

Crisis Communications

The Power of Images



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By now you've probably seen the video or photographs of a police lieutenant pepper spraying peaceful protestors at the University of California in Davis. As a result of this image, the police officers involved have been suspended pending investigation of the incident and the UC Chancellor is under fire.



There is a power in visual images that we sometimes fail to understand. This power derives in part from the belief that what we're seeing is true, that the evidence of our own eyes transcends all others. It is for this reason that YouTube is considered a highly trusted source of news by the Gen Y crowd.

But can we really believe our own eyes? Do images tell the truth?

The simple fact is that images are not always truthful and have been used historically to manipulate public opinion.

Images lack context

Images, particularly photographs, freeze a moment in time. This is true even of video footage. The viewer must imagine what went before and what occurred after.

A famous picture from the Vietnam War shows the national police chief executing a bound Viet Cong prisoner. The photograph, considered one of the most influential of all time, won the Pulitzer Prize and became one of the defining images of the war.



Photo: Eddie Adams
@ 1968 Worldwide Photos

The incident occurred during the Tet Offensive, a time of considerable chaos. The prisoner was allegedly the leader of a death squad responsible for the murder of police officers and their families. He was apprehended near a ditch holding over thirty bound bodies, including friends and relatives of the chief. In context, the chief's actions, while violating the rules of war, are certainly more understandable.

Images shape public opinion

The power of an image comes not so much from what it captures as from the emotion it evokes. It is this emotional appeal that makes images powerful tools for manipulating public opinion.

During the Great Depression, for example, the Federal government used photographs of



migrant workers to build support for the New Deal. The most emotionally engaging of these photographs were those by Dorothea Lange, employed by the Resettlement

Administration, whose photograph “Migrant Mother” became the defining image of the Great Depression.

Images can be manipulated

It’s odd that we put so much trust in images since they can be so easily manipulated. The photograph of the UC Davis officer spraying demonstrators has been manipulated into numerous images, all sending the same message: the action was perceived as police brutality against peaceful demonstrators.



However, not all manipulation is satire nor is it so obvious. Following the 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco city leaders orchestrated a cover up intended to convince investors that the damage was primarily the result of the fires

(a manageable risk) rather than the earthquake (considered an act of god). Among the tools they used were doctored photographs showing undamaged buildings on fire.

Images can be ambiguous

Facts are not always obvious in images, particularly in the low definition videos taken by security cameras or smart phones. During the recent trial of a transit police officer convicted of shooting an unarmed suspect in custody, the video introduced at the trial and seen widely via YouTube generated strong public emotion but did not have sufficient detail to determine the facts of the shooting. Nevertheless, the video generated public outrage and led to a number of civil disturbances and protests.

Reacting to negative images

With the prevalence of smart phones, media, and surveillance systems sooner or later you will have to deal with a negative image. Countering it is difficult because you always start from behind and must regain trust. Consequently, the faster you react, the better.

Your reaction must be factual but above all, it must be believable. The UC Davis police justified the use of pepper spray by claiming self-defense. While the investigation will determine if this is true, the claim is obviously at odds with the images and therefore lacks credibility with the public. The UC authorities have already lost their opportunity to salvage the situation.

Remember the old saying that equates a picture to a thousand words. You need to start talking immediately and honestly. Images are not about facts but about emotions and, ultimately, trust. 