Media, Technology and Education in a Post-Truth Society: From Fake News, Datafication and Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust

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Chapter 12

The Kony 2012 Campaign: A Milestone of Visual Storytelling for Social Engagement

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Abstract

Images had long conveyed politics through forms as varied as private paintings and public coins. If images are storytelling vectors (Fusari, 2017), visual artefacts were intended to re/shape human perception of current events and, consequently, their states of 'being in the world' (Heidegger, 2001); this is the reason why the visual quality of communication might be hard to disjoin from that of 'performativity' (Cartier-Bresson, 2018).

The polysemic (Barthes, 1977), if not fully open (Eco, 1989), quality of visual semiotics complicates identification of any framework of reference and adds to the need for practical and sensible research in digital communication (Fusari, in press).

Since the first US Presidential debate televised in 1968, a new interest surged towards the understanding and production of visual communication of politics. Increasingly so, images (both still and moving ones) have affected, if not thoroughly shaped, understanding of all recent political affairs, particularly so from the 1992's Gulf War onward (Baudrillard, 1995; Kellner, 1992).

The 2012 Invisible Children (IC)'s campaign is here assessed as the milestone marking the potential for global impact acquired by socio-political visual-centred storytelling.

The intertwining of the digital with the visual has yet to be precisely arranged for socio-political storytelling; also, storytelling as a format and approach has increasingly gained relevance, adding new concerns to issues of veracity.

In response, this chapter advances the notion of 'storyline' in conjunction with that of 'storytelling': the resulting taxonomy aims to review specific notions of truth- and trust-fulness from a visual-centred perspective.

The chapter thus explores the requirements for communicating and understanding visual storytelling on digital media; by doing so, it addresses the extent to which 'visual storytelling' might be a notion fit for the job of disseminating today's digital cultures.

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Eventually, the chapter will question how to *design* visually centred communication formats and, in turn, *engage* these as storytelling of socio-political issues for digital platforms.

Keywords: Visual performance; visual storytelling; digital strategy; visual politics; storytelling; phenomenology

Introduction

Digital media engage material and symbolic projection of one's identity/ies across personal spaces and social communities (among many: Tsatsou, 2009; van der Graaf, 2014; World Economic Forum Report, 2016). Ideas of state and society, of power and politics, have been quickly and consequently evolving. This seems to be particularly impacting processes of representation and self-representation across intertwined and overlapping practices on *visual* media (Fusari, in press).

In today's continuously evolving scenario, the booming number of participants that digital and social media allow in, and empower to fully contribute to the communication game, further complicates understanding and engagement of political relations across societies and cultures, internally, regionally and globally.

Easiness of digital media production echoes immediacy of digital distribution; richness of available platforms reflects personal, social and cultural re/making of content/s (Engadget, 2020). In turn, the 24/7 all-permeating quality of digital communication and the fully personal usage each and every one (*of us*) has of it renders any identification for a consistent pattern truly futile, if not pointless.

As much as education focuses on verbal skill sets delivery, visual literacy development is left mostly, if not uniquely, to art schools (Greenaway, 2008). Furthermore, the same notion of the visual is both extremely difficult to pin down, and harshly disputed (for a basic orienteering see among many: Elkins, 2011; Mangani, Piper & Simon, 2006; Ritchin, 2009).

Visual semiotics, i.e. how that which is seen is interpreted by others, is a research field still coming out of the doldrums. The Saussurean and Peircean traditions are frameworks for verbal analysis that semioticians strive to specifically translate into bespoke visual-led grammars (see for instance: Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

As such, today's challenge might be reframed around the search to *adapt* for the visual, rather than merely *adopt* a grammar of semiotics; in turn, what could be the specific contribution of those with expertise in both the political practice and in visual literacy? Equally crucial, does the 'visual' quality of communication refer to a form, a channel or a dissemination strategy? For instance, is reading a verbal text 'visual' as it goes through the eyes? Does a 'verbal' description visualized in the mind of a reader remain 'verbal' or evolve as a 'visual' ekphrasis? In turn, focusing on different semiotic qualities, is the narration of a painting 'verbal,' 'visual' or 'sonic', or all of them together?

As Eco has long argued for,

> To say that light is a *medium* is a refusal to realize that there are at least three definitions of 'light'. Light can be a *signal of information* [as the result of electricity]. Light can be a *message* [I'm at home];

> and light can be a *channel* [to read a book]. In each of these cases *the impact of a phenomenon on the social body* varies according to the role it plays in the communication chain. (Eco, 1995, p. 139, emphasis added)

Unquestionably, at the core of today's digital cultures, and growing, is the centrality the visual quality of communication has acquired. The number of, both private and public, digital images defies sensible assessment, as day-by-day individuals and groups storytell their existence. Whatever the estimate, it can be safely stated that there are more images *produced* in a single year than were ever throughout the whole history of photography (BuzzFeed, 2012).

As the first rule of communication (i.e. who speaks on behalf of whom, representing what?) might be increasingly more complex to clearly frame on digital media, current shifting cultures could finally provide scholars and practitioners with the opportunity to rethink the visual as both a 'practice' and a communicative 'performance'.

What if, for instance, a State Department (SD) spokesperson tweeted as themselves and then repeated exactly the same note as the spokesperson on the SD's official Facebook page? Or the other way around? What is the impact of which precedes what in a dissemination sequence, and consequently, on its analysis? Furthermore, how to assess an image being referred from another source in support of one's arguing? Or incorporated in a TV interview or, again, being shown live at a White House's briefing? In other words, how to draw a line between different *persona*s (Jung, 1990, p. 123) communicating the same, as well as distinct, multimedia message/s on parallel and multiple digital platforms? Furthermore, how do 'audiences' decipher overlapping dynamics engaging the message, the platform and communicative threads of digital actors? Finally, who does still have the time to attentively, consciously, if not, *intentionally*, manage and appreciate all this in today's speeding-up cultures and politics?

If current digital cultures, whatever form they may take, are appreciated as visual/visual-centred/visual-led (Qualman, 2018), should effective visual competency be prioritized over verbal ones? Equally, how/should those who have power in their gift be aware of the strategic use of visual-led communication *and* storytelling practices for political action?

As far back as the early 1990s, Muzi Falconi (2004), with many others, signalled the extent to which communication had already become an autonomous player in the production and consumption of socio-political and cultural values. Thus, as communication becomes so much more than just a tool for the transmission of knowledge, it should be appreciated as knowledge in itself, and, hence, as truly 'agentic' (Bandura, 1999; Coole, 2005).

In turn, as political actors critically engage with the rapid evolution of multimedia formats across digital platforms, it would seem unavoidable for them to incorporate sensible notions of visual storytelling into their political thinking and daily practice. This chapter will therefore review the mission, strategies and implementation of political actors' agenda by reference to two major goals:

(1) To incorporate the visual and emotional qualities of communication for digital practice/s as effective 'storytelling';
(2) To master techniques and visual methodologies for the strategic planning and dissemination of storytelling as socio-political 'storylines'.

This chapter originates from the acknowledged centrality of visual communication, with its own bespoke features, to advance an operational definition of digital politics by means of visual storytelling. To do so, this essay relies on the 2012 IC's groundbreaking campaign to indict Commander Kony. By reference to the media quality of the campaign, the chapter aims to investigate the relation between visual storytelling for socio-political communication to recommend its integrated application as strategic storylines.

By exploring how to strategize media channels and communication operations across online and offline worlds in a target-oriented and responsive manner, the chapter advances a revised framework for the analysis and practice of visual politics on digital media. Final recommendations and identified best practices are suggested as merely temporary takeaways because of the volatile nature of current media developments.

Storytelling as an Agent of Order

As briefly introduced above, digital communication 'is' and 'works' across multiple and overlapping semiotic fields. These features seem to be particularly difficult to strategically manage because of [1] the multi-media and multi-platform quality of the digital; [2] the increased, and continuously increasing, role of the visual and [3] its very personalized usages. As a result, storytelling might be a notion to be revamped to structure some order in today's chaos.

Storytelling is today's buzzword. It is all-pervasive and more and more referred to as the new Holy Grail resolving each and every communication issue. Indeed, 'man is a storytelling animal by nature' (Eco, 1984, p. 509), and storytelling could be rightly appreciated as a pivot, if not the pivot, for all forms and formats of communication, from the visual to the verbal.

Because of its communicative quality, it could be argued that storytelling, by extension, should be approached as a solution equally applicable for cultural and political issues. Though, if everything is a 'story', including, possibly, the same storytelling format, then, as a practitioner, I'm puzzled by what this might signify and, operationally, lead to.

In view of its massive usage, storytelling has been equally referring to the practice of *telling* a story and that of *understanding* one, as much as, frequently, both of them at the same time. Beyond the practices above mentioned, as it were not enough already, storytelling could also be referred to as a process. Even journalism, as acutely noted by Ronson,

> …walks a line. Journalism is storytelling. We wait around for the best bits – the most engaging, extreme, colourful moments – and

> we stick them together, ignoring the boring stuff, turning life into a narrative. (Ronson, 2012, p. 71)

Though, as he concludes, 'there's shaping a story and there is making things up'.

To bring some clarity, this chapter argues for an epistemological differentiation between the concept of 'storytelling' and that of 'storyline'. Any differentiation between the two notions must not be approached as an academic exercise, but, instead, intended as a much-needed taxonomy for today's dissemination of overlapping digital cultures.

For the present context, storytelling is differentiated from storyline as follows: the former is the final result of multiple media forms, such as, for instance, the visual, the sonic and the verbal, as combined to purposely communicate. The latter, 'storyline', is the produced storytelling as strategically disseminated by means of target-oriented operations; these operations are media-driven and platform-informed to specifically tailor the storytelling content for distinct, yet fully integrated, digital storylines.

Both notions incorporate the idea of combining form with content with their most revealing difference being their consequentiality: one storytelling is translated into bespoke storylines when it is *strategically* disseminated by means of dedicated operations including, but not limited to, the apt usage of digital channels and online/offline platforms.

If the above framework is accepted, it consequently follows that all socio-political actors that are part of today's far-reaching communication system, from small community centres to international NGOs, from local stakeholders to United Nations agencies, face the challenge of continuously re/tuning production strategies to translate (visual) storytelling into strategized storylines. The case study of the IC's campaign will be used to explore in detail this set of considerations.

The Case Study

The IC's (2012) campaign has been extensively researched and widely reviewed from a multitude of perspectives, with contributions assessing its impact across academic and social fields (Campbell, 2012; Foreign Policy, 2012; Kanczula, 2012; The Guardian, 2012; The Huffington Post, 2012; Tunheim 2012).

Nevertheless, analyses were mostly synchronic to events with public commentators and academic researchers re-focusing on other priorities shortly after the campaign. In turn, this chapter addresses the IC's campaign from a distance, using the campaign itself as an opportunity to critically review practices of visual storytelling.

As such, the chapter will first contextualize the campaign within its wider socio-political and media framework, then review it by reference to established grammars of storytelling. Conclusions will recommend a sensible management of the relation between storytelling and storyline, with a few lessons learnt for prospective uses.

The IC's Campaign and Its Framework

The IC's campaign officially began on 5 March 2012 with the simultaneous release across YouTube, Vimeo and on the IC's website, of a 29-minute video (hereafter: IC, 2012). For IC, this represented the culmination of years of committed policies of socio-political awareness across a number of international *fora* nationally and globally.

IC's stated aim was to achieve the indictment of the Lord Resistance Army's Commander Joseph Kony, and IC explicitly timed its campaign to coincide with the US Presidential Election year.

IC arguably ran its integrated communication strategy on a double gamble. Firstly, the length of the video went, and still does, against all rules and best practices for online communication. Tunheim (2012) quantified in three minutes the average running time of successful YouTube videos and in four minutes the average running time of the top 10 YouTube videos; IC was surely aware of the dramatically decreasing attention span of audiences (Qualman, 2018): to argue for a visual-driven storytelling of 29 minutes promised to be an endeavour with unpredictable outcomes.

Secondly, IC chose to synchronize the launch with the US' Presidential Election when public interest in political topics might be expected to rise. Though, the same rise in interest could have equally deprived IC of precious prime-time attention, as political news fights for a place on daily news bulletins and across the political debate.

While it is difficult to speculate on which supporting intelligence IC might have relied on for its assessment, it should be argued that IC viewed the communication challenge as an opportunity to wage a media *Blitzkrieg*. IC chose the election year to enforce a deadline-driven approach as its Damocles' sword to leverage on its targeted stakeholders, the Democratic and Republican parties. The menace implicit in this strategy is that failing to engage with the IC's agenda would incur the high cost of losing the primary targeted audience IC was after: US' young voters.

In the author's words,

> …we need to remind them [US politicians] that, in this election year of fighting and name-calling, no matter what side you are on, this is something we can all agree on. (IC, 2012, 24:04)

By using *tactically* the US' election year, IC built up *strategically* its agenda both nationally and internationally: in turn, the efficaciousness of its engagement policy might be rightly appreciated as truly Kissinger-ian.

Nationally, IC's explicit strategy employed a bottom-up commitment to lobby 20 American public/cultural figures and 12 American political representatives for the arrest of Kony (Fig. 12.1).

To make 'Kony world news by redefining the propaganda we see every day, all day, that dictates who and what we pay attention to' (IC, 2012, 24:50) required the smooth and simultaneous integration of actions both online and offline:

Fig. 12.1. Cultural and Political Targeted Stakeholders, Screenshot from Video. *Source:* IC (2012, 23:10).

lobbying the 20+12 public figures was carried out taking full advantage of all digital platforms, or, according to the taxonomy suggested above, by employing multimedia storytelling as strategized storylines.

Using cultural icons as 'influencers' led IC to gain massive coverage and to successfully achieve its leverage attempt: for instance, a tweet from Oprah skyrocketed threads on the topic from 66K to more than nine million in less than 24 hours (The Huffington Post, 2012).

Furthermore, social media actions were not used as an aim in itself (to gain followers and/or likes), but as a fully functional and integrated component to IC's strategic effort, which was meant to culminate with the *Cover The Night*'s appointment.

> [We will] blanket every street in every city till the sun comes up […] we will be smart and we will be thorough […] the rest of the world […] will wake up with hundreds of thousands of posters demanding justice on every corner (IC, 2012, 25:40)

Meanwhile, on 21 March, US senators Inhofe and Coons put forward a resolution

> condemning Joseph Kony and his ruthless guerrilla group for a 26-year campaign of terror […to back up] the effort of Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and the newest country, South Sudan, to stop Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army. (Inhofe, 2012)

An official statement pledged support 'for the US' effort to help regional forces pursue commanders of the militia group' across both aisles of the Senate. Incidentally, in a rather surprising example of bi-partisanship during election time Senator Graham stated that:

> *When you get 100 million Americans looking at something, you will get our attention*. This YouTube sensation is gonna help the Congress be more aggressive and will do more to lead to his demise than all other action combined. (Kern, 2015, p. 201, emphasis added)

Through a comprehensive plan articulated with the combined arrangement of multiple actions, the campaign achieved unprecedented success in its reshaping of the public discourse: by incorporating media, channels and platforms as part of the campaigning, IC consistently tailored its storytelling into a series of consistent and strategized targeted storylines. Indeed, the resulting conversations rendered Kony truly famous, as IC had hoped by the sheer force of numbers (the 100 million Americans quoted above).

The campaign proved to be the first one to tactically rely on, and fully use, digital media for online activism, successfully re/framing public and cultural agendas (Kanczula, 2012).

IC's commitment to root its campaign on a community of focused and engaged participants (as argued throughout the video), thoroughly and consistently supported implementation of its agenda through activities on digital media and public channels. IC explicitly reminded viewers that participants in the project should be termed neither participants nor audiences. Instead, IC claimed that, by joining in the campaign, individuals would not 'study but shape human history' (IC, 2012, 28:25): in so doing, they would truly become empowered and efficacious digital actors. By achieving 'real' outcomes, as exemplified by President Obama's letter (see below), IC's dedicated community, the US youth, would feel fully empowered and would therefore commit further to disseminate IC's storytelling.

In turn, IC reiterated its call for dedicated activism by direct reference to the wider flow of global political events, including the unfolding 'Arab Spring', to exemplify the acquired centrality of digital media as tools of accountability (IC, 2012: Teaser).

IC's Campaign under Storytelling Lenses

As stated above, this chapter aims to critically review the communication efficacy of the IC's video as translated into a set of comprehensive storylines. As much as issues of veridicality are crucial to socio-political communication, these lie outside the present realm of intervention. For instance, the above-mentioned Obama letter (see IC, 2012, 18:50) should be critically reviewed in its truth-fulness and trust-fulness as a best fitting example of the difference between 'shaping a story' and 'making things up'.

Visual polysemy has been previously argued in its capacity to turn a single image into multiple and co-existing meaning-making processes (Barthes, 1977). Visual images are indeed semiotically 'open' (Eco, 1989) because of the 'irreducible plural' and the 'overcrossing' of meanings they endlessly generate (Barthes, 1977, p. 159).

The following analysis will combine the storytelling formats of the Narrative Arc and the Hero's Journey. These two techniques will be complemented by reference to basic archetypes and to the three ingredients part of each story 'Theme, Coherence and Plausibility' (Lupton, 2017, p. 36).

Freytag (1894) identified five consequential parts in the analysis of any dramatic work: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Through implementation of the Narrative Arc approach, the following storytelling has been identified and argued for (Table 12.1).

As per the rules of visual communication (Cartier-Bresson, 2018), even the smallest alteration may illicit dramatic changes to *any* storytelling; if even a single photograph carries the potential multiplicity of co-existing messages (Barthes' 'irreducible plural'), the semiotic possibilities for a 29-minute video are virtually infinite.

Indeed, the above Narrative Arc is not the sole possible storytelling, and different ones could be identified via the intersection of alternative *studia* and

Table 12.1. Freytag's Five Consequential Parts in the Analysis of Any Dramatic Work.

Exposition	*00:00–01:55*	Today's world is being re-defined by digital media and its overlapping boundaries. We all have become part of a single community, *and so are you*
Rising Action	*01:55–08:20*	Jacob changed my [Jason Russell's] life. Gavin, 'my son', did the same. I care for Gavin and Jacob and Jacob ran away from Kony. This made Kony personal to me, *and – as we all belong to the same community – this should become personal to you too*
Climax	*10:36–17:10*	Kony's capital crimes Vs. the inaction of the international community. Kony's abductions would have been top media stories if they happened in the United States. Digital media *empower us all* to re/prioritize agendas
Falling Action	*17:10–22:55*	In the past we didn't know or could not act. *Now you know and can make a difference, why wouldn't you?*
Resolution	*23:00–29:10*	Gavin recommends a solution. The strategy is to make Kony visible with clear tactics and operations. *Your actions shape history*

puncta (plural of Barthes' *studium* and *punctum*). These two notions were left overall unclarified, if not unresolved, by Barthes, who would roughly identify the *studium* as 'meanings that are nameable […] given cultural meanings that we understand at once' (Barthes, 1981, p. 44). The *punctum*, by contrast,

> will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me […an] accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). […] The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like / I don't like. The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*. (Barthes, 1981, pp. 26–27)

Storytelling's semiotics might be placed at the intersection between multiple and shifting combinations of *studia* and *puncta*, i.e. of different liking and loving emotions. The better a storytelling is arranged in its combination of form by content, the more focused, constrained and finalized its polysemy is: IC's storytelling was majestically arranged, first, and then strategically translated into its consequential storylines as dichotomies on the tone of 'Us vs. them', 'Young vs. old' and 'Commitment vs. apathy', or in other words, of 'Good vs. evil'.

However, visual polysemy should not too easily disregard as 'tamed' for the present context; because of the synchronic quality of the visual (Paivio, 1990), *puncta* perform distinctive storytellings through the highly personalized quality (the loving mentioned above) in the relation between the frame and the viewer. Furthermore, the process might occur both at a quantitative and qualitative level; the former when different audiences look at the same video, with the latter happening as the same audience engages the video at different times, and, hence, within shifting phenomenological states of 'being in the world'.

In reference to Freytag's Narrative Arc, storytelling was identified among multiple potential options available. This recognized storytelling might indeed be questioned by reference to alternative *puncta*, in consideration to chosen events and their lengths. In order to validate the shared analysis, this will be tested against the format of the Hero's Journey.

This approach, like the Narrative Arc, has a long history (Campbell, 1949), often overlapping with psychoanalytic notions of myths (Eliade, 1976) and archetypes (Jung, 1990). Regardless of its different features, what all paradigms share is the notion of 'change' occurring to the main character, the 'Hero'. By storytelling how the Hero becomes other than that which they were before, change makes each and every story both personally relevant and universal.

In short, the format of the Hero's Journey goes as such: an ordinary context is unsettled because of a sudden change requiring the Hero to act upon; by answering their call and leaving the comforts of their past life, the character faces a number of challenges that makes them 'other' and 'more' by the time they return home. Classic examples include *the Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *The*

Odyssey and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. These stories present an educational journey for *any* audience to learn by personification: this eventually makes even the most distant journey truly memorable as it is relevant to each and every one (Table 12.2).

Lupton argues that the five ingredients of each story are 'Arc, Change, Theme, Coherence and Plausibility' (Lupton, 2017, p. 36). The arc element has been addressed

Table 12.2. Semiotic Strategies: Application of Narrative Arc, Hero's Journey and Archetype.

Narrative Arc	**The Hero's Journey**	**Archetype**
Today's world is being re-defined by digital media and its overlapping boundaries. We all have become part of a single community, *and so are you*	The Hero leaves their previous community and becomes one with IC to change the world	*The Young Hero*
Jacob changed my [Jason Russell's] life. Gavin, 'my son', did the same. I care for Gavin and Jacob and Jacob ran away from Kony. This made Kony personal to me, *and – as we all belong to the same community – this should become personal to you too*	Jason cares and has offered himself as an example of social commitment	*The Mentor*
Kony's capital crimes Vs. the inaction of the international community. Kony's abductions would have been top media stories if these happened in the United States. Digital media *empower us all* to re/prioritize agendas	They don't do anything. Where do you stand?	*The Shadow*
In the past we didn't know or could not act. *Now you know and can make a difference, why wouldn't you?*	Seize the Sword and fight!	*The Warrior*
Gavin recommends a solution. The strategy is to make Kony visible with clear tactics and operations. *Your actions shape history*	The final reward	*The Wise Man*

above in its five components. The change component has been similarly assessed, by pinpointing the transformation from the 'Young Hero' into the 'Wise Man'.

The three elements that Lupton adds, namely, the theme, coherence and plausibility, address the extent to which any storytelling would require to be validated as both understandable and valuable. Indeed, IC informed its storytelling with coherent and plausible elements by presenting convincing characters, while crafting a consistent and consequential flow.

Above, the storytelling techniques of the Narrative Arc and the Hero's Journey have been matched and further complemented by reference to some basic archetype figures. The pending issue seems now to pivot on who is the Hero that IC particularly targets to transform beyond the storytelling's most immediate representation.

As the classics dictate, the Hero is someone that does not study history, but rather shapes it. Exactly like Jason was changed by the story of Jacob, everyone engaging the IC's campaign becomes the transformed Hero: Jason's transformation is his viewers' journey: each viewer is the Hero shaping today's events as history and making a difference, globally.

IC's comprehensive storytelling run, undoubtedly, in a very strategic manner through offline and online engagement tactics and very effective follow-up operations: as such, it will be here referred as an effective storyline, which led to a yet unparalleled global impact making Kony truly famous (The Huffington Post, 2012; Tunheim, 2012). All this was majestically complemented, and viewing data unquestionably state so, with a final call to action (IC, 2012, 23:00–29:10), further empowered by the prospect of future actions (IC, 2012, 29:10–30:00).

All three semiotic strategies used above (the Narrative Arc, The Hero's Journey and the archetypes), as completed by reference to Lupton's toolkit, converge on one clearly argued storytelling: you, the US' digital youth of 2012, will be making history by joining *our Quest*.

IC successfully translated its storytelling as storylines to leverage targeted American cultural, public and political (20+12) stakeholders. Once IC gained the ability to shape its storytelling as storyline (see below), those wishing to challenge/criticize/question IC's communication had not the ability, nor the resources, to do so. Furthermore, IC prevented conversations from happening on its platforms, thus forcing confrontational storytellings to argue their counter-narrative/s *elsewhere*.

Eventually, it should be recognized that all oppositional voices challenged IC's storytelling by either reasoning or fact-checking; further, they challenged IC's storytelling through, mostly, if not solely, verbal arguments. In addition, they did so on platforms with a much-limited audience: even for those commenting on Facebook, numbers were infinitely smaller than IC's. As such, IC's rooted and committed community proved the strongest strategic asset at its disposal (Campbell, 2012).

For instance, Kagumire as one of most respected commentators *on* Uganda *from* Uganda had worldwide recognition as expert and scholar on the region, though with a very limited public profile. She still covers socio-political issues of her country and the Region, collaborating with a wide array of political actors and very respected partners (Kagumire, 2012).

Whatever her authority and expertise, she could not digitally compete with IC, as a crude comparison between viewing data on YouTube, as per end of April 2020, indicates: 102M (with 236K subscribers and 1.3M likes) for IC Vs. 637K (with 443 subscribers and 9.5K) for Kagumire. Furthermore, Kagumire would not have had the time, nor, arguably, the resources, to shape a storytelling as visually compelling and emotional-driven as that of IC; like for any chess game, early positioning proved of capital importance.

Publics, 'public opinions' and 'civil societies' are *radically* evolving because of, and through, digital assets and, increasingly more, because of the emotional capital of visual media and storytelling formats. Visual communication, in virtue of its synchronic grammar of communication, has altered verification procedures for issues of trust and accountability: in result, the disjunction of the real from the represented is widening and becoming increasingly un-knowable. This is the reason why the strategic usage of media, channels and platforms to tailor a storytelling as purposeful storylines might be rightly assessed as key to managing contemporary digital cultures.

Conclusions

Smartphones are worldwide more present than toothbrushes (Qualman, 2018). In result, media production and dissemination capabilities fully intertwine with and thoroughly enhance today's social media practices across multiple and overlapping platforms.

In such a context, it could be argued that noticeable and effective communication is at everyone's fingertips because of smartphones' availability and easiness of production; and with it, the very concrete ability to re/shape current cultures through dedicated and focused socio-political activities. Storytelling, thus, can be looked at the empowering toolkit through which digital users have the potential to aptly and strategically plan and pursue their aims.

The amount of visual information being produced on a daily basis is unparalleled and continuously growing. The visual is the object of enormous media production and, consequentially, of digital dissemination; in turn, visual content constitutes the vast majority of all produced, distributed and consumed data (Deloitte Global, 2017).

However, as Toscani argues, to be able (and/or capacitated) to produce a photograph doesn't make one a photographer (Toscani, 2017): in fact, media production skills are not one with media literacy competencies. Indeed, visual communication requires both the practical skills and the sensibility that only education can foster: as such, it asks for the software, i.e. the thinking abilities, possibly more than the hardware, i.e. the camera.

The challenge visual forms bring to current digital frameworks extends from the pre-production phase to the production and post-production, as suggested through the above discussion on the Stop Kony campaign. This impacts current debates on the ontology and epistemology of storytelling, and of visual storytelling, specifically. It consequently changes how we perceive ourselves as 'human beings', and fully informs what we are becoming.

This is the reason why the relation between the real and its interpretations, alongside its disseminations as dedicated stories, continues to gather attention across all digital actors contributing to today's quickly evolving politics of communication.

As each image conveys the potential for multiple and, even contrasting, semiotic spaces and emotional universes, to choose one image over another is already (and should indeed be appreciated as such) a purposeful choice on the real as 'that specific real'.

Alongside with the issue of which real to articulate as what storytelling to be then communicated as a dedicated storyline, decision-making on practices and strategies, processes and policies, do inform all phases of communication. How does the gigantic amounts of pictures endlessly shot worldwide on smartphones change representation and understanding of visual societies? Does it facilitate, or even promote, visual literacy in terms of skills development and/or competencies enhancement? As the world is increasingly narrated visually, is it also better visually understood?

To become effective visual storytellers, one is required to master visual storytelling's production capabilities in its operational and strategic usage; s/he is therefore required to manage the tools and competencies of today's grammars of socio-political engagement across both the media and the socio-political realms.

As the former is thoroughly ineffective without the latter, these skill sets are required to turn storytelling into bespoke storylines, first through the crafting of evocative and consistent storytelling, and then with its strategic dissemination as convincing storylines.

IC engaged the visual form as a powerful communicative tool, and fully adopted aesthetics as its semiotic propeller (Fusari, *forthcoming*). As such, IC's success should be identified in the apt combination of form with content, both at the storytelling and storyline moments.

The majestic quality of IC's storytelling was achieved through a key feature of storytelling techniques, i.e. the effective usage of emotions. As +Acumen, a leading platform on digital literacy, argues, storytelling is 'feelings, nothing more than feelings' (+Acumen, 2019), and this is what makes storytelling templates fully evocative and *therefore* convincing.

The IC's campaign to indict Kony successfully implemented the relation between the emotive component of visual storytelling and its *strategic* usage on digital media as bespoke storylines. This essay explored the relation between the real and the represented, with particular attention to the specific visual literacy requirements, now as much as then, that are required to manage the visual storytelling of politics.

The case study of the IC's campaign, among several other considerations, marked the acquired capability of media, and visual media specifically, to impact with considerable magnitude today's socio-political discourse. IC's unquestionable ability to turn its storytelling into powerful storylines is the reason why IC was chosen as a still relevant case study nine years after its appearance, which is truly a very long time for digital parameters.

The IC's campaign illustrates that the successful usage of the visual quality of storytelling, with its emotional capital for digital media, is key to its dissemination as understood storylines. As Kevin Spacey argues, once storytelling is effective, 'you will have kids forcing media on their peers in a way that any blockbuster movie could only dream of' (Spacey, 2013). Indeed, this trickle-down model was witnessed at every step of the IC's campaign, from the crafting of the storytelling to its dissemination strategies as storylines: US youth was the unstoppable actor forcing IC's agenda on celebrities and political figures (the 20+12) for them to leverage IC's un-negotiated agenda onto Washington.

New actors beyond the State system, what has previously been addressed under the rubric of 'public diplomacy', have surfaced to impact and re/shape cultures, publics and politics worldwide. Their tool to raise, re/direct and possibly re/root cultural paradigms of social changes has expanded to include the apt production, distribution and engagement of (visual) storytelling as understood (multimedia and hence: multisensorial) storylines.

However, activities that are part of today's digital politics continue to shift across evolving forms of engagement on unmapped territories, with no clear direction for analysts or practitioners yet to follow; IC's twin bracelets included in its distributed toolkit or the 'pay as you can' fundraising model/supporting scheme (IC, 2012, 25:15) are very clear examples of bespoke strategies to commit targeted audiences in a sensible way for the target group.

In such a fluid and hybrid scenario, the synchronic quality of visual media challenges the basics of cognitive processes: for instance, to say 'the red rose smells' is different from drawing or picturing a red rose because graphic elements are processed at different speeds and by different areas of the brain (Caviglioli, 2019). Hence, distinct elements within the frame (as well as outside it, for instance: the prospective) are differently prioritized by the audience's mind: the result produces multiple, co-existing and ever-changing cognitive understandings.

Politics and communication rely on, and, in turn, feed human beings; the visual as the adjective to both media and storytelling, identifies a field of highly questioned, massively evolving and exceptionally volatile semiotic engagements: all the above contributes to approach current cultures as 'post-symbolic communication' (Lanier, 2011).

Visual-driven storytelling is increasingly popular and popularized on smartphones: its over-production and consequential re/informing presence endlessly changes forms of public knowledge as communication, understanding and media dissemination of contents.

As much as storytelling was previously recommended as an agent to order visual communication, it should be eventually appreciated that things are not that easy, nor yet already solved: in fact storytelling, as a format of *visual* communication, informs digital politics as *multiplied* shifting representations.

The synchronic (Paivio, 1990) quality of the visual should be therefore recognized as ontological; it should be further appreciated as the definitive argument against the supposed simplicity, easiness or immediacy of this specific communicative form. In fact, the visual is a complex and multifaceted media form

that requires literacy skills development and intellectual sophistication (Fusari, *forthcoming*).

The profound mark that IC produced with its Kony 2012 video is yet unmatched and offers a final opportunity for two major takeaways, with both of them becoming increasingly relevant:

(1) crafting a powerful visual storytelling is as challenging as effective when audiences understand it through effective storylines: IC would have never re/shaped the public discourse *globally* without its 29-minute superb video as tailored into convincing storylines;
(2) turning storytelling into storylines must be consistently arranged through credible, shareable and consistent sets of targeted operations on multiple and integrated platforms.

As media channels and digital platforms acquired an undisputed centrality, their operational management and strategic engagement continues to be at the centre of the communication debate. How to prioritize media forms, digital platforms and the dichotomy between social media and digital networks when communicating politics? What to make of digital actors that overlap and/or re/shape strategic communication to their advantage? How, eventually, to make sense and respond to trolls?

IC proved the extent to which a compelling visual storytelling has the capability to effectively implement strategized media actions as engaged storylines. Visual storytelling was identified as that which matches the right form for a specific content and, in turn, the right content for the identified media form; its result is then purposely and tactically tailored into dedicated storylines. IC's storytelling chose simplicity and linearity over multifaceted richness; it did so to regiment its sensorially articulated storytelling into a monolithic storyline of Good vs. Evil.

Strategy is indeed pivotal to communicate the real as *that representation* through the tailoring of each and every available medium: the sonic, the visual and the verbal, each of them requires dedicated frameworks and offers the opportunity for the integrated and enhanced engagement of their bespoke features. For instance, silence as the absence of sound, has the ability to thoroughly reframe and re/signify multimedia communication to purposely activate an emotion and achieve an aim.

Similarly, what is referred to as 'negative space' could be purposely used as a communicative feature alongside aesthetic notions of colour, shape, lines, and spaces of composition. In other words, there is no form of communication that cannot be used tactically to achieve a key result.

This brief analysis of what is still – in 2021 – the most effective and impactful socio-political campaign was aimed to specifically evince the centrality of the visual as the form of communication shaping media and politics globally. The visual was pleaded not only as the medium informing today's cultures globally, but as a specific form of communication increasingly crucial to engage with socio-political

issues. In addition, visual storytelling was identified as the pivot through which contents are convened as purposeful storylines.

Failing to tactfully and strategically master these elements will continue to make visual communication un-appreciated, un-strategized and overall misunderstood, turning inter-personal and social understanding, as well as appreciation of human and cultural perception, in a prolonged state of crisis (Ryan-Mosely, 2021). This is the reason why approaching an educated and strategic appreciation of the visual medium, and of storytelling as a format of communication, remains, today, more relevant than ever.

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