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## Obamacare

### Visual Rhetoric in Newspapers

BARBARA EMANUEL AND MARCOS ANDRÉ FRANCO MARTINS

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# Obamacare: Visual Rhetoric in Newspapers

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*Abstract: This work analyses first pages of American newspapers in order to identify strategies of visual rhetoric. The newspapers in question were published on June 29, 2012, the day after the Supreme Court ruling that confirmed the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, a comprehensive plan to reform the country's healthcare system. Since Court sessions may not be photographed, reports could not have been accompanied by photographs of the event itself and newspapers had to employ alternative strategies of visual representation, such as portrayal of pro- and anti-protesters, definition of main characters, emphasis on healthcare workers and their patients, and the use of symbols. The results of the analysis demonstrate how decisions about visual elements are essential to the rhetoric strategies in mass communication. News design operates in a context of geographical, historical, and ideological situations and intentions, so text and images collaborate to shape the message, operating in a rhetorical fashion.*

*Keywords: Communication, Newspapers, Visual Communication, Images, Visual Rhetoric*

## Introduction

When selecting an image, newspaper editors may consider several criteria, such as technical quality in terms of resolution, exposure, granularity, and so on, format and framing in relation to the space available on the page, and relevance to the news. Furthermore, images should be considered in service of the message. Printed news is communicated not only by words, but also by the complete visual presentation. That is, the same text might be presented in different ways, visually, resulting in different messages, each with different rhetorical appeals. According to Gui Bonsiepe, "'Pure' information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins" (Bonsiepe 1965, 180). As elements of visual rhetoric, images not only illustrate written words, but also help shape the message.

The influence of visual rhetoric can be observed by comparing different approaches taken to report the same story. On June 29, 2012, a large number of American newspapers covered the same event in their front pages: the day before, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, a comprehensive healthcare reform. The law, signed by President Barack Obama in 2010, promotes changes such as prohibiting insurance companies from denying coverage for pre-existing medical conditions and allowing patients to choose their doctors. This court ruling happened during the 2012 presidential campaign of democrat Barack Obama and republican Mitt Romney, and made news of the ruling especially relevant when it comes to party politics and divided opinions.

## Presence and Evidence

Images have the power of creating presence, that is, reporting events in a manner that lets readers feel as if they were present. While words might evoke mental pictures, images are able to actually present events to the audience (Kjeldsen 2012). Photography, in particular, carries an aspect of not only presence, but also evidence. The indexical relationship between photographs and that what they portray gives them a status of document, of a register of what happened, working rhetorically as a credential of credibility (Barthes 1977a). In the case of the Obamacare ruling, a challenge to newspaper editors when it comes to establishing a sense of presence was the fact that there were no pictures of the event itself, since the court does not allow photographs of debates nor voting sessions. A few papers used, as an alternative, a court-style drawing of the

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moment when Chief Justice John Roberts addressed the group (Figure 1). The use of illustration adds to the feeling of presence, but is inefficient as evidence, due to the lack of indexicality, characteristic to photographs.

Another alternative is to show photographs of the reactions to the event—protesters, for and against Obamacare, gathering outside the courthouse in an attempt to indirectly document the ruling. Some newspapers chose to show pictures of healthcare professionals and their patients, while others published photographs and illustrations of symbolic representations of concepts such as justice, health, and patriotism.

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**This artist rendering shows Chief Justice John Roberts, center, speaking at the Supreme Court in Washington, Thursday. From left are, Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Stephen Breyer, Clarence Thomas, Antonin Scalia, Roberts, Anthony Kennedy, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Elena Kagan.**

Figure 1: Illustration and the Sense of Presence
*Source: The Bemidji Pioneer (Bemidji, MN)*

## Protesters: Reaction to the Event

We identified four main categories of images of protesters outside the courthouse: emphasis on *pro-Obamacare* groups; emphasis on *anti-Obamacare* groups; separate photographs of both groups, with equal prominence for each one; and photographs of both groups together (usually taken during heated debates). Some newspapers used scale as a tool to emphasize one of the groups, showing larger pictures of either pro or anti-protesters, while others published images of only one of the groups. The front page of Washington D.C.'s Express consisted mainly of a large photograph portraying a group holding up signs defending Obamacare, with a woman raising her arm and pointing up, in the foreground, along with the headline "UPHELD" (Figure 2). The manner in which her hand was treated, so that the letters H and E would not cover it, created a physical connection between the word and the main character. Therefore, photograph and text operate as one single image, rhetorically bringing together the headline and the joy in the face of the protester, transferring a positive meaning to the word "upheld."

Figure 2: Connection between Image and Headline
*Source: Express (Washington, D. C.)*

Figure 3: Religious Fervor versus Celebration
*Source: The Day (New London, CT)*

The Day published images of both groups, with the main picture portraying opposing protesters: two men lying on the ground and two men praying on their knees, with the courthouse in the background, a secondary picture showing a group of women smiling and holding up pink signs in favor of the law (Figure 3). The scene depicted in the main picture denotes an unusual behavior, suggesting eccentricity or even madness, while celebratory smiles in the other picture convey a joyful attitude. The bigger size and top position on the page highlight the picture of the opposing protesters, while the addition of the secondary photo creates a contrast in terms of attitudes (masculinity, tension, and eccentricity versus femininity, fun, and joy), which emphasizes even more the negative aspects of the main picture. The men's body language, clothing and bibles imply Christian faith, which is reinforced by the word "pray" in the caption. Consequently, even if the article has no mention of a link between opposition to Obamacare and religious interests, readers can infer this connection from the photograph. In addition, the choice of showing men lying and kneeling, instead of a more discrete demonstration of faith, hints to an extreme behavior, assigning a radical character to opposing protesters and to religious groups in general.

If, on one hand, different sizes may indicate different levels of importance, on the other hand, images with the same size may signify equivalence in value, but bringing attention to the division in opinions. Figure 4 shows a montage suggesting symmetry between both sides, each one with their leader (Obama/Romney), a demonstrator holding a sign, and a prominent member of congress. In the middle, the courthouse, implying that justice is in neither side. A vertical line between the text blocks stresses the divergence and continues, visually, in the courthouse central columns, alluding to the split in the Supreme Court votes (it was a narrow five to four ruling). The headline, "Fight not over yet," adds to the sense of equilibrium, without defined winners or losers.

Figure 4: Balance
*Source: The Repository (Canton,OH)*

Figure 5: Contrast
*Source: San Diego Union-Tribune (San Diego, CA)*

The San Diego Tribune showed equal-size pictures of both groups, strengthening the sensation of victory/loss through top/bottom positioning on the page (Figure 5) and visual contrast. The celebration photograph on top shows several pink signs, while the opposition group, in the bottom, carries black signs and wears dark colored clothes—the contrast in chromatic vibration reinforces the disparity in emotional vibration. Body language is also different in each image: raised arms, smiles and shouting in the top one, downcast faces and closed mouths in the bottom one. The similarities between both images, as the size, the background (the courthouse), the same kind of elements (people, signs, megaphone) and having roughly the same amount of people, makes it easier for readers to focus on the differences. That is, having constants may operate rhetorically as a way to emphasize the variables.

## Characters: People Involved

Another way of conveying a sense of presence without pictures of the event itself is to show the people involved in it. Like a movie poster that shows the main actors instead of a scene, some newspapers represented the ruling by presenting the judges and the presidential candidates. Key players of the event, the Supreme Court judges appeared in several first pages. Some of them showed a schematic list of their names and portraits, pointing out how each one of them had voted. The Star-Ledger added a picture of Barack Obama, placed in a way that he seems to be standing in front of the judges, conveying a sense of leadership (Figure 6).

The list of characters grows in other newspapers, with the addition of Mitt Romney. In the next example, the Supreme Court judges appear at the bottom of the page, as some kind of "supporting cast," while Obama and Romney are on the top, as the main characters (Figure 7). Chief Justice John Roberts is promoted to a "leading role," when his portrait is published next to Obama and Romney (Figure 8). His importance is justified, since his vote was decisive in keeping the constitutionality of Obamacare. Here, according to the Western order of reading—from top to bottom, from left to right—Obama is in the first position, followed by Romney and then Roberts. In the Arizona Daily Star (Figure 9), Roberts is in the first position, far left, followed by the candidates. Here, the design includes taglines that can work as an indication of the role they play in the story. This kind of over-simplification, reducing the many aspects involved, can be seen in movie posters as well: "the rebel," "fighting for freedom," "looking for love,"—where stereotypes introduce characters, so that audiences can decide for whom they root.

Figure 6: Leadership—Obama and the Judges
*Source: The Star-Ledger (Newark, NJ)*

Figure 7: Characters. Main and Supporting Cast
*Source: The Orange County Register (Santa Ana, CA)*

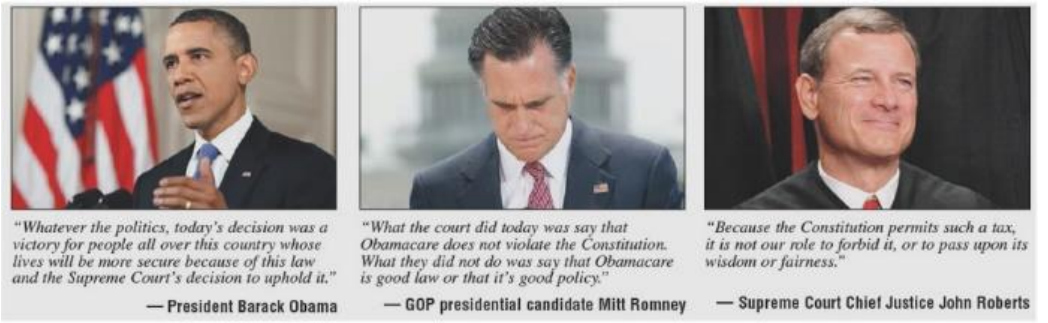


Figure 8: Protagonists, Roberts in the Main Cast
*Source: Casa Grande Dispatch (Cara Grande, AZ)*

Figure 9: Defining Profiles, Taglines for Each Character
*Source: Arizona Daily Star (Tucson, AZ)*

Figure 10: The Man in the Middle, Referencing Movie Posters
*Source: The Bakersfield Californian (Bakersfield, CA)*

## Healthcare Professionals and their Patients

Images of medical care bring the focus to practical consequences of the ruling, either the ones considered to be positive, such as the people in need who will gain from it, or negative, like the raise in government cost and possible tax raise. Patients who look healthy minimize anxiety regarding costs, since they do not seem to need a lot of care in the near future. Images of patients with visible symptoms, on the other hand, might remind readers of impending expenses.

Inspiring readers to identify themselves with patients may cause empathy, as in "this could be my parent, my child; this could be me," which can influence opinions. The choice of photograph is decisive when it comes to empathy, since this emotion is highly related to human features, like gaze and posture. The main image on the cover of the Inland Valley Daily Bulletin (Ontario, CA) shows a crowded waiting room, where patients have their backs to the camera and consequently, to readers (Figure 11). From the only two faces we can see, one is blurred, in the background, and other is covered by a mask. This lack of eye contact can significantly reduce the empathy, so readers see the people in the waiting room as numbers, as a warning of how crowded waiting rooms can be.

The opposite effect can be observed in Figure 12, where a sick child stares at the camera and, therefore, at the reader. The boy's gaze attracts the reader's, while his open posture invites them to come closer. The contrast between delicate infantile elements (the boy's soft hands and facial features, the print on his clothes, and the decorations on the wall) and elements that communicate sickness and suffering (bruises, a syringe, hands wearing surgical gloves) can be unsettling and engaging at the same time. His facial expression does not indicate explicitly neither suffering nor joy, but, instead, awareness and interest. He seems to be examining the reader, as if establishing a dialogue: "I am paying attention to you. What about you? Are you paying attention to me?." The appeal to protective instincts operates as an argument to endorse the new healthcare plan.

Figure 11: No Visual Contact, Less Empathy
*Source: Inland Valley Daily Bulletin (Ontario, CA)*

Figure 12: Emotional Appeal, Upset and Attraction.
*Source: The Daily Herald (Everett, WA)*

## Symbols

One of the most frequent images in first pages that day is the Supreme Court building, especially as background for protesters—the building on top, people on the bottom (Figure 13). The courthouse, with its columns and pediment, looks like a roman court, hovering over the crowd. Its shape is instantly recognizable, becoming a symbol for justice and rulings. In a metonymic relationship (*pars pro toto*, tool in place of action/result), the courthouse symbolizes justice in general. Its superior position conveys a sovereign attitude of justice over people, emphasizing a "top-bottom" decision, that is, a decision that comes from Supreme Court judges, who merely inform people about it.

Figure 13: Justice Over the People, Metonymic Relationship
*Source: North County Times (Escondido, CA)*

Figure 14: Passive Posture
*Source: Baltimore Sun (Baltimore, MD)*

Figure 15: Same Team
*Source: Denton Record-Chronicle (Denton, TX)*

Figure 16: Images-text Relationship
*Source: Florida Today (Melbourne, FL)*

Framing and posing may suggest relationships between demonstrators and justice, represented by the building. The photograph published by the Baltimore Sun shows the courthouse on the top (Figure 14), protestors in the foreground, and, since most people are facing backwards, emphasis is placed on the building and, consequently, the Court's action. The protesters' posture conveys a sense of passivity towards justice. In another newspaper, on the other hand, demonstrators are celebrating, raised arms and open mouths, facing the camera with the courthouse behind them (Figure 15). Their posture and the framing—placing the building exactly over their heads, transmit a sense that justice is on their side.

Florida Today (Figure 16) shows a photograph of protestors in favor of Obamacare celebrating, with the courthouse in the background and, on the top, the headline "It's the law." A raised hand, visually pointing at both the Court and the headline, suggests a reiteration of the ruling, restating to the reader that the decision is final, that victory has been achieved and it will persist. President Obama's quote, "Today's decision was a victory for people all over this country," alludes to the victory suggested by the image and operates as a connection between the photograph above it and the one right below, showing Obama during in a speech. As a result, his image is rhetorically connected to the concept of *victory*. The statement that victory belongs to everyone reinforces the idea that the achievement is his to offer.

Hermes' caduceus, often used as a symbol of medical practice, is used to associate the healthcare system with other concepts. Figure 17 shows a caduceus combined with a question mark, a symbol for doubt, for uncertainty. They are visually joined not only by position, but also by color and texture, appearing to be parts of the same object. This fusion transfers to the represented concepts—healthcare and doubt, emphasizing uneasiness and concern about confusing aspects of the new law.

Figure 17: Combination of Medical Practice and Doubt
*Source: Des Moines Register (Des Moines, IA)*

Figure 18: Combination of Medical Practice and Partisanship
*Source: Home News Tribune (East Brunswick, NJ)*

The Home News Tribune combined a caduceus with political symbols: substituting serpent heads with a donkey, symbol of the Democratic Party, and an elephant, symbol of the Republican Party (Figure 18), therefore highlighting the partisanship involved in the matter. The bottom part of the image gradually fades to white, what may suggest the gradual declining of the medical practice, that is, the possible dismantling of the American healthcare system because of the ruling. The presence of the donkey and the elephant, who appear to be arguing with each other, may give the impression that political disputes are the cause of such dismantling.

Another visual representation of medicine, a green line over black background mimicking a heartbeat monitor, may bring a sense of tension and anxiety (Figure 19). Since images are polysemous, there are other possible interpretations, such as *life*, *excitation*, or *health*. The illustration itself does not refer directly to the ruling, but both the narrowing of meaning and the connection to the events may be created by the use of text, establishing what Roland Barthes defines as a relationship of "anchorage" (Barthes, 1977b).

Figure 19: Text-image Anchorage
*Source: Iowa City Press-Citizen (Iowa City, IA)*

Texts can not only identify the object in the image, connecting it to an specific event, but also guide the reading through possible meanings, indicating which ones should be apprehended or discarded. Here, the anchorage happens with the headline "Supreme court upholds health care reform. What's next?." The first sentence connects the image to the Supreme Court ruling, and the second one delimits meanings to be read, since the question "What's next?" reiterate the feeling of anxiety, doubt and fear, discarding positive meanings such as *life* and *health*.

## Perspective and Framing

The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle's first page shows a photograph of people watching a live broadcast of President Obama on a giant screen (Figure 20). People, with their backs to the camera, mirror the readers' action, looking to the screen. The reader consequently can feel closer to the people in the photograph—they are all part of the same group, those who watch the events and wait for results with expectancy. The headline above the image adds to the connection: "Now that Obamacare has been upheld, what does that mean for you and me?"

The image is a representation of a representation of President Obama, since it is a photograph of a video frame, and that may create a feeling of distance, of separation. The physical distance between the screen and the people watching adds to the symbolic distance between readers and the President. Framing and perspective result in a sense of *us* (readers and people in the photograph) and *him* (Obama), which represents the detachment between the people (affected by the new law) and the government (where the law comes from).

Now that Obamacare has been upheld, what does that mean for you and me?

By Andrea Coombes
MarketWatch

SAN FRANCISCO – The Supreme Court's ruling Thursday to uphold the bulk of the health-care law – the biggest overhaul of the health-care system since Medicare was created in 1965 – means that some popular provisions, such as requiring insurers to accept people regardless of pre-existing conditions and to accept children up to age 26 on parents' plans – remain intact.

The ruling delivers a huge victory to President Barack Obama on

Small businesses seek answers A12

Court shifts left B11

Fox, CNN got it wrong B12

Pedestrians in downtown Chicago watch President Barack Obama speak on a giant monitor Thursday after the Supreme Court's decision upholding the vast majority of his health-care overhaul. Associated Press

Figure 20: Reader-Image Connection. Physical and Metaphorical Distance
*Source: Wyoming Tribune-Eagle (Cheyenne, WY)*

Figure 21 shows examples of how framing can establish a relationship of superiority/inferiority between Obama and Romney, even with pictures in the same size. In these photographs, they are both behind a podium, wearing dark suits, white shirts and ties in the country's colors. In the pair on the left, the framing in Obama's photograph leaves less space above his head, and more on the bottom, so he is visually superior to Romney. The background in Romney's picture strengthens the superiority: the Capitol, with its curves and light colors, frames Romney's head in a way that makes it look smaller. The straight and contrasting lines behind Obama, on the other hand, create diagonals that highlight his head, and an illuminated section of the ceiling works almost as a halo, at approximately eye level. In the pair on the right, the framing is similar in both pictures. Here, the space above heads is the same, leaving both faces at the same height. Behind Romney, there is only white sky, creating more contrast than there is between Obama and the walls in his background.

Figure 21: Highlight/Equilibrium through Framing and Composition
*Sources: Left, Palm Beach Post (Palm Beach, FL); Right, The Daily Union (Junction City, KS)*

## Conclusions

When someone chooses what to include in a layout, he or she also chooses what to omit. The procedure of emphasizing elements determines at what readers will look first, determines what is most important. The arrangement of elements in an area, the contrast or harmony between them, the general tone of a piece—all these aspects help to create an image that is perceived holistically and that may induce the reader to apprehend the message in a specific way. That is, the conveyance of news does not come as a natural consequence of the reported facts; it is a composition where text and image collaborate in a rhetorical construction.

Reporting an event that cannot be photographed evidences the composition character of the news, since, not having a direct image of the fact, it is necessary to adopt an alternative strategy of visual representation. If newspapers could publish photographs of Supreme Court judges issuing their opinion in favor of Obamacare, maybe many of them would have, taking advantage of the sense of neutrality a direct representation might convey. However, not being able to do so, they had to choose indirect representations for the intended message, punctuating the impression of intentional conception. The analysis of different approaches used in the reports of the court ruling shows how decisions related to the employment of visual elements are essential to the rhetorical composition of news. News design operates in a context of intentions and situations—geographical, historical, and ideological, since "nothing is free of rhetoric, […] visual manifestations emerge from particular historical circumstances, and […] ideological vacuums do not exist" (Kinross 1989, 143).

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