, or it can be a form of unintentional messaging constructed through images media have captured and/or edited and then present to the public. Furthermore, optics can be perceived as positive or negative, supportive of a leader and the message or undermining that message. It may be contrived by the leader and followers or captured spontaneously by the media. Further, it may include a wide variety of circumstances (e.g., public appearances, informal gatherings, interviews, meetings, hearings, or a round of golf), a variety of venues (e.g., NATO headquarters, the White House, a stadium, or a golf course), and a variety of people (e.g., members of the media, supportive followers, hecklers, or family members).

The word "optics" evolved over centuries with the development of lenses and various theories of light and vision. It derives from the Greek term for "appearance, look." In the 20th century it became part of scientific discourse: "wave optics" and "quantum optics." Zimmer (2010) suggests that the use of the term in politics first emerged in Canada, where the French *optique* can mean "perspective or point of view" as well as the science of optics; thus, it assumed a decidedly political connotation. He argues that it gives "a scientific-sounding gloss to P.R. and image making." The Oxford English Dictionary (OED.com) offers the following definition for this contemporary use of the word: "the way in which a situation, event, or course of action is perceived by the public. Freq. in political contexts." Burkeman (2012) disparages the term and asserts, as we have for the word "narrative," that it stands in stark contrast to "reality," at least as used in the United States: "Optics is not just ghastly jargon coined by D.C. insiders. It also unwittingly describes politics' disconnect from people's reality. … [It] is about impressions, appearance, the way someone might interpret what is seen. In that, *optics* isn't necessarily about facts."

To be sure, "optics," like "narrative," has taken on negative connotations in the area of political leadership, most specifically as "bad optics." It is in this sense that Western media have described the seemingly friendly visual encounters between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin or between Trump and Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. Despite its negative connotations at times, "optics" remains a powerfully embedded term in current media discourse on political leadership. It is used to describe situations political leaders may intentionally create and cultivate (e.g., Trump at rallies) or situations in which leaders are, quite ironically, thrust into circumstances that provide a contrast to what they may desire (e.g., Trump with Democratic House Speaker Pelosi (D-Calif.) looming behind him at the 2019 "State of the Union Address"). Needless to say, the media may shape the optics for leaders by framing them in either supportive or undermining ways.

10.1.6 The Use of "Optics"

We have selected five recent examples (again in chronological order) of the use of "optics" to demonstrate how visual depictions of leaders can be positive or negative, or cultivated or haphazard:

- "It's the optics as opposed to the real injuries to people" (Heidi Heitkamp, on MSNBC, January 23, 2019) [What one sees in the media is set in contrast to reality and facts]
- "The optics are going to be cuckoo for Tuesday night's State of the Union Address" ("Nation Prepares for State of the Union Tweetstorm," *The Boston Globe*, February 5, 2019) [Optics may precipitate a narrative of tweets, again with the visual presentation of Pelosi looking over Trump's shoulder leading to a tweeting narrative by Trump as an attempt to counter the optics]
- "The optics were terrific" (Rick Tyler, on MSNBC, February 9, 2019) [Reference to Elizabeth Warren's announcement of her candidacy for president of the United States in Lawrence, MA, the site of one of the most important strikes in American history, with flags waving and diverse supporters behind her]
- "He understood how the optics are supposed to work for his benefit" (on MSNBC, February 24, 2019) [On Trump's conscious use of optics to support his political agenda]
- "How bad are the optics for the President?" (Alex Witt, on MSNBC, February 24, 2019) [On Trump and his association with dictatorial "leaders"].

In early 2019, optics was perhaps most powerfully in evidence when US Governor Ralph Northam (D-VA) was discovered to have a photo on his medical school yearbook page showing one person in "blackface" and another wearing a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) outfit. That alarming visual was the subject of media attention for many days and created considerable controversy in Virginia politics and throughout the United States. Similarly, a photo of Trump with porn star Stormy Daniels has added fuel to the many controversies about his leadership. On the more positive side, media coverage of US Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) announcing her candidacy for president of the United States in a severe Minnesota snowstorm suggested to many people that she who hails from America's "heartland" is indeed a leader who can face and overcome many challenges.

10.1.7 Language Related to Optics

Since optics involves visual expression that tends to be immediate and may be broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide, it provides a highly powerful intended or unintended message. At its most powerful level, it can explode in "viral moments" that are disseminated across multiple networks and social media and may radically alter the standing of a current or aspiring political leader in a very short time. Such

was the case, for example, of Trump telling an interviewer in a short video that he could "grab 'em [women] by the p****. You can do anything." Surprisingly, Trump survived that video by distracting attention from it with the debacle of former US presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton's emails, an example where narrative deflected optics.

But humans tend to rely on vision and visual stimuli. As Wilson (2012) has argued,

> … early prehuman primates … came to depend more and more on vision and less on smell than did most other mammals. They acquired large eyes with color vision, which were placed forward on the head to give binocular vision and a better sense of depth. (pp. 23–24)

Many expressions used by the media and commentators today when discussing political leadership demonstrate this tendency to emphasize the visual:

- *Look*: Many media commentators as well as leaders initiate their remarks or narratives with "look," a nearly unconscious expression which suggests that interlocutors are called upon to pay attention to the narrative that follows rather than simply hear it. Commentators or leaders use "listen" infrequently.
- *Paint*: Narratives are sometimes described as "painted," with the leader "painting" a visual picture through the messaging and thus creating a subtle shift from narrative into optics. One commentator put it this way recently:
  "We're seeing a narrative being painted …" (on MSNBC, January 26, 2019), with the emphasis on the visual seeming to subsume the verbal.

Such expressions convey an immediacy that is underscored by other expressions which seek to shorten time or even eliminate time altogether, as if time—the narrative mode—can be transformed into unadorned and instant messaging—optics. The following eight expressions can be useful in gaining a better understanding:

- *at the end of the day*: This expression provides a quick picture that sums up the entire day or an entire period of time.
- *plain and simple*" or "*pure and simple*": This expression demonstrates a desire to elude narrative elaboration or the need for rhetorical flourishes.
- *weaponizing*: This expression offers a message that has the power, immediacy, and explosiveness of a bullet or a bomb.
- *in real time*: This expression indicates delivery that is immediate or concurrent with an event.
- *the fact of the matter*: This expression doubles an attempt to provide the real, empirical, materialistic, immediate perspective that seeks to move beyond an extended, non-factual narrative.
- *period!*: This expression urges us to understand that a narrative can be summed up and decided ultimately by the immediacy of a conclusive, final punctuation mark. It reflects the same teleological perspective as "at the end of the day."
- *the crux of the issue*: This expression suggests that complex discussions (narratives) can be reduced to a central, summary point.
- *calculus*: This expression suggests that a narrative expression can be reduced to a more immediate, mathematical expression.

It is imperative that leaders and the media convey messages quickly and succinctly today, moving in some ways beyond a language—narrative—that may be inadequate to what they want to convey. Though they may need to rely on language as we all do at this point in human evolution, they may seek to use messaging that transcends time-bound words and provides images—optics—which express entire narratives. Even if they must resort to a narrative, they can make use of expressions noted above—expressions that make use of words but attempt to bypass words.

The emphasis on immediacy in optics is echoed in society at large today with phone receptionists, who are famous for using expressions such as "Give me a quick second to check" or "Can I put you on a brief hold?" These expressions underlie the ever-increasing desire to communicate rapidly and without too many of the constraints of language, a desire that may be especially pronounced among political leaders and the media that cover political leaders.

10.1.8 Twenty Thoughts for Consideration

- Narratives and optics are often seen as fabricated and divorced from facts, reality, and "truth," though many followers may accept their messages without question.
- Narratives and optics are forms of communication subject to multiple interpretation (i.e., points of view, conflict, and disagreement) by various stakeholders: the media and commentators as well as followers and the general population.
- Narratives and optics may convey leaders' carefully constructed, purposeful messages, but they may also convey unintended, ironic, or ambiguous messages.
- Narratives and optics involve two-way communication that includes the leaders, on the one hand, and followers and the general population, on the other hand. Both groups are dynamic and interactive, with leaders influencing the followers/population and the followers/population influencing the leaders.
- Narratives, as expressed by leaders, often reflect what lies within the followers/population. As such, leadership may flow from the followers/population as much as it does the other way around. Polling is crucial in this regard.
- Narratives aspire to transcend words and become non-verbal optics in many ways.
- Narratives may involve layered interpretation that includes the leader, the media, and the followers/population, as well as multiple news outlets and multiple social media platforms.
- Narratives are far more important for the meaning they express than for whatever "truth" they may convey or claim to convey. Likewise, the way leaders construct "reality" in their messages may be far more important than any empirical "reality."
- Narratives can be shifted or changed over time, and optics can be adjusted to promote revised messaging.
- Optics, through repetition and patterning, may serve as a non-verbal form of narrative that is created over time.
- Optics have become increasingly important for people who rely upon visual input as a result of their evolutionary development.

- Optics may be far more compelling and effective in today's world of diminishing text and the increasing visual media and social media.
- Political leaders, recognizing the power of the media to present their messages and to edit and interpret them, may seek to cultivate special relationships with specific media outlets.
- Political leaders must use both compelling, succinct narratives and carefully created optics to communicate with followers and the general population.
- Political leaders may attack opposing narratives and opposing optics, thereby creating additional narratives and optics.
- Political leaders can manipulate the media and their followers through the use of strategically designed narratives and optics.
- Political leaders need to establish credibility and trust to make effective use of narratives and optics.
- The media play a significant role in interpreting and presenting narratives and optics, and in shaping them for specific followers and the general population.
- The followers/population may interpret narratives one way (or be encouraged to do so by the leader), whereas the media may interpret those same narratives in a significantly different way, creating a tension that may persist over time.
- Much of the language used in political discourse today seems to strive for the kind of immediacy available through optics.

10.1.9 Where Are We Headed? The Possible Future of Leadership and Communication

We have suggested that non-verbal communication may loom as increasingly important in the future and that optics—or perhaps a more positive way of framing visual communication than the by-now-baggage-heavy term "optics"—may further diminish the need for narratives and verbal communication.

In *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Wilson (2012) argues that humans have evolved to "become the experts at mind reading …. We express our intentions as appropriate to the moment and read those of others brilliantly…. From infancy we are predisposed to read the intention of others…. [We] acquired a 'theory of mind,' the recognition that [our] own mental states would be shared by others" (pp. 226–228). In *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, Wilson (1998) hypothesizes a new kind of language that leaves verbal language far behind:

> The observer reads the script unfolding not as ink on paper but as electric patterns in live tissue. At least some of the thinker's subjective experience – his feeling – is transferred. The observer reflects, he laughs or weeps. And from his own mind patterns he is able to transmit the subjective responses back. The two brains are linked by perception of brain activity …. The communicants can perform feats that resemble extrasensory perception (ESP) …. The first thinker reads a novel; the second thinker follows the narrative. (p. 129)

In *The Origins of Creativity*, Wilson (2017) argues for the need to "escape the bubble in which the unaided human sensory world remains unnecessarily trapped" (p. 92).

The next great revolution in communication, by leaders or others, may resemble the extrasensory perception (ESP) to which Wilson refers, something that takes us beyond text (narratives) and even beyond our heavy reliance on visual input (optics). As he and others (see Ramachandran 2012; Eagleman 2012) have suggested, we are complex connecting animals who have developed, through the use of our complex connecting brains and their billions of constantly connecting neurons, intricate nonverbal means of communicating with each other. Through the use of "mirror neurons," for example, we are capable of "reading" the behaviors of others and understanding the actions and intentions of others. In processes that closely resemble "empathy," mirror neurons help us develop a "language" unlike anything related to traditional languages and unlike the basic optical data we process with our eyes.

Research on mirror neurons in neuroscience, neurophysiology, cognitive science, and cognitive psychology (see Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1997; Pineda 2009) is in its initial stages. But such research could potentially uncover exciting pathways about how humans could communicate with each other in ways far subtler than language (narratives) or visual images (optics). We seem to be moving away from the use of narratives over thousands of years (spoken first and then written later) to an increasing focus on visual forms of communication such as photos and videos, most of which provide textless messaging. In the future, it may be possible—though this is controversial—to develop through what philosophers (see Doherty 2008; Wellman 2014) have called "theory of mind" or the capacity to infer others' thoughts, beliefs, desires, and mental states, and to convey our own in turn.

Clearly, further research on the human brain and nonlinguistic interpersonal communication may lead in the coming decades to a communication revolution that will take us beyond our long reliance on speaking and writing, and beyond language as we know it. Given the alacrity of communication changes we have experienced in the past century—from wire-bound to wireless, print to electronic media, email to texts and tweets, language-bound to visual modes—we are certainly poised for many new changes to come. Those changes will undoubtedly affect leaders, the media, the followers (people), and the planet.

Humans might more appropriately be called "*homo connectans*" than "*homo sapiens*". We are a connecting species—our brains constantly firing with billions of neuronal connections like a physiological/neurological embodiment of our need to connect with each other and with everything we experience in our lives. Put another way, we have an intense desire, built in through thousands of years of evolution, to exist in *community*, and central to such an existence is our need to *communicate*. Over time, we will almost certainly refine our current modes of communication and develop new ones—still grounded in language or perhaps moving beyond it—that are more immediate and powerful, as well as more honest and transparent. The leaders of the future, currently limited by narratives (language) and optics (visual imagery) and by the fabrications those concepts seem to involve, could find themselves in a new era of communication where their very intentions, thoughts, and behaviors would be laid bare for all to know. In such an era, leadership might be completely accountable and responsible, or, if everything is open and available and shared, perhaps leadership—all too often still understood as what individuals express and do—would be

unnecessary and truly the kind of interactive, collaborative endeavor that practitioners, scholars, and educators have called for in the past fifty years.

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