

Brac University



**RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA THROUGH
FACEBOOK IMAGES**

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RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA THROUGH FACEBOOK IMAGES

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Abstract

We live in an image filled world. Whether they are encountered in galleries, the internet or elsewhere, images challenge us. Images have the power to convey more than the words they represent. Now in the twenty-first century, images are becoming more relevant in our perception than words. We have passed from an era in which reproduction and representation are the most crucial aspects of how we come to understand the visual culture. Most of these images are shared through the most popular social networking site Face book.

This research attempts to find out how political and religious images create a propaganda that has an impact on our daily life. I also gave some examples of Face book images, describing how they use their visual power through Face book. I took these images from different groups from Face book because Face book is the most popular social networking site in the world today.

Hence my research is about why political and religious groups use social networking sites like Face book as tools for communication in political and religious uprisings and spreading certain ways of looking at those images. The focus of my paper is also how the images effect of our everyday life and change our perspective toward religion and politics and how these images dominate our life.

Introduction

We are at the age of information overflow. Every day when we open our eyes we have thousands of different images overflowing our vision. No matter whether it is reading the newspapers and magazines or in social network or even just walking down the street, visual information surrounds us constantly. We receive thousands of images per day, which is incomparable to any other form of information intake. Compared to any other time in history, the human experience has been much more dependent on information, and become more visual; even satellite photos or medical images of the human organs have become a part of this experience. Therefore, today's world can be claimed to be ruled by a visual culture, where images speak louder than words.

In the current society, images presented by the social network such as Facebook greatly influence people's lives. These images have a viewing audience of almost all classes and age groups of the society and are therefore categorized as visual culture or popular culture. According to Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture* "Twenty three million Americans were online in 1998, with many more joining in daily. In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life." So we can imagine how the images shared through the social networking sites impact on our lives every day.

In my thesis, I analyze how images are used on social networking sites like Facebook by political and religious groups as tools for communication in political and religious propaganda.

The Different Kinds of Images Shared

Day by Day our life is being dominated by the images. What we see has a thoughtful effect on what we do, how we feel, and who we are. Through experience and experimentation, we continually increase our understanding of the visual world and how we are influenced by it. John Berger writes in his book, *Ways of Seeing*, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak."

All of us see thousands of images every day. Through social networking sites people also share thousands of images by uploading them or editing them. By using these images people share their thoughts, feelings, emotions or expressions. There are many types of images they are sharing with each other. Different people interpret pictures in various ways.

As Ronald Barthes mentions in his essay, "The Rhetoric of the Image", the images analyzed offer us three types of messages; the linguistic message, the coded iconic message and the non coded iconic message.

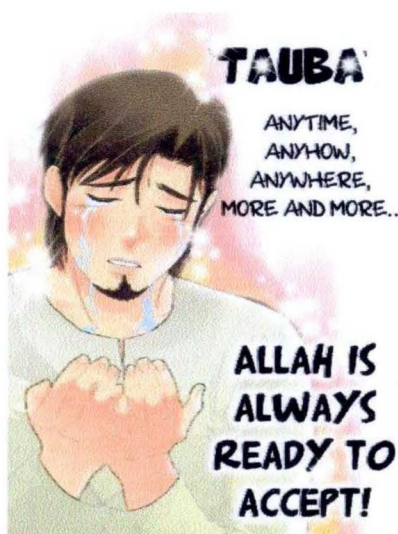
The following images contain only words and no real picture. But just because they are more graphic than plain words written on a page, they seem to be more effective.

**You Have Only Two
Friends In This Life**
1. ALLAH
**2. Those Who Remind
You Of ALLAH**

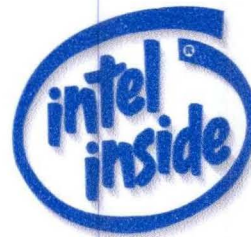
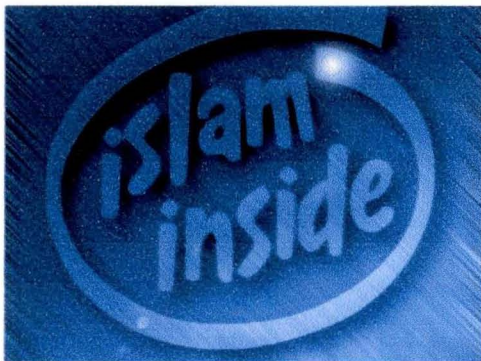
How do you
 expect the legs
 that don't carry
 you for prayer
 to carry you
 into paradise ?

According to Barthes, "in order to find images without words, it is doubtless necessary to go back to partially illiterate societies, to a sort of pictographic state of the images." This linguistic message is made up of all the words in the images, for example, the caption and the labels, these being inserted into the scene. It needs cultural knowledge (language) to interpret text and implies the sound and familiarity of this particular text.

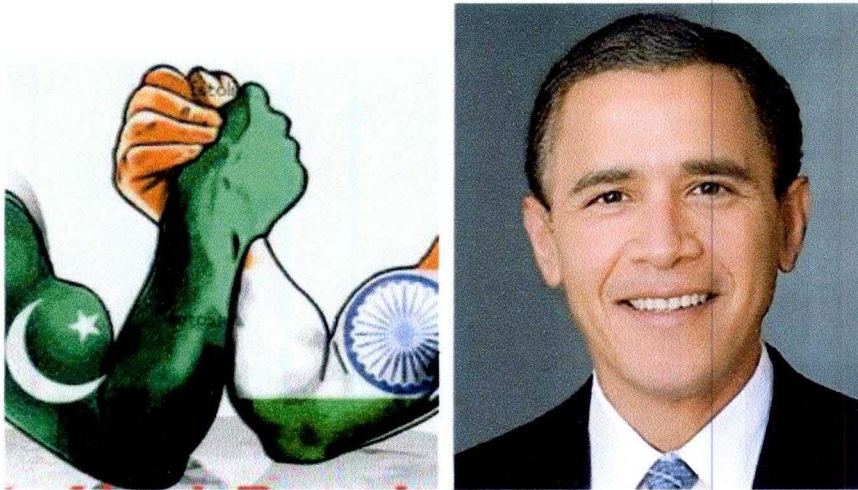
The following images contain both pictures and words, collectively making up the meaning of the images.



The images with coded iconic message contain contextual information. They also signify symbolic and cultural or connoted messages. It depends on different types of knowledge, whether the viewer of the images understands the messages conveyed or not. For example, if someone does not know that the following image is mocking the logo of a world famous computer brand, the image will lose its meaning.



The non coded iconic message, as “the photographic representation repeats rather than transforms the source subject matter”, says Barthes. Though “It is a literal message as opposed to the previous symbolic ones”, it can lead to different interpretations. The following images match this category.



Facebook Images as Messages

The social networking sites, Facebook are the new tools for communication in political and religious uprising. Though it is a comparatively new phenomenon, but it is already an expert of creating religious and political consciousness. Facebook easily creates small networks that allow users to control who participates. This allows believers to quietly share some unrevealed images with private direct messages. Most images convey some messages and people share these images with each other to spread their thoughts.

There are many religious groups that also use Facebook to deliver their religious messages; there are Islamic groups as well as Christian groups. Some religious groups, for example, the followers of Christ stay in touch with one another securely within countries with little religious freedom. Believers can use such sites to communicate with the outside world the discrimination they face. These groups can use the social media to hide their identities, where security is an issue.

For example, in considering the situation in Syria or our neighbor country Pakistan or Myanmar, many people discuss the role of the social media in political and social movements through Facebook. Social media supporters believe these movements are helped and increased through the use of socialized networks. There are many groups on Facebook, who use these sites as their platform to spread their thoughts, feelings, and their faith.

Religion and Social Networking

Much theoretical and experimental controversy surrounds the question of how religion actually forms our thoughts. Some studies highlights Facebook in their book in different way. Krause said in his book *How Social Relationships affect Health* that “people find in religious organizations as the major source of well-being” (Krause, 2008). While other sociologists like, Greeley and Hout wrote in their book *Happiness and Lifestyle among Conservative Christians* shows the “private and subjective aspects of religion” (e.g., Greeley and Hout 2006). While both styles are believable, it remains unclear which aspect of religion plays a more significant role and how these extents might interact to shape personal happiness.

A lot of religious issues made news because of accusations about extremism or intolerance. According to *Religion in the News*, “among the biggest individual stories of 2011 were a controversial congressional hearing about the threat of homegrown Islamic terrorism and the fallout after a Florida pastor staged a Koran burning.”

The debate of religion in social media in the past two years was quite different than the attention in the other press. According to *Religion in the News*,

None of the top religion related subjects among bloggers in 2011 was a top story in traditional media outlets. While the presidential campaign and political incidents involving Islam captured the attention of the traditional press. Bloggers also tended to cover religion in a less sustained way than the mainstream media.

Religious people are more gratified with their lives because they regularly attend religious services and build social networks in their audiences through social networking sites like Facebook. The effect within viewer's friendship is dependent, however on the presence of a strong religious identity.

One explanation for this is that religion offers personal networks and support. This suggestion dates back to classical sociologists. Durkheim's and Simmel, who considered the social aspect of religion the "essence and substance" of religion in their book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* and *Essays on Religion* (Durkheim 1951; Simmel 1997). According to this argument, religious involvement increases personal happiness because religious organizations offer opportunities for social communication between compatible people, the development of friendship and social bonds.

Although this explanation is acceptable, previous studies largely fail to find direct evidence to support it. Specifically, these studies find that the relationship between religious involvement and security remains strong even after controlling for social resources such as the frequency of social activities and the size of one's friendship network.

Politics and Social Networking

Social media is a web based platform where people share information, thoughts and activities. Social media uses technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Several bloggers around the world have been arrested for writing against oppressive governments. And recently, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been added in this row. Though these sites were introduced to offer casual friendship, but they were used as key works in the modern Arab Spring.

According to the Fletcher's *Facebook: Friends without Border*, The social networking site, Facebook was introduced in 2004. Just six years after its inception, the number of Facebook users crossed 500 million and has reached 800 million now. It has become the third biggest country in the world (Fletcher, 2010).

The inventors of Facebook or Twitter perhaps never thought that their nonpolitical networking sites would be used to bring political change in several countries. The forum of casual friendship turned into a platform of protesters during the Arab Spring. It is people's inspiration by which the people picked up these sites as the platform for sharing opinion, designing programmes, and updating and spreading the movement to get rid of the oppressive rule in North Africa and the Middle East.

Social media played a central role in shaping political arguments. Focused on Tunisia and Egypt and led by Philip Howard,

[...] the study shows that the social media was used heavily by a key demographic group in the revolution; young, urban, relatively well educated individuals, many of

whom were women. Bloggers also used the internet to publish information critical of the governments in Egypt and Tunisia. The activists used social media to connect with others outside their countries.

Bangladesh is a country with low internet access although a big online community is gradually developing day by day. Bangladesh does not have any unfair system like the countries in the Middle East. However, the democratic government sometimes acts in a non democratic manner. Also, the country suffers from several socio-economic problems. In many cases, the online community here responds positively or negatively to the socio-economic and political issues.

The online community that contains Facebook users and bloggers regularly serves news and analyses contemporary issues. In that way, they perform as journalists to spread news over the world through images. The bloggers and Facebook users regularly criticize the government for their failures. Though they stay in a virtual world, they try to channel the issue in a conversational form from the real world to the virtual and vice versa. Their effort to uphold recent and progressive thoughts and their moves for democratizing the society for equal rights can be mentioned here.

Very recently, the issue of cyber-crime has come forward and the discussion of introducing cyber law has made online users uncertain about an attempt to control the community. As time passed, other bloggers especially the Facebook users came with news, views and analyses on the issue and the incident became one of the most discussed issues in the blog community. For example, in recent years the BDR mutiny, migration of the Rohingas, controversy around the Padma Bridge as well as the corruption of the railway

minister made the online community of Bangladesh respond. The other significant events like these include border killings by BSF, the war crimes tribunal, destruction of the Baul sculpture in front of the airport, the killing of a journalist couple, the Persona scandal and so on.

These responses, in most of the cases, stand for humanity, democracy and the rights of people and against the domination of the powerful. In Bangladesh, the concern of offense has been raised against bloggers and thus the issue of introducing cyber law has been put forward by a minister. Recently, a public university teacher living abroad faced legal charges for his Facebook status, and also followed by, a student of Jahangirnagar University (by Prothomalo) was also charged for comments about the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. A blogger was arrested for organizing a protest rally in support of the movement against the rise of tuition fees in a public university.

Religious Communication through Facebook Images

The ability of visual images to motivate to communicate and influence is unquestionable and certain. Through evolution, human beings are forced to view and spread visuals. Recognizing the importance of visual communication means one's success. Allen Ginsberg, poet and author, stated on Media Ownership and Consolidation that, "Whoever controls the media the images controls the culture". Religious and political propaganda posters are very effective in manipulating popular opinion.

Different types of religious images get uploaded every day. These images have a great impact on the youth, because most of the Facebook users are from the younger generation. The largest two groups are Islamic groups and Christian groups.

Islam has been redefined for the youth. A group of 'Islamists' has proved their purpose to fight for every single one who has faith in their group. Religion also is the cause of many of the world's problems as it is dangerous. Religious people often accept exoteric, exact understandings of religious texts, without using their normal capabilities on Facebook. Sometimes religion without reason is blind, ruthless and leads to discrimination. The current media focus is too heavily balanced on the out-of-date issues, which religion appears to have a returning and negative understanding of.

Many Muslims have neglected the internal extents of faith and have placed more importance on the outward. In a time when many Muslims' faith has been shaken to the core mostly, since the attack of anti-Islamic feelings following 9/11, the divine teachings of Islam

are needed to restore a sense of calmness more than ever. The Muslim communication on what conventionality really is, has been taken over by literalists and has been forced by 9/11. Instead of Muslims saying what they are, they have become too worried in saying what they are not. According to the article of *Being Muslim* "After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the media has reflected on what's been called "the decade of fear."

This incident has a great impact on Facebook as well. A group named "Join the 9/11 Day Movement" reached 316,376 likes this week. Thousands of images, posts have been uploaded after 9/11 against Islam and the Muslims. Since the Sept. 11 attacks social networking sites portrayals of Muslims in the United States still present a misguided interpretation of Islamic culture and religion. The framing of a public community center as the 9/11 mosque or the striking event of Koran Burning are recent examples of the way the media misrepresents Islam.

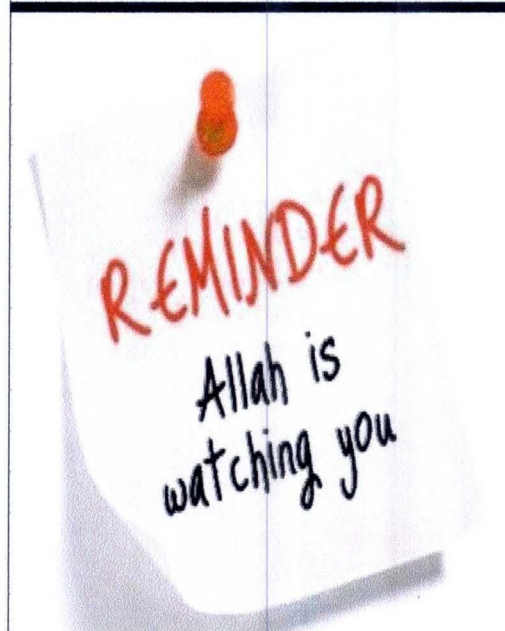
Some people are represents their communities through Facebook According to an article of Time Magazine they found that,

"There are many groups in Facebook that represent their communities or a person. A Facebook page dedicated to the 13th century Sufi poet Rumi who, according to Time Magazine, is one of the all-time best selling poets in the USA reached 300,000 'likes' last week. Rumi's vision for Islam is one that is refreshingly inclusive compared to the doctrinal fundamentalist forms which are so often the focus of news media."

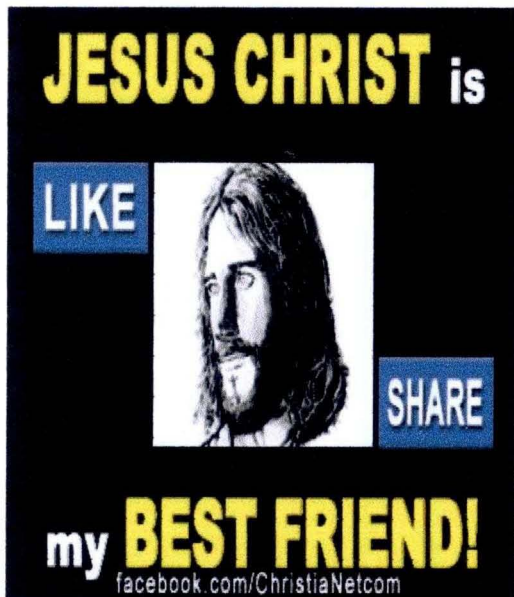
Islamic and Christian groups are the two of the biggest groups of religion in Facebook. Islamic groups use Facebook as their way of communication. The visual elements that

The following images remind their audience of the “fear” of God and propagate the old teachings of Islam in a pictorial representation.

Fear Allah
even on
Facebook

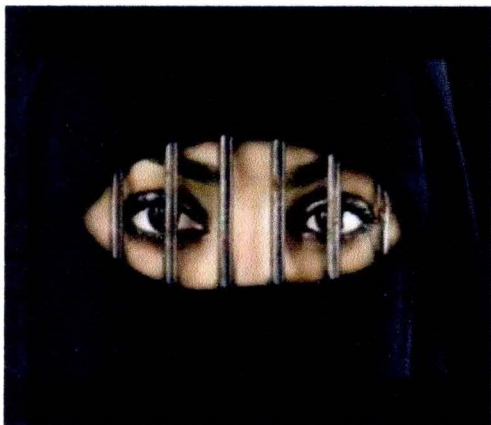


The first picture shows how this message is meant for Facebook users only. The second picture however is more witty in the way it tries to convey the message, which is a very contemporary way in which people keep reminders. Christian groups use images of Jesus to connect with their believers.

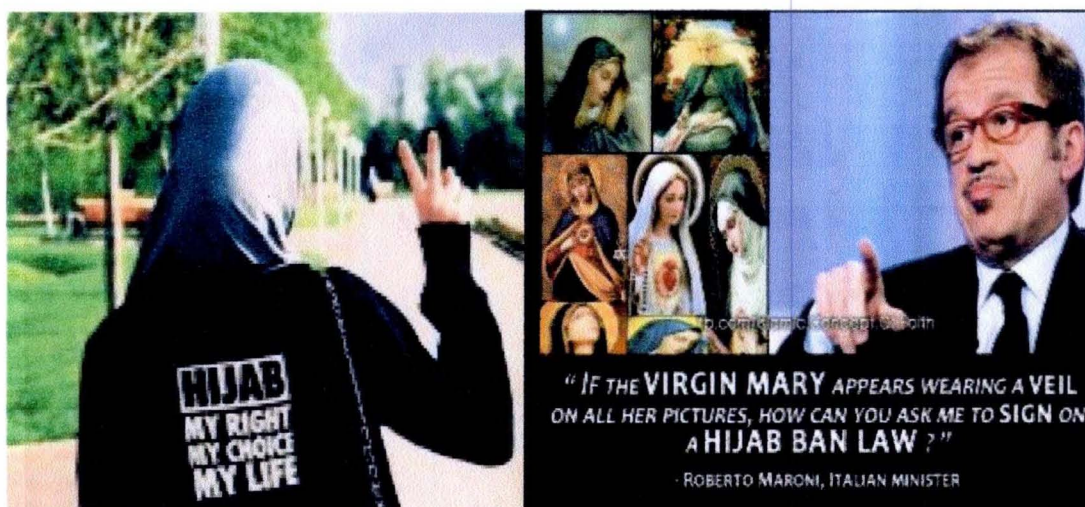


However, where the second picture above is a traditional one, the first one is 'Facebook friendly'.

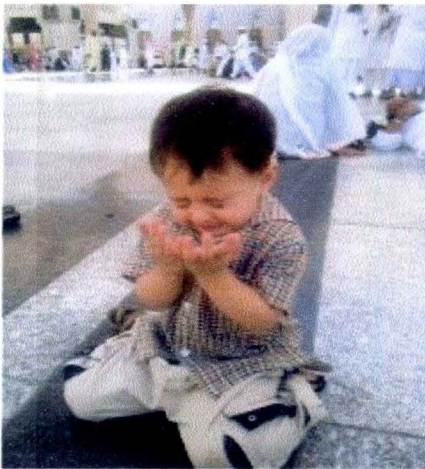
Among these images some are uploaded by anti-religious and anti-political groups. Anti-religious groups are resisting or protesting against the effect of religious beliefs in people's minds and lives, encouraging non-conformity or even mocking religious beliefs. Such images attract the attention of non-believers and may also affect believers negatively. The following image criticizes the phenomenon of the resurrection of the "hijab".



A majority of Muslims believes that hijab protects women from the male gaze and allows them to become autonomous subjects. Others have argued that the veil only provides the illusion of protection and serves to absolve men of the responsibility for controlling their behavior. But this image shows that hijab is like imprisonment for women. But some people do not agree with that. We can see their reaction regarding the hijab from the following images.

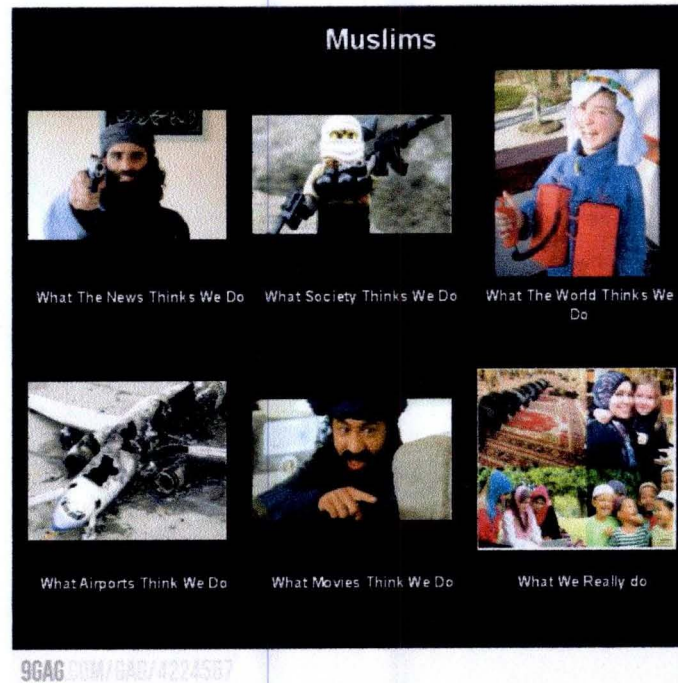
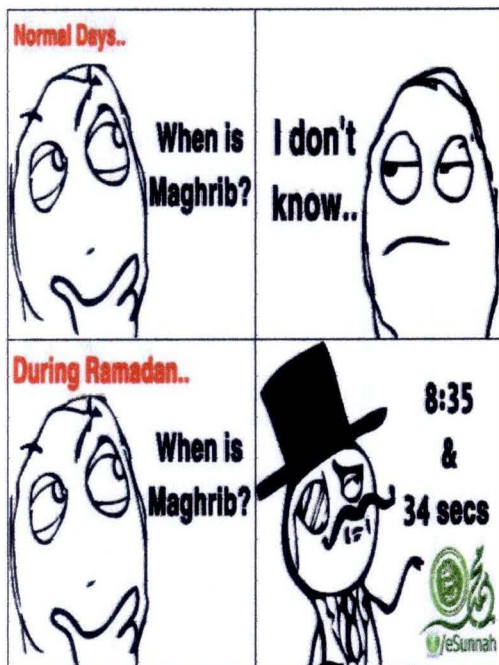


On the other hand, some images are uploaded by different religious groups. They spread their religious beliefs through these images. In some images they use children. This type of images enhances or affects user's emotions and attitudes.



J. Francis Davis, an adult educator and media education specialist, captured it well when he said an article on *the power of Visual culture*, "...in our culture pictures have become tools used to elicit specific and planned emotional reactions in the people who see them. Visuals are not only excellent communicators but also quickly affect us psychologically and physiologically."

Some groups are also using witty and funny images to sometimes mock people's perception of Muslims or Islam and sometimes Muslims' pretensions of beliefs as well. The following images exemplify such intentions.



Political Communication through Facebook Images

There are many types of political images uploaded every day. Some political parties have found success using Facebook as their social camp. For political parties, social networking sites like Facebook have become valuable tools for communication and winning votes. In the U.S, the

Democratic and Republican parties both use Facebook, mostly to pass along political news and images to promote their candidates. According to Steve Tillery, executive director of the Dallas, he says in an article on Facebook that "Party does not use social networking for fund-raising. It just hasn't been successful for us," he said. What has worked for Democrats, he said, is using Facebook to organize volunteer efforts. "During several recent neighborhood walks to "get out the vote," over 100 volunteers turned out, largely due to word on Facebook", he added.

Major Political parties in India also keep updating the websites and Facebook pages that have been recently created in order to reach out to the masses, especially the urban voters which are being motivated through various advertisements on these sites. These pages also consist of the videos featuring speeches made by the leaders of these parties, photographs of the rallies and programmes that were organized as a part of the political campaign during recent times.

More than 10 lacs people use Facebook in Bangladesh. It is the most popular social networking site, especially among the youth. But recently Facebook was banned for a few days because of a cartoon of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh as well as the opposition party leader. Pakistan has recently banned Facebook for hosting irreligious contents. A contest organized by a Facebook user calling on people to draw the Prophet raised protests in Pakistan.

There are many types of images political on Facebook. Every image has its own meaning. Some are narrative, which explores the basics of how images communicate. Some images are iconic, which is a sign, looks like what the images represents. Some are symbolic and the symbolic sign does not look like what it represents and its meaning must be learnt. And some are indexical, which means a clue that links meaning. Its association with this meaning is not arbitrary but is physically or casually connected. Most though not all comics rely on a

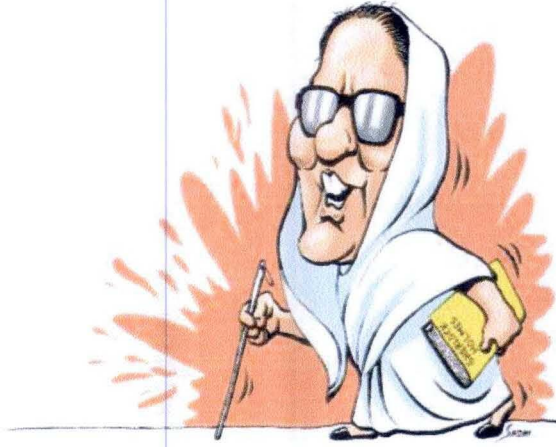
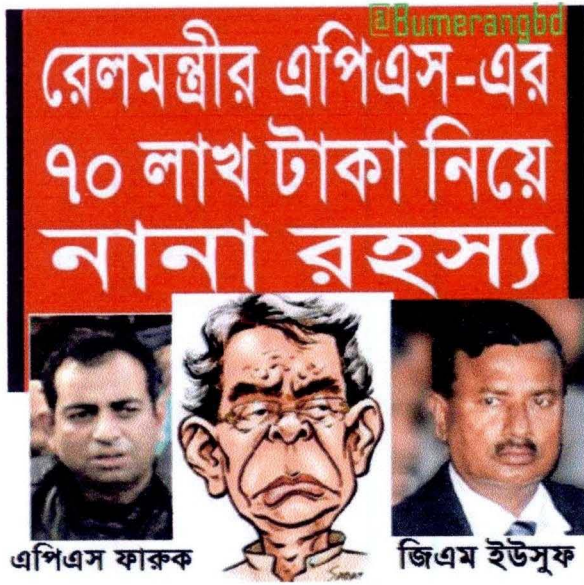
combination of words and images to convey an idea. If the story is driven mainly by the imagery, then the words can wander in many directions, it's called the interdependent words and images. In some images words are telling most of the story and in some images, image is telling most of the story.

All of these types of signs are used in combination in visual communication. This is how images tell stories. Images have the power to impact how cultural messages are transmitted and received. This gives them the power to alter the culture itself. Propagandas can control how the media use turn political parties' messages.



These images capture the effect of the Padma Bridge incidence and political influence on the police.

Some images are sarcastic that mock the political parties or the government's new policies. Some groups in Facebook mock the politicians involving in corruption. The following images are examples of these.



Conclusion

Paul Martin says in his book *Syntactic Theory of Visual Communication* that, “Something is happening. We are becoming a visually mediated society. For many, understanding of the world is being accomplished, not through words, but by reading images.”

It is a life experience that's happening and there is no escape from this reality. There are many who see this visual process as an invasion of the only remaining personal space in their lives and such people do not promise to this form of communication. The social impact of the new visual world is remarkable. Slowly a world of visual communicators is emerging, as one sees people of different cultures and backgrounds more visually and interacts with them more habitually. This brings us to the point that the more we see one another, the more we may understand each other and such interaction may bring us closer together, leading to a global society. Whether there is a greater acceptance of various viewers and the new visual world is welcoming the visual differences is something controversial. However, the fact remains there is no escape from such a reality. This is definitely a sign of change.

As religion and politics are two controversial aspects of life, many people fail to express their thoughts on these issues in their real life. People are often threatened by societal expectations, peer pressure and of being categorized as something or the other. Social networking sites help people express their views and share their thoughts keeping them distant from the threats of real life accusations. So, a lot of people who do not discuss these issues in public feel comfortable sharing these topics on Facebook and such.

Facebook also has an addictive quality to it, which encourages people to go with the flow. So if everyone is sharing something religious or political, one feels obligated to take part in the process as well and share their own views.

The groups that propagate propagandas use the platform to reach as many people as possible through the distance of the screen. People from all over the world can come together in platforms like Facebook and form a virtual community based on their common values and beliefs.

Thus, Facebook images have become a very powerful tool for communication in all aspects of the life of the youth and beyond. Religious and political images are only a part of this phenomenon, which empowers and connects people in different ways, letting them express their individual views, yet connecting to a broader community.

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- <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=140613>
- <http://www.medialiteracy.com/sayings.htm>.
- <http://www.billiondollargraphics.com/infographics.html>