



Whose Image is It to Use? The Ethics of Persuasive Pictures in Political Advocacy

A number of years ago, a criminal justice reform organization, which has since closed, called The Justice Project took out a full-page ad in a publication aimed at policymakers. The ad promoted pending legislation making it harder to send people to death row. The ad highlighted the number of wrongful convictions, and featured a photo of a young, white man with his head in his hands. The point of the ad was to say “anyone can be wrongfully sentenced to death – this could be you or someone you know.” The young man in the photo was not on death row, or even in jail – it was a stock photo purchased from an image service.



Stock Image: [PickPik](#)

When the ad ran, nearly 100 people had been wrongfully sentenced to death since 1973, a number that has now reached more than 160 – about 10% of everyone sent to death row (Death Penalty Information Center, 2020). Anyone can be arrested, sent to jail, or even sentenced to death for a crime she or he did not commit – even people in stock photos.

Advocates understand the power of images. They carefully select what they judge is the right image, to make the right point, to the right audience, at the right time. Images can capture entire stories. They can boil complicated ideas into a single frame. Some images become iconic and are credited with changing the course of policy – or even history. Dorothea Lange showed Americans the reality of the Great Depression, photographs have helped spark advancements in civil rights, images of a drowned child drew international attention to refugees from the conflict in Syria, and a crying child became the face of US immigration policy. Advocates hope the image they choose impacts campaigns or policy, as the “Willie Horton” ad did in the 1988 presidential campaign. (Criss, 2018). These images, and many others, have helped draw public attention to critical issues and have helped spark change. They are also full of ethical challenges. One challenge is the choice of whose picture to use.

As far back as Aristotle persuaders have known the importance of identifying with an audience. People are more likely to support legislation or policy change if they think that could happen to them, their family, or someone they know. We’ve all heard people say “that could have been me” to explain why they put on a seatbelt, or “my mother was a victim” to support greater funding for breast cancer research.

Smart strategic advocates find connections between their issues and those with power to create change. They choose images that resonate with decision makers. For a policy maker to say “that could have been me” there has to be some connection between the picture and the policy maker. Images used by advocates need to look like policymakers, or those about whom the policymakers care.



One important group of policy makers is the U.S. Congress. The U.S. House and Senate create national policy and help drive the national policy agenda. Advocates know a lot about members of Congress and how to connect with them. Members of the House and Senate, on average, are whiter, older, wealthier, better educated, and more likely to be male than the rest of the population. (Congressional Research Service, United States Census)

This creates a challenge for advocates. On one hand, an advocate wants to create a visual connection between their cause and those with power. On the other hand, the advocate wants to be honest and representative of the facts and trends concerning certain issues, and advocates certainly do not want their campaign to make other problems worse. Many of those on whose behalf advocates work don't look like most policymakers. Most people sentenced to death (like most Americans) are not older, wealthy holders of advanced degrees. Should advocates use a stock image depicting a white male, potentially like many of the sons of many of the members of Congress, or an image of a person of color, in many ways a truer face of those most harmed by flaws in the penal system?

The question of image gets trickier on other issues such as immigration. Many who were brought to the United States as children, and whose parents did not have appropriate documentation, are a diverse group from various countries and regions. In pushing campaigns about such a diverse group, advocates may strategically look for images of people who could be in the same school or neighborhood of the children of policymakers – images of people who look like what policymakers think of as “typical” Americans. No doubt many of these young people fit that model – but many likely do not.

Using images of what policymakers may think of as “good” or “deserving” people may advance a policy, and at the same time reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes. The policy win may come at the cost of perpetuating structures that led to the problematic policy in the first place. Such images may be of people who the policy change will impact – they are ‘true’ or accurate in that sense - but in showing only part of the truth the images may have other negative consequences. On the other hand, showing a wider array of images may make the policy more difficult to achieve and may reinforce other negative stereotypes that “all those people look like that.”

Showing more typical victims of a policy, illness, or disaster may fail to fully connect with policymakers. If they do connect, the images may reinforce negative stereotypes or the belief that one class or group needs to constantly “rescue” others (sometimes called the White Savior Complex (Quartz, 2020). Showing less typical victims (or people not even impacted at all, as was the case at the start of this case study) may be deceitful or reinforce that people who look like policymakers deserve help, while others may not. The same is true for issues such as drug addiction, mental illness, or any number of other topics that “could happen to anyone.”

And of course advocates have a limited space. Ads are small and to be effective can only contain a limited amount of information. Another layer of complexity is the impact on the person in the ad itself. A person depicted in some stock photo – or perhaps in an actual mug shot—affected both by the policy and the advertisement might not want to be forever defined by that moment or image, always being “that guy or girl in the picture.” On the other hand someone in a stock



photo, who may be paid for the use of their image regardless of what it is used for, may be mistaken for a death row inmate (or whatever the ad is about) in future interactions.

The ethical choices involved in employing powerful images in advocacy campaign are serious and deserve reflection, whether they involve individuals closely connected to the topic of the campaign or simply models posing in some previous photo shoot. If a picture is worth a thousand words, how are political campaign advocates to best direct the effects of such campaigns while respecting those pictured in their persuasive materials?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ethical challenges or problems in using a stock photo in an advocacy campaign? What problems arise if one uses an image of someone actually involved in the topic of the campaign?
2. Should advocates choose pictures that most represent those on whose behalf they are advocating, or pictures most likely to persuade policymakers?
3. If accuracy of a representative image trades off with its effectiveness in reaching a target audience, what value should an advocate prioritize? How might they go about this prioritization in practice?
4. If advocates want policymakers to help a group, how do they choose pictures that show the group as not helpless, even though they may need help?

Further Information:

Congressional Research Service. (June 1, 2020) "Membership of the 116th Congress: A Profile." Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R45583.pdf>

Criss, Doug. (November 1, 2018) "This is the 30-year old Willie Horton ad everybody is talking about." CNN. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/01/politics/willie-horton-ad-1988-explainer-trnd/index.html> (Accessed June 25, 2020).

Death Penalty Information Center (accessed June 19, 2020). "Innocence." Available at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/innocence>

"Recent Death Sentences by Name, Race, County, and Year." Available at <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/sentencing-data/2019-death-sentences-by-name-race-county-and-year> (Accessed June 25, 2020).

Quartz (accessed June 19, 2020). "White Savior Complex." Available at <https://qz.com/re/white-savior-complex/>

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