

CHAPTER 9

Visual Methods

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When you want to observe the organizational structure of IOs, as well as understand their history and culture, visual methods offer highly valuable approaches. Producing images about or analyzing images of IOs allow researchers examination of their representations of the social world, their visual conventions, and their power dynamics. Here we introduce several case studies using visual data as sources of information, and how to proceed with image-based research.

What?

Rooted in social sciences, visual methods sit at the intersection of two different paradigms: “[they] are research practices that explicitly use images in various ways including drawing, photography, video, film, and Internet pages. The images are either regarded as a *source* of data in themselves, or as a way of *producing* data through their use, or a combination of the two” (Warren 2009: 566). Researchers who work on images as sources of data act as “image collectors”: they analyze the significance and meaning of pre-existing images, whether produced by an institution or by previous studies. Their methods include the use of visual archives and databases, visual artifacts, websites, institutional documents, or the study of the architecture of buildings and places. On the contrary, researchers who produce visual data are “image generators”: they relate to images explicitly generated for their study, whether by the researchers or in collaboration with research participants. Rather than using words, these methods include direct observation

(of behaviors, settings, rituals, etc.) but also visual recording of what is going on (drawings, paintings, photography, film, cartography, etc.).

Interestingly, most authors agree that visual methods are often ignored in organizational research, despite a growing interest since the early 2000s (Ray and Smith 2012). To date, only one handbook promotes the usefulness of visual methodologies in organizations (Bell, Warren, and Schroeder 2013); however, visual theory and culture has been a flourishing field of study, especially in sociology and anthropology. For example, visual methods allowed researchers to explore the creation and dissemination of visual clichés among IOs—as suggested by the previous work of the author about humanitarian imagery (Gorin 2012). In addition, participatory visual methods have increased recently, explicitly involving “research respondents in the co-creation of qualitative data” (Vince and Warren 2012: 275). They use either photo-interviews, also called photo-elicitation (production of pictures by the researcher and interviews with participants to elicit discussions about what they see) or photo-voice (participants make pictures themselves, often to reveal their preoccupations or agendas).

Why?

We live in an image-saturated world, where image production, management, circulation, and consumption have pervaded every organization in the private and public sector. Therefore visual methods enable more in-depth overviews of the different dimensions of organizational settings, including the symbolic, cultural, or emotional. They help to question the way IOs perceive themselves and build their identity and reputation, both in their visual branding or artifacts (logos, merchandising, uniforms, etc.) and their communication strategies (such as accountability, field evidence, fundraising, awareness or advocacy campaigns, and forensic data). Using visibility allows better observation of the organizational structure but also intra- and interorganizational interactions, emphasizing the power dynamics among them, which sometimes remain invisible even to those who work in these organizations.

Overall, images are considered reliable because of their so-called unbiased transparency. However, as in any qualitative approach, images must be considered subjective expressions of points of view that refer to cultural practices and cognitive resources that determine the way we see the world around us (Berger 1972). Visual methods allow the exploration of representations of power, gender, race, or ideology at work among IOs. For example, there is

a growing scholarship on visual histories of IOs, especially those active in the humanitarian sector. Research has shown how UNHCR images shaped national perceptions of and international policies about refugees, or how WHO visual campaigns contributed to promote health standards (Gatrell 2011; Rodogno and David 2015). In our own research, we focused on the circulation of colonialist imagery in humanitarian organizations active in Africa since the nineteenth century, despite their claim for dignity and universalism (de Laat and Gorin 2016). To reduce the variety of visual materials available, we focused on photographic archives—pictures being one of the first mass media introduced by the use of mechanical reproduction.

How?

Visual Corpus

The constitution and size of the corpus matter. First, determine the purpose of your research and your selected approach in visual culture. If you are interested in an iconic image (like a logo) or a series of posters for a given campaign, then it will be important to focus on the description and detailed analysis of each image. On the contrary, if you aim to identify visual conventions and the emergence of new representations over space and time, then it is better to select a large visual corpus, so you can compare similarities and differences between images. Dealing with a visual macro-corpus can be impractical, so it can be useful to rely on content analysis softwares such as *Atlas.ti* that allows you to process through description and classification devices. One recommendation would be to start with a smaller corpus on a short period (e.g., a decade), while mixing sources among IOs to identify if there are any recurrent or new visual conventions.

Second, think about your capacity to apply visual skills. Working with one or several visual methods implies knowledge about visual techniques (use of the medium), visual theories (semiotics, iconology, etc.), and visual styles (such as medical or travel photography). Gillian Rose's handbook will help you become familiar with visual methodologies, as well as provide a list of questions to interpret images (Rose 2016; Cohen and Ramel 2018). Whether you are an image collector or an image generator, you need to follow several steps. Beginners in visual methodologies may be interested in following Luc Pauwels's step-by-step integrated framework for visual social research (2011).

Images as Data

If you plan to analyze images, the first step aims at identifying institutional archives, either physical or digital, by establishing a list of major IOs related to your topic (see also box 1—*Visual Archives*). To find out visual databases, you have three options: whether the organization has a library or documentation center, archive units, or a media center. Many visual databases are either unrecognized or underused by researchers interested in international relations—such as the UNHCR¹ or the ICRC.² Many of them are open to the public, but if not you should seek whether there is an exception for scholars. In many cases, a visit to the physical archives or library in the headquarters could be useful. Although using online research engines or databases is helpful, sometimes they do not include everything. Therefore it is also rewarding to contact librarians working in these organizations,³ so they can help you identify specific collections and get familiar with the databases. The secondary literature can also be useful (especially in history, ethnography, political sciences, or international relations) to help locate visual materials previously used or mentioned by researchers. Make sure you find visual databases with sufficient information about image producers (e.g., personal biographies, mandate framework with the IO),⁴ the context of images, their dissemination, and possibly the targeted public.

Images That Produce Data

If you plan to generate images, you have to decide whether you want to produce images yourself or if you need to include research participants within the organization. Many layers of organizational settings can be directly observed and visually recorded: employees, buildings, meetings, interactions, processes. Try to remain unobtrusive; this can happen with photographic devices or

1. The UNHCR visual media center can be found at: <https://media.unhcr.org/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=Home> (accessed October 2, 2020).

2. In 2015, the ICRC put all its audiovisual collection online: <https://avarchives.icrc.org/> (accessed October 2, 2020).

3. Most of the time, you find a contact email on the archive resources or library webpage of the organization.

4. For example, in 1948 UNICEF partnered for the first time with David “Chim” Seymour from the newly founded Magnum agency, to attract international attention and funds for war orphans by using one of the best names in war photography.

videotaped recordings, so you might opt for drawings, diagrams, or graphs instead (Meyer 1991). Conversely, you can include participants to make images of places that would otherwise remain inaccessible to the researcher. Thus Samantha Warren asked members of an IT firm to picture their desks to explore the aesthetics of work environments (Warren 2002). This option will include field preparation with the IOs and instructions to participants. This is a very important aspect: you need to have a mutual discussion over the set-up and execution of the study. Some legal and ethical issues have to be agreed upon; for example, you need to know whether subjects will be aware they are being recorded and whether they agree (informed consent). Many IOs have working agreements already established with photographers that might be useful and readjusted by researchers, whether to obtain consent or to pay attention to ethical issues when using or producing images.⁵

Visual Analysis

The second step of your research will consist of analyzing visual products based on what is represented (the content) and how it is represented (the visual style). This implies you should pay attention to the social life of the image: its production, content, circulation, and reception. The circumstantial elements are important to understand why an image was made, what the communication objectives of its mediation were, and when and where it was disseminated and how often. Never separate the image from the text. In her analysis of the UNHCR and other refugee libraries' pictures, Caroline Lenette thus offers a step-by-step iconographic approach to describing, analyzing, and interpreting the structure, contexts, and producers of refugee photography throughout the 1980s–2010s (2016). An image is always the result of a choice; it can have several meanings depending on the political, social, economic, or cultural contexts in which it is created and seen. In our study of the iconology in Africa, we compared large corpuses of pictures with former studies on iconographic conventions in the humanitarian sector, to explore their symbolic dimension (exoticism, racial gaze, Western governance) throughout the twentieth century. The persistence of clichés through space and time and through different visual products (posters, postcards, stamps, films) can help categorize representations between typical (recurrent, generic) and particular (unusual, exceptional), for example.

5. See for example the photograph consent form from UNAIDS: https://www.unodc.org/pdf/india/news_and_events/photographer_guidelines.pdf (accessed October 2, 2020).

If visual data were generated to include the “voices” of the stakeholders, the researcher has to question the encoding-decoding process. This means to plan qualitative interviews with the research participants, so they can explain their views, their choices, what they take for granted. It allows the researcher to avoid assumptions, bias, or question elements that might not be obvious or relevant to him/her.⁶

What Challenges?

Using visual methods in IOs involves two main challenges: the political context of such organizations and any ethical issues. IOs are institutions where political stakes, behind-the-scenes meetings, and multilateral diplomacy play a crucial role. Photographers working in these organizations usually have to follow strict media accreditation and image management. First, the researcher who wishes to use direct observation or visual recordings should expect some resistance to setting up the methodological framework, for they would not be allowed to access all places freely, especially those involving sensitive political issues or private meetings. Second, it might be difficult to identify appropriate stakeholders in IOs (either the staff, the decision-makers, or any state representative) and have access to them or engage them in the study. This is even more obvious when using participatory visual methods in the context of IOs working with affected populations, such as the UN agencies. Be flexible and realize that sometimes it is better not to take the picture.

Ethical issues, on their side, relate to anonymity (e.g., blurring faces), intrusiveness (sensitive cases or places, disturbance of the interaction), and confidentiality (respect of privacy, protection of vulnerable people). In the case of visual participatory methods, specific ethical principles related to the display of suffering, including dignity and protection of the subject, must be considered before any visual experiment proceeds, as the research should avoid the perpetuation of visual clichés. The researcher working on images as sources of data should also discuss ethical distancing from stereotypes. But in this case the challenges relate to the copyright and the control and use of public and private images. Many IOs mandate external, public, or private image producers (e.g., filmmakers, photographers, and publicity agencies) to produce visual artifacts. Therefore you might struggle to obtain the rights

6. See a brief given to research participants by Vince and Warren (Vince and Warren 2012: 295).

to use/reproduce them in a published work. Questions over ethical issues, authorship, and ownership of images should be anticipated, discussed, and negotiated previously in an agreement with the IO (Kunter and Bell 2006: 186–90).

To Go Further

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