

Manufacturing Visions of Society and History in Textbooks

by David D. Perlmutter

Interviews with personnel involved in designing secondary-school social-science textbooks, and the findings of previous research in the sociology of work in mass media organizations, reveal three, often complementary, domains of control that influence textbook visual content: (a) industrial—the meaning, relevance, and historical or social significance of an image directed through captioning and accuracy guidelines; (b) commercial—marketing pressures that make aesthetic appeal of great importance to the textbook's production success; and (c) social—interest groups that influence the visual components of the textbook, but because of space limitations the game is zero-sum. This study finds that, in all, the textbook vision of society is homogenized and sanitized to reduce the risk of controversy.

No set of images provides as encompassing or broadly distributed visualization of society and history as that found in high-school social-science textbooks. For the half of U.S. children who do not go to college, high-school social-science textbooks are the last officially endorsed guides to the ordering and meaning of U.S. and world history and society.

In response, many researchers in communication, education, and other disciplines have engaged in quantitative or qualitative analyses of textbook content. They have focused on the portrayal of ethnic, racial, religious, or gender-based groups, such as African Americans (Jones, 1980); Hispanic Americans (Salvucci, 1991); Native Americans (O'Neill, 1987); Chinese Americans (New York ASIA Society, 1976); women (Hutton, 1976); and regions or

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nations (Birchall & Faichney, 1985; Griswold, 1974; Koppensteiner, 1978; Schulz, 1987). More rarely, researchers have appraised such social issues as warfare (Perlmutter, 1992), criminality (Wright & Ducaji, 1992), and the development of democratic ideals (Gagnon, 1987). Most such research is normative, often accusing the texts of bias in the representation of the group or issue under study. Other writers, in a more philosophical vein, have criticized textbooks as being oversimplified and “dumbed down” (Ornstein, 1992; Solozano, 1986; Swint, 1991). Whatever the concern, then, the textbook is a locus for much dispute about what history and society should look like.

The textbook arena is of interest to communication research for several reasons. First, the school system has always been a battleground for the control of public culture (Ravitch, 1974, 1983; Tidwell, 1928). Social-science textbooks are objects of contention for many of those trying to engineer particular values and views about U.S. and world societies and their origins (FitzGerald, 1979; Wong, 1991). Wider debates over political correctness and culture wars concern what should or should not be included in the texts. These battles occur within academia (DeFattore, 1992; English, 1980; Gross, 1992; McCarthy, 1993) and in public discourse (Granberry, 1993; Innerst, 1994). Such struggles affect the content of informational, entertainment, and educational communication.

Textbooks are also of interest because their industry’s structure and evolution are closely linked to that of other U.S. media corporations. Specifically, formerly independent publishers have merged or been bought out by larger media conglomerates. For example, Prentice-Hall is now owned by the Paramount Corporation. This degree of cross-ownership has greatly reduced the number of companies that manufacture textbooks used in social science classes. In 1960, over 100 companies produced the vision of society and history taught in U.S. schools. In 1995, almost 90% of high-school textbook production was subsumed under just seven major media companies, each owned by larger corporations.¹ In 1995, the “el-hi” (elementary to high school) market generated almost \$2 billion in sales. These textbooks comprised 30% of the entire market for books in the U.S.

Content analysis has not been the only approach to exploring the role of the textbook in communicating the past and present. Here, I attempt to tap into questions of textbook content from the production perspective of textbook creators. This is in line with previous research on the “insider’s view” within a mass media industry (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Turow, 1978a, 1980, 1990). The discussion and analysis deal with the manufacture of the visual elements (graphics and pictures) in the books. The industry perspective has value as a target of study, besides providing background to appraising content.

Most textbook analyses, as noted, have been concerned with verbal or pictorial images of groups, events, places, ideas, or issues. However, almost no

¹ These are, in order of market share and sales revenue within the industry: Glencoe, owned by McGraw-Hill; Prentice-Hall, owned by Paramount; Houghton Mifflin; Holt Rinehart Winston, owned by Harcourt; Scott Foresman, owned by the News Corp.; D. C. Heath, owned by Ration Co.; and Addison Wesley, owned by Pearson.

attention has been paid to how visual form, style, and content are selected, created, and displayed, and why, that is, with what purposive, communicative intent, textbook creators attempt to encode certain meanings through images. This is a significant gap, especially in an age where much of what passes for social or historical fact and proposition arrives through visual media. In addition, the high school classroom is the most common arena for learning, at least cursorily, methods to appraise the validity of historical evidence. Those methods, of course, simply may be to accept whatever is printed in a book as authoritative, and whatever is pictured as being incontrovertible. In exploring the process through which textbook producers manufacture visual elements, I will delineate the contextual forces that constrain or influence the imagery worlds of textbooks.

Finally, the textbook is a worthy target of communication research because this media product is influenced by a complex amalgam of industrial, commercial, and social domains of control related to the particular qualities and complexities of the targeted audience. For example, as in most mass media industries, questions of production content and form are intimately linked to marketing considerations (Turow, 1984). The production of a single full-sized textbook may take 5 years and cost up to \$2 million. Because of the size (up to 1,000 pages) and complexity of the texts, a book that fails to sell cannot be replaced for several years. Accordingly, the business and marketing component of textbook production has influenced the form and content of the product. The multitiered level of consumers includes students, parents, teachers, curriculum planners or principals, and, most important, the state book adoption boards.

Though adoption routines vary, board members' general mandate is to select texts for their state's public schools. Once a text is approved for a particular purchasing cycle, a bulk buy is made of all the state's books. Not all boards, however, are equal in power. States with the most school-age children, such as Texas and California, which together account for 20% of the el-hi market, have the greatest influence. Although only 22 states (including California and Texas) have such committees, the weight of their decisions impacts all texts. It is prohibitively expensive for publishers to customize books for individual schools or boards. Because so much rides on the decisions of so few, pleasing the adoption boards is the foremost concern. The entire system is often characterized by insiders as feast or famine, with a company's profitability hinging on a single text.

From a communication perspective, board members are primary patrons to whom publishers must attune the form and content of their product.² Boards, in turn, are lobbied by interest groups that seek to influence text content. Moreover, the textbook adoption process affects visual textbook content, form, and theme. Adoption hearings and presentations often take place at short conferences. Therefore, selectors may not read prospective texts thoroughly

² Turow (1992a) explained that primary patrons in a mass media corporation "become entities production executives see as generating requirements that they must incorporate in their work or change if they are to succeed" (p. 49; see also Cyert & March, 1963; Evan, 1976).

(Bernstein, 1985; Farr, 1987). Many committee reviewers “reported that they only had time to ‘flip through’ some of the texts to gain a general impression of the content. . . . Although no one is sure which factors of a text help it pass the ‘flip test,’ eye appeal certainly ranks high on the list” (Farr & Tulley, 1985, p. 470). In short, how textbooks look—including the selection, distribution, and arrangements of visual images—may be of more than ancillary relevance to their production and marketing. Indeed, the premium placed on appearance is enhanced by the brief time accorded to inspection and decision making.

Overall, the precariousness of the market has organizational and manufacturing consequences. In mass media industries, there is a fundamental organizational requirement to control the quantity, quality, cost, content, and form of the product (Becker, 1982; Hirsch, 1972, 1975; Peterson & Berger, 1975; Turow, 1992a). The aim of this process is to reduce the risk of failure that might diminish sales. Investigation of the philosophy behind the selection and presentation of visual images, therefore, is of great relevance to understanding the textbook as a media product, a commercial entity, and an instrument of societal self-definition. With this production analysis, I attempt to explore the insider perspective of the textbook industry’s communicative intentions.

Study Design

To assess the controls that regulate textbook content, I conducted open-ended interviews with 43 employees of six major imprints.³ Although their rank and employment status changed during the period of the study—a feature of textbook work—all respondents were involved in the production or marketing of secondary-school social-science textbooks. Their general job classifications included editor, editorial assistant, copywriter, photographer, graphic designer, salesperson, marketing agent, archivist, and researcher.⁴

Such interviews are potentially valuable because they may reveal strategies of encoding and intention toward media content (Turow, 1978a, 1980, 1992b). Interviewing also can tap into inferential assumptions made by production workers that may not be evident in studies of content or standardized mail surveys (Turow, 1991). Further, interviews with media workers allow the researcher to cross-reference and verify information, and identify and explicate

³ The interviews, conducted by phone and in person from 1992 to 1995, ranged from one-half hour to a few hours in length.

⁴ Obviously, conclusions drawn from such interviews are subjective and qualitative. A standardized survey instrument, however, would not have been a useful tool for this research, nor possible because of the sensitive nature of textbook publishing. Textbook companies are aware of research on the content of their products. Public-interest groups often use such studies as evidence of “bias.” Companies, therefore, are highly suspicious that academic researchers are out—as one textbook company’s lawyer put it—“to dig up something wacky so that we can be attacked.” Accordingly, interviews were allowed by upper management only if they were conducted in the form of general discussion of the kind of work performed by employees within the textbook production process.

patterns of practice across organizations. Establishing the presence of such patterns is a necessary step for conducting meaningful research, which, as some scholars have noted, has implications for public policy (Tunstall, 1983).

The Domains of Control

Data from the interviews are grouped into the following three categories or domains of control: industrial, commercial, and social. The *industrial domain* asks how the image world of a textbook actually is created and printed. What rules govern its physical production? What actors oversee this process? How much power do they have? How is control established and maintained? The *commercial domain* examines to what extent marketing considerations influence the quantity, quality, and selection of the textbook image world. What role does aesthetics, the “look,” play in marketing books (as opposed to their stated educational function)? The *social domain* covers how struggles for social self-definition in an increasingly diverse polity are enacted through the visual content and form of textbooks.

The sectionalizing of manufacturing control into these areas, as is the case with most mass media products, is artificial. No walls of separation exist among the editorial process, marketing considerations, and outside social forces. There is, instead, a confluence of influences. Each interpenetrates the other.⁵ Dividing up the domains of control, however, does at least allow the areas of impact to be discussed and evaluated.

The Industrial Domain

Textbook construction is communal. Academics—sometimes large committees of up to 30 people—write the original draft. Typically, the authors do not provide notation for the inclusion or selection of images. Textbook editors are responsible for the visual design of the books. Like many mass media workers, these editors must balance creativity and constraints (Ettema & Whitney, 1982). They are often hardworking, well-paid, respected, and talented professionals, with artistic or English major backgrounds, or both. Yet, their work is produced within an industrial context. Although the manufacture of textbooks involves hundreds of people, the “buck” of responsibility stops at the editor’s desk. In practice, textbook production is broken down by categories of content. Images, for example, initially fall under the purveyance of subeditors and assistants. Their domains of control and creativity are related to their rank in the hierarchy. Essentially, the higher one is within the production division, the more likely one is allowed greater range in choosing pictures and captions.

After developing a textbook, a company might not produce a new one for 3 to 5 years. Sometimes, the developers go to work for another company that is

⁵The influence on form or content of any mass media product is not distillable in the sense of isolating one substance of a solution. The divisions used here are, thus, a form of representation heuristic meant to organize discussion.

starting a new program. Years later they may return to work for the original company. Such a system encourages industry-wide, communal standards of value and efficiency. Indeed, one of the major findings of this study was that most respondents agreed on what was good and bad, and right and wrong. One editor compared the situation to a “guild where everybody agrees on the specs of the widget.” This sharing of information is vital to maintaining standards across an industry. It is analogous to the sharing that occurs within work teams inside a corporation (e.g., McGrath, 1991). Again, as in other mass media organizations, such a system socializes newcomers quickly as “people learn to use . . . norms or rules as a resource for the construction of meaning” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 206).

Control of images is mechanically enacted in the industrial context in several ways. Foremost, pictures are found to fit themes, ideas, or special requirements of the location to which they are assigned. In practice, this means that the caption usually is written first, and then a picture is found either to fit it or to exemplify a similar instance that requires minimum adjustment of the caption text. Pictures are found through stock photo or graphic companies, freelance photographers, or archives and museum collections. If a picture of a planned caption does not exist, in-house graphic artists, freelance artists, or photographers create it. The latter are mostly employed for photographic representations of contemporary society. An editor may decide, for example, that a sidebar page detailing the increasing success of Hispanics in the U.S. education system should include a picture of “young Hispanic-looking woman . . . receiving, in graduation garb, at the front rostrum of a ceremony, a rolled-up diploma; make the diploma-giver a white-haired old dean type.” In any case, all photographs are approved by at least two layers of textbook personnel, including the editor.

A second, related area of control is through captioning. “Pictures describe captions,” is how one editorial assistant summed it up. As noted above, pictures are found or made to fit what is needed in a particular location within the text. Images are considered illustrations of the points made in the captions. Pictures are also expected to match the mood, subject matter, and period the text depicts. In addition, editors employ captions to transform pictures into visual metonyms. A single dead body, for example, may be described as exemplifying all the dead of the Holocaust (Perlmutter, 1997b). Part of the creative culture of textbook production is a belief that workers are producing images with discrete meanings. An assumption that the message of an image can be set in place by its creator or selector reduces risk that unintended, “bad” items will escape the process. Editors and other workers in the textbook world act as quality control agents. They would not be able to accomplish this task without assuming the product (images and their meanings) can be controlled.

Another strategy of controlling content is through the adherence to accuracy guidelines including these: topical (the images represent the events described in the caption and body text); temporal (the events described occurred at the same time as those shown); geographic (the scene described is the same as the one shown); subject matter (the figures or objects in the scene portray those described in the caption or body text); and graphic (if the image is identified, as

with the title of a painting or the name of a photographer, the same image should be displayed).⁶ In sum, editors enhance control by trying to ensure that pictures show what they are intended to show.

Technical manipulation of the image is another form of industrial control. The fact that this strategy is not seen as being in contradiction to the requirement for accuracy reveals a great deal about the ethos of textbook image creation. All textbook pictures are manipulated. First, they are selected—no photograph appears in a textbook unless it has been chosen to appear. Second, editors choose where pictures will be placed on a designated page. Third, the photograph is sized to fit the space accorded to it. Editors and graphic designers also manipulate the content and form of the picture itself, or change graphic elements, such as tables or charts, colors, type styles, and sizes at will.

In situations where textbook publishing crosses over from the restraints of the news photo to the advertising image, editors have greater opportunity for manipulation. It is acceptable to create and stage events, or to use stock photos of staged events to illustrate social roles and issues. In pictures created for the publication, editors enjoy considerable leeway in cropping, tinting of colors, placement of subjects, and the like, but such stock manipulations are not permitted in the portrayal of historical events. In portraying historical events, manipulation generally is restricted to changing sizes, reversing perspective, or colorizing black-and-white historical photographs.

The Commercial Domain

No wall separates the production of textbooks and the marketing considerations for selling the texts. All personnel are aware that they manufacture a product that must sell, and they consider the visual component of the books a crucial part of marketing. The phrase, "It must look good to sell good," was agreed upon in some variation by all those interviewed for this study. The industry engineers good looks through the successful selection, design, and deployment of visual images. The interviewees identified the most important consideration in selecting pictures to be aesthetic appeal, good looks, and "flip value." Here, the editor combines personal judgment with manufacturing constraints, because the qualities of aesthetics are suggestive rather than objective. Nevertheless, an industry standard seems in force.

There are three general criteria of aesthetic value. The first is striking composition, also known as "the decisive moment." This photographic term refers to the one moment in the taking of a picture when all the elements (including lighting, angle, and subject position, action, and expression) are right. Coined by the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, it is a standard quasi-description of superior images in photojournalism where "the subject and the compositional elements form a union" (Lester, 1991, p. 7). Likewise, textbook editors use it as shorthand to describe a striking image. Although treated as a definable quality, its nature borders on the mystical, "I know it when I see it."

⁶ A portrait of a person need not coincide in time with the events discussed in the caption. A portrait of George Washington in later life may be paired with a caption describing events in his youth.

The most common examples are photos of dramatic events, such as John Paul Filo's 1970 image of a girl screaming over the body of a student shot at Kent State University or Eddie Adams's 1968 photograph of the street execution of a Viet Cong suspect during the Tet Offensive. Industry workers claim that such eye-catching moments, such icons of outrage, are important in textbooks. These considerations, however, are balanced with worry that the text might appear overly violent. Iconic images that either imply action or sum up major historical events through arresting composition without showing explicit violence (i.e., icons of transcendence) are thus preferable. Examples include Dorothea Lange's 1936 migrant mother of the Depression or Joe Rosenthal's 1945 picture of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima by United States Marines.

Color is a second criterion of aesthetic value. All editors agreed that color was especially prized. As one editor put it, "A really good picture is one that grabs you—color will do that, especially bold colors—red, green, etc. The brighter the better." Color is also assumed to deliver a sense of freshness or novelty, whereas black-and-white pictures render a feeling of age. Accordingly, the more colorful the product, the more it appears new and improved. In practice, black-and-white photos balance historical flavor as well as provide tonal contrast to the color images. One color image in every two-page layout is considered a norm. In some cases, when only black-and-white pictures are available, but a color image is preferred, editors will colorize it by adding a background dye.

Kinetic content is a third criterion of aesthetic value. This designates the amount and qualities of movement and action within a visual image. An image low in kinetic content displays no movement of living subjects—the size and weight of the figures are placed symmetrically around an imaginary line at the center of the image, with balanced lighting enhancing the static effect. An image high in kinetic content portrays subjects and objects "caught in the act" of movement. Imbalances of angles, weights, and lighting suggest action or movement (i.e., high kinetic content) and generally are prized above those with static or still-life qualities (i.e., low kinetic content).

In sum, editors employ pictures largely for their aesthetic value as illustrations, but seek a diversity of images for balance. One photographer stated, "The book would look weird if every picture was popping off the page; there is plenty of room for [static] portraits, maps, and so on." The effective selection, ordering, and layout of images are testament to the design sense and talent of the editor.

The Social Domain

The final domain of control over the textbook image world is enacted through the interplay of the textbook and society itself. Social forces create marketing pressures. These pressures influence content in a positive or negative direction, or both. A positive direction implies the increased use of a certain type of picture (e.g., more laudatory portrayals of African Americans' contributions to U.S. and world history, and more pictures that show Africans and African Americans engaged in "socially desirable" or nonstereotypical activities). A

negative direction implies suppression (e.g., the excising of pictures that show socially censured acts or stereotypical portrayals).

The obvious norm of control, then, is for textbook content to fit into accepted guidelines and avoid images that are “unsafe,” “trouble,” or “controversial.” Editors recognize that the first rule of their job is not to offend anyone. One textbook editor stated, “The publishers know that adoption board people have very little time, so look is vital and the main way a book is judged.” It follows that if a book reveals a single offending image, the entire work may be rejected. An assistant editor noted:

The worst case scenario would be if a review committee member was paging through your texts, and she happened to see an image that she knew would cause trouble—upset somebody or break guidelines—well she would just move on to the next book. She might point out the problem to our sales rep, and of course I would hear about it in due time.

Other textbook workers also recognized this problem. A photographer commented, “This is serious business. All the way up and down the line no one wants to be blamed if some blatantly bad picture—say something that could be taken as sexual or racist [gets through].”

Controversy can arise in many forms, from nudity to portrayal of the dead to minority groups engaging in stereotypical negative behavior. Taken from this perspective, in the textbook world, the relationships between social power and image content exist in four variations: fiefdoms, common lands, unstaked sites, and disputed territories.

First, certain parcels of textbook vision are fiefdoms. Particular groups portrayed in the images are given great power in controlling content. This is often the case in the portrayal of ethnic, racial, or minority groups. Textbook makers have listened to the petitions and reports made to them or to adoption boards by these groups, and perceive themselves as making conscious attempts to accord to them the self-definition that they want.

In more general areas—common lands—there is near unanimity on the selection and constraints of the image population. One example is the portrayal of death. One editor noted that death was a “touchy visual” that had to be handled with sensitivity. She said:

Well, there's one view of history as [a] big graveyard. We could have 10 death pictures for every war, but what is the point in that? I don't have a formula, but what matters is that we have some pictures of war death, but that they don't gross out parents or (adoption) committees. So if you mean that we don't show blood and guts, that is true.

Indeed, a content analysis of secondary-school social-science textbooks showed very few death images in color, in photography, or in depictions of recent wars (e.g., in living memory) (Perlmutter, 1992). Full-color death is deemed unacceptable for viewing. A photo archivist noted: “There has to be some sanitiza-

tion; the market will not accept anything else, though I'm sure the kids would love to see exploding heads."

Third, there are areas in which no definite group or lobby has arisen—unstaked sites. Interestingly, the aesthetic dimension of the books, so important to their marketing, is in such an area. Textbook-industry employees explain that the premium placed on aesthetic appeal goes beyond flip-value. Textbooks must compete with many other sources of images for the student's attention. These include movies, MTV, Nintendo, and comic books. In addition, some editors predict that the hardback textbook will transform into a multimedia product on CD-ROM. In any case, respondents discussed at length the feeling that they, the textbook workers, were fighting a battle they could not win without adopting the tactics of the enemy. One editor expressed this sentiment:

A child watches 2 hours of MTV, then plays Nintendo. We have to get him to sit down and study a thousand-page textbook! The only trick that we—and parents and teachers—have is to grab their attention. Appealing pictures are a built-in technique.

In other words, the aesthetization of textbooks is seen as both meeting a commercial goal and performing an educational function.

Last are the areas of genuine controversy—disputed territories—in which a variety of actors struggle to define textbook imagery. Groups come into conflict with a textbook as their battleground. For example, Native Americans and Italian Americans may disagree on the significance and the evaluative depiction of Columbus. Guidelines reflect the fact that, in most cases, dealing with certain issues in any way will offend some groups. With historical issues in which controversy cannot be avoided (e.g., the Vietnam war), images and words are made as vague or bland as possible. Again, risk must be reduced. Controversy is anathema.

Conclusions

Textbook editors are at the epicenter of societal struggles over textbook content. In striving for the controversy-free, aesthetically pleasing textbook that satisfies the myriad constituencies in the educational process and in society, textbook editors know that their reach exceeds their grasp. They cannot please everyone. Their mandate is to assuage all and offend none. Yet, textbooks cannot be of unlimited size, or contain an infinite number of images. Social control over textbook content is a zero-sum game. One group's victory automatically reduces space for someone or something else. A greater, and more in-depth, visualization and analysis of the contribution of Ukrainians to history, for example, leave less room for World War I, global warming, and the Hittite empire.

In essence, visual meaning is too important to be left to the viewers. There is a mutual contract of trust between textbook manufacturers and the adoption

committees. Accordingly, discussing the chief difficulties of their jobs, textbook editors alluded to the pressure of making sure “everything is just right” in a 1,000-page book rich with images. One editor summed up the feeling when he compared his job to that of a jumbo jet mechanic: “One loose screw and the whole thing crashes.” In response, the image population, so crucial to making a textbook look good and, thus, sell better, is highly controlled. The content of pictures is circumscribed. The captions declaim the lessons of the image. Moreover, textbook creators employ images as shorthand metonyms to encapsulate and illustrate whole events, eras, or ideas neatly.⁷ These controls, as suggested, fall into industrial, commercial, and social domains, which, in practice, interpenetrate each other. The editors, who enforce both orthodoxy and innovation, are the direct supervisors of the process. In symbolic terms, they manage meaning within the organization (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; see also Pfeffer, 1981). In all cases, the function of control is to reduce risk.

In addition, textbooks are yet another realm of public discourse that is subsumed under an entertainment-industrial complex (e.g., Postman, 1985). The norms of production are political and aesthetic, but only marginally historical or educational. Textbook workers create an image world that reduces the risk of controversy (and subsequent loss of sales), and maximizes the visual appeal of their textbooks. Aesthetic considerations are more important than critical questions of educational value; pretty takes precedence over thought provoking. Yet, here a ritual incantation, found in many commercial-industrial settings, emerges. Members of organizations often attribute their own success to internal, organizational strategies under their direct control, while blaming external factors for failures and problems (Bettman & Wetz, 1983; Salancik & Meindal, 1984; Staw, McKechnie, & Puffer, 1983). Likewise, editors perceived aesthetic appeal as both a sales attribute and an educational prerequisite. Clearly, like many other mass media workers, they use “good citizen” terminology to justify commercial intentions (e.g., Turow, 1978b, 1981). As one worker put it, I think without intended irony, “What’s good for the business is good for the kids.” This convergence of commercial consideration and (self-perceived) good citizenship marks a good deal of what passes for organizational justifications of work practices and goals in textbook manufacturing.

It is paradoxical, then, that the heterogeneity of the market contributes to the homogeneity of the product. Textbook editors must satisfy the subcultures that cooperate and compete to define images in their products. Essentially, editors or developers are bibliographic social engineers in this retroactive cultural community. The safety codes that circumscribe their activity limit the selection, placement, and design of works. The overwhelming consequence of such a system is a sanitized vision of history and life, where important societal conflicts are homogenized and made to seem less severe.

In sum, the visual depiction of history and society in secondary-school social-science textbooks is a construction derived from industrial, commercial, and social influences. Most important, the artificial manufacturing process

⁷ Such a metonymic function is also part of the shorthand of photojournalism (Perlmutter, 1997b).

undermines the assumption that visual or verbal educational messages are neutral transmissions of self-evident, naturally arising, unstructured, or objective content. The social production of the past is not unique to modern U.S. education. All societies represent themselves symbolically as well as physically. Any party within a power struggle seeks legitimacy by establishing “continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1). Such “inventions of tradition” typically involve a state, power group, or class in need of a way to amplify its authority and legitimacy. The textbook is the favored site for such representations to be disseminated as natural or found truth. The constructed and sanitized nature of the product is masked from the audience.

Textbooks, in words and images, enact what society deems history ought to look like, and how images should be employed as historical evidence. They suggest a method of visual historiography and display visual history (cf. Perlmutter, 1994). It is of great importance, then, for communication researchers to dissect the production, content, and reception of such socially important ideas, words, and images.

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