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‘X’-ing out enemies:
*Time* magazine, visual discourse, and the war in Iraq

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Abstract
This article examines *Time* magazine’s visual discourse in its coverage of Iraq War insurgent Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s death. *Time* marked the event by using the same visual trope – a head crossed out by a red ‘X’ – used to mark the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Adolf Hitler in 1945. The study provides a semiotic analysis of the cover, traces the historic development of the ‘X’, and compares it to rival *Newsweek*’s coverage. *Time*’s cover points to the way visuals are used to make journalistic statements that would not be acceptable to convey verbally. The study suggests that *Time* used Hitler imagery to establish authority by invoking its historical coverage. And by drawing such a close association between Hitler, Hussein, and al-Zarqawi, *Time* personalized group conflicts, presented a Manichean view of the world, attributed a false sense of finality to ambiguous events, and reinforced administration pro-war arguments.

Keywords
collective memory, frame images, Iraq War, newsmagazines, terrorism, visual communication

On 7 June 2006 a US air strike destroyed a house, killing Iraq War insurgent Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – the individual reported to be the head of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi’s death played big in news outlets, prompting frontpage newspaper coverage and cover stories in the weekly newsmagazines. *Time* magazine featured an illustrated image of al-Zarqawi on its cover, overlaid by a dripping, blood-red ‘X’. The magazine’s readers...
may have noticed a similarity to a cover that appeared three years earlier. In April 2003, shortly after the start of the Iraq War, *Time* featured an illustration of deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s face also overlaid by a red ‘X’. In giving al-Zarqawi and Hussein what *Time* editors called ‘the X’, (*Time*, 2003a) the magazine resurrected a visual trope it had previously applied to Adolf Hitler in May 1945.

The purpose of this article is to examine the discursive frames staked out by *Time*’s 21 June 2006 al-Zarqawi coverage and thus trace the development of a visual trope and examine the way the magazine has deployed it. Why analyze a single cover? First, *Time* magazine has long been a major news provider, reaching more than four million US readers per week in 2005 (Magazine Publishers of America, 2005), and its cover has been an index for larger issues in US society. Throughout its 75-year history, *Time* has featured prominent newsmakers on its front pages. A cover subject can be seen as important by their mere placement there, as evidenced by yearly discussions about who is or should have been ‘Man/Person of the Year’. Second, unlike content within the magazine, covers impact people who never read the article – pedestrians passing news-stands, shoppers making their way through grocery check-out lines, and others that happen to catch sight of the magazine. Third, publishers see covers as a medium through which they can succinctly convey their magazine’s identity. Covers, according to industry research, attract new readers, play a key role in spurring subscription renewals, and influence how long readers keep an issue. As such, publishers place an enormous amount of energy and resources into cover design (Turow, 1997). Fourth, covers succinctly package an issue and prime how it ought to be viewed by many of those who do read the articles inside (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the al-Zarqawi case presents an opportunity to examine how an influential news outlet has drawn upon its institutional history and society’s collective memory to frame contemporary issues, bolster its own authority, and, in doing so, advance neo-imperialistic interpretations of the war. In the sections that follow, we review the literature on the discursive power of images, visual news coverage of the Gulf Wars, and the visual construction of US enemies – especially those in the Middle East. Then, we trace semiotically the way *Time* has historically used the ‘X’ on its covers and compare it to the magazine’s closest competitor – *Newsweek*. The study contributes to our understanding of how newsmagazines seek to use visuals, in particular cover imagery, and collective memory to interpret contemporary events, establish journalistic authority, and advance dramatic claims they would be unlikely to make in verbal form.

**Theoretical framework**

**Visuals and meaning**

Pictures have become increasingly central to people’s understanding of news and are especially important in evoking emotional frames (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001). Further, pictures and text interact in ways to create new forms of understanding (Bryant, 1996; Darling-Wolf and Mendelson, 2008). Photographs convey concepts and events to readers in multiple ways (Huxford, 2001) that go well beyond mere representation or denotation. Visual meaning is shaped through the way images are structured, their context of presentation, and viewers’ temporally and spatially situated knowledge (Edwards, 1992; Fiske,
1990; Helmers and Hill, 2004; Mendelson, 2007). The unique power of images derives largely from an ability that is ‘unavailable to the verbal version’ (Blair, 2004: 53; see also Barthes, 1981; Freedberg, 1989) to evoke an immediate and involuntary response within the viewer. Images are often more efficient than text alone. As Susan Sontag pointed out in reference to war casualty photographs, they ‘reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus’ (2003: 6). Pictures do not operate under the same set of interpretative rules as verbal statements (Worth, 1981). There are less formal systems of syntax. For example, it is not possible for pictures to make propositional statements explicitly. These must be inferred.

Because of this, pictures are able to make a rhetorical statement that might be unacceptable to utter verbally. This compact quality lends itself to ideological interpretations, presenting alarming and complex phenomena within the context of more easily comprehended frameworks (Geertz, 1973). In doing this, ideological interpretations truncate great amounts of nuance within a group of seemingly straightforward symbols. These symbols constitute the connotative and mythic meanings, or ‘layer of broader concepts, ideas and values which the represented people, places and things “stand for”, or “are signs of”’ (Van Leeuwen, 2001: 96–7; see also Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1973).

Central to this semiotic process is the concept of a sign. Signs are representations of some entity or concept, composed of two parts: the signifier (which represents) and the signified (the ‘thing’ represented) (Fiske, 1990; Rose, 2001). Barthes (1977) discusses two levels of meaning in any image – the denotative and connotative. The denotative focuses on those signifiers used in the image. On a basic level, a subject is endowed with significance by its mere selection, over alternative options, and so frames our understanding of a concept. Thus, it is also necessary to consider what was not chosen for inclusion in the image (Fiske, 1990; Szarkowski, 1966; Van Leeuwen, 2001). Meaning is also created through the way signifiers are combined syntagmatically within the image (Fiske, 1990).

Understanding the connotative meaning requires examining both composition and the cultural meanings of the subject matter. Compositional choices such as angles, shading, and the use of lines and shapes are, in essence, the adjectives that qualify the subject matter, suggesting how viewers should perceive a subject (Messaris, 1994; Szarkowski, 1966; Zettl, 1999). In addition, photographs work metaphorically to create meaning. Through convention, abstract concepts can be made more real through reference to concrete images (Huxford, 2001).

Much of the power of visuals comes from their intertextuality, or ability to reference other images (Helmers and Hill, 2004). In this way, they draw on the collective knowledge of the past, or collective memory, that draws individuals into community (Halbwachs, 1992). Schwartz (1998) has argued that images tap into collective memory by presenting contemporary events through the prism of ‘frame images’. Frame images are ‘pictorial representations that organize understandings of present events by aligning them with well-understood and affecting events of the past’ (1998: 6). For example, illustrators in the Second World War era repeatedly made allusion to Abraham Lincoln and the US Civil War. Frame images can thus be highly ideological in that they present the uncertain developments of the present by way of well-recognized references to the past. In this sense, images contribute to an ongoing dialogue of shared, social thought about a subject to which individuals have varying access. While a sign has ‘an effective nucleus
of meaning’, how that meaning is made manifest fluctuates ‘within a varying range’ (Williams, 1977: 39), depending on the situation and the people involved. The polysemic nature of an image can thus lead to substantially different readings or to different routes to the same general interpretation. While a wealth of knowledge can add texture, a rote understanding of a subject does not equate to a lack of interpretation. Rather, people who are largely unfamiliar with a subject still bring their limited knowledge to bear on an interpretation (Mendelson, 2007).

Elements that accompany an image can also lead meaning-making activity in certain directions. Text, for instance, can ‘anchor’ or narrow the meanings perceivable in photographs (Barthes, 1977), pointing audiences to a preferred reading (Fiske, 1990; Hall, 1973). Likewise, the lack of text can shape how viewers interpret a subject. A subject without a name becomes merely a generic symbol of a larger group (Edwards, 1990). Since pictures cannot convey propositions, linguistic elements – such as a bar over an image to suggest ‘not’ or ‘no’ – are often added in order to frame pictures propositionally (Worth, 1981). The resulting images are interpreted linguistically, in addition to pictorially.

Coverage of wars in Iraq

Many studies have argued that news coverage of the Gulf Wars should be viewed as extensions of the US military’s public relations wing (Calabrese, 2005; Greenberg and Gantz, 1993; Jeffords and Rabinowitz, 1994; Kellner, 1992; Lewis et al., 2005; McChesney, 2006; Mowlana et al., 1992; Robertson, 2004; Spielvogel, 2005). Though oppositional stances have appeared as well (Kaid et al., 1993), the general trend in coverage has been characterized by an over-reliance on US officials as sources or frames of information (McChesney, 2006; Robertson, 2004), a downplaying of the impact the wars have had on civilians, infrastructure, and enemy troops (Ravi, 2005; Robertson, 2004), an emphasis on military technology and the ‘video game’ aspects of the war (Gerbner, 1992; Griffin and Lee, 1995; Kellner, 1992), and a Manichean, good-versus-evil understanding of the conflicts (Morgan et al., 1992).

One of the primary ways foreign entanglements are presented is through the demonization of enemies, focusing especially on leaders. Personalization is often used by news media to make complex issues more accessible to audiences (Bennett, 2006). But an over-reliance on personalization leads to oversimplification and can distract audiences from thinking deeply about an issue. Lakoff (2003) contends that a central metaphor in foreign policy coverage is the notion that ‘a nation is a person’ (2003: para. 3; Said, 1981). In this way, audiences are presented with an image of a fight against an individual rather than a group. Newsmagazines visually represented the first Gulf War as a duel between George Bush and Saddam Hussein – often literally portraying the two facing off against each other (Griffin and Lee, 1995). Hussein was represented as ‘the personification of evil’ (Boyer, 1992; Katz, 1992: 6; see also Dennis et al., 1991; Hallin and Gitlin, 1993; Kellner, 1992; McAlister, 2001; Morgan et al., 1992; Taylor, 1992). While such demonization has happened with many US enemies, Said (1978) argued that this binary good-versus-evil view of Middle Eastern figures has historically been arrived at through a type of projection where the East appears as a distorted version of the West. Hussein has thus been presented as a Middle Eastern Hitler. This began as the rhetoric of
politicians and was then recirculated and magnified by the news media. Dennis et al.’s (1991) content analysis of coverage of the first Gulf War showed over 1100 such references in major news outlets. In terms of visual discourse, Kellner (1992: 63) cited the example of The New Republic, which manipulated an image of Hussein to look more Hitler-like by shortening his moustache. President George H.W. Bush made this link explicit by comparing Hussein to Hitler in public statements (Katz, 1992). Lule (2004) contends that coverage of the second Gulf War has also conformed to the ‘State is a Person’ trope through ‘the figure of Saddam Hussein’ (2004: 96).

In the second Gulf War, Saddam was joined by a new enemy – radical Islamic terrorism. Following the 1970s oil and hostage crises, Islam assumed a heightened importance in discourse about the Middle East. In its new prominence, Islam has become a screen upon which many US policymakers, pundits, writers, and filmmakers could project anything they found problematic with the region, consistently linking it with terrorism and religious mania (McAlister, 2001; Said, 1981; Shaheen, 2001). President George W. Bush continued the ‘Hitlerization’ of Middle Eastern enemies by liberally mixing allusions to Nazism and radical Islamism in his rhetoric post 11 September 2001 (Merskin, 2004).

This study hopes to add to the above body of literature by examining how Time has used historical visual tropes to interpret contemporary events and the extent to which the magazine reinforces government rhetoric.

**Methodology**

We used semiotic analysis as our tool for investigation. Semiotic analysis attempts to qualitatively place content in a larger, cultural context (Barthes, 1972, 1977; Hall, 1973). Rose (2001) argues that semiotic analysis requires ‘taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning’ (2001: 69). Our specific approach is similar to that of Hariman and Lucaites (2007) in their work on iconic photojournalistic images. Hariman and Lucaites called for ‘a close reading of the patterns of visual display’ (2007: 29) and then historically traced the use of the icons. Following these scholars’ lead, this analysis consists of three parts. First, we provide an internal analysis of what was visually presented on Time’s al-Zarqawi cover. Second, we trace the history of Time’s cover portrayals of US enemies. Third, we provide a comparison of alternative covers, specifically Newsweek’s, to further inform the meaning of Time’s choices. Consulting Newsweek allows us to gauge what other types of paradigmatic choices could have been made – not in a hypothetical, but in an actual, similar publication.

**Analysis**

**Analysis of the al-Zarqawi cover**

On Time’s 19 June 2006 cover (Figure 1), Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s disembodied head appeared against a stark white background, blocking out much of the masthead. He appeared to look directly out at the reader. The insurgent wore a black knit cap and his face bore a thick beard. The image was a full frontal, photo-realistic likeness based on a mug shot that appeared on both wanted and propaganda posters in Iraq. The original shot
showed al-Zarqawi’s neck, part of his torso, and a collared shirt. Many photographs were available for the basis of the illustration, including a tight shot of his bloodied face after the bombing (a picture that was held up at a military press conference, framed and matted) and one where he wore glasses, shirt and tie, and appeared clean shaven. The image that *Time* chose conforms most closely with stereotypical images of radical Islamic terrorists, possibly facilitating the readings of viewers unsure of the cover subject’s identity. Further, using the image of an already dead al-Zarqawi would have been visually redundant with the red ‘X’, possibly suggesting a macabre allusion to the desecration of dead bodies.

It is interesting that *Time* chose to erase al-Zarqawi’s body from the image, given the attention paid to the video-taped beheading of US contractor Nicholas Berg – a murder allegedly carried out by the insurgent’s group. The body, especially the head, has long been a site of discursive power, whether displayed on a pike in a public square (Foucault, 1977) or on the cover of a magazine in a mediated public square. During the US ‘war on terrorism’, heads have occupied a grim, central place in news discourse. Grindstaff and DeLuca have argued that the body of decapitated US journalist Daniel Pearl has been used as a rhetorical tool ‘for multiple discourses of terrorism and nationalism’ (2004: 308) by not only those who murdered him, but also those who have lionized him. The use of al-Zarqawi’s disembodied head occupied the same historical moment as the grisly decapitations of Berg, Pearl, and other victims, as well as rhetorical acts like the sawing-off of Saddam Hussein’s head from a downed statue. The beheadings, and allusions to
the act, suggest a disturbing back-and-forth in which the destroyed bodies of antagonists are strategically displayed by either side.

*Time*’s cover image appeared without any words other than the magazine’s nameplate. Drawing on Edwards’ (1992) work on anthropological ‘type’ images, the lack of identifier suggested simply another generic Arab terrorist has been killed. Still, there is another meaning that can be inferred from an unidentified image – that this person is so well known that no name is needed. This has been a common practice in mass media on the death of celebrities such as Princess Diana and Elvis Presley. Their image is their identity – a name is redundant. By running the image of al-Zarqawi without accompanying text, the magazine suggested that this person is of great import.

Perhaps the most striking element in the image was the blood-red ‘X’ that crossed directly through al-Zarqawi’s face. The ‘X’ was centered over the bridge of his nose, spanning his face and protruding onto the white backdrop and *Time*’s masthead. The top sections of each line bore drip marks that appeared to run down the page. ‘X’-ing out al-Zarqawi’s face presented an iconoclastic destruction of an image. David Freedberg (1989) has explained that images can evoke a visceral response within the viewer that in extreme cases can spur them to physically lash out against an image. This kind of response has been common with particularly hated political figures. Freedberg notes that images in which the subject peers out at the viewer, ‘as if directly challenging him’ (1989: 413), are especially susceptible to provoke attacks. Despite the viewer’s conscious knowledge that the image is only a representation, the powerful response it elicits can lead them toward the irrational ‘assumption that the sign is in fact, the signified, that image is prototype, that the dishonor paid to the image … does not simply pass to its prototype, but actually damages the prototype’ (1989: 415).

**The historical context for Time magazine’s use of the ‘X’**

*Time* founders Henry Luce and Brit Haddon started their publication in 1923 with the intention of providing readers with a digest of the week’s most important news. The magazine quickly became known for its distinctive writing and Republican slant (Tebbel and Zuckerman, 1991). But *Time* also quickly developed its own unique cover-art conventions. From its first issue, the magazine’s cover featured a portrait of one of the week’s newsmakers. These portraits were neutral in tone without much accompanying text. Newsmakers that could be deemed hostile to US interests or *Time*’s conservative worldview, for instance Soviet leaders, were granted the same neutral cover treatment as positive figures. The portraits reflected a ‘great men’ view of history that saw eminent figures directing the course of world events. In featuring the faces of these newsmakers, *Time* drew on visual conventions of portraits as capable of revealing the inner character of their subjects (Trachtenberg, 1989).

In the late 1920s, *Time* introduced color to its portraits and began using photographs on occasion. Perhaps influenced by the success of *Life*, *Look*, and other photo-magazines, photographic portraits had become *Time*’s norm by the mid-to-late 1930s. But this trend was only temporary and by the time the United States entered the Second World War, the newsmagazine had returned to illustrations. They would remain the standard through the 1960s. *Time*’s cover conventions took another turn with the onset of the Second World War.
The magazine’s editors and artists made covers more of an overt editorial device by layering the usual portraits in the foreground against an interpretive background scene. For instance, the 23 December 1940 cover featured a portrait of slain German pastor Martin Neimoller against a painting bearing a cross, manger scene, swastika, and Nazi thug. Japanese foreign minister Yosuke Matsuoka was depicted with his head at the center of a radiating sun in July 1941. This trend increased after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Portraits of US enemies in Japan and Germany were often depicted against backdrops that clearly conveyed a threatening sense of evil and inhumanity. In late December 1941, *Time* featured a jaundiced Admiral Yamamoto against an ominous yellow background. The 23 February 1942 issue ran a cover image of Gestapo head Reinhart Heydrick against a backdrop of nooses. Two months later, German Admiral Erich Raeder’s head appeared before a black Swastika dripping blood. In October 1943, SS chief Heinrich Himmler was pictured in front of a heap of pale, contorted corpses. Himmler appeared again in February 1945 with his head set overttop a pair of smoking bones, simulating a grim ‘Jolly Roger’.

*Time*’s cover treatment of Adolf Hitler over the course of the 1930s foreshadowed this move toward the interpretive. Hitler first appeared on the magazine’s cover in December 1931, depicted in the midst of a fiery address. Hitler made his next cover appearance in March 1933 in a painting of him lounging in a chair next to a black German Shepherd. The dictator appeared again in an April 1936 cover photograph giving his familiar open-palmed salute. The next time Hitler appeared on *Time*’s cover marked the magazine’s most radical departure from its standard portraiture to date. Naming Hitler ‘Man of 1938’ in its 2 January 1939 issue, *Time* ran a drawing of the German leader playing a ‘hymn of hate’ on a church organ. Emerging from the instrument’s pipes was a Catherine-wheel, dangling eight limp, naked bodies. *Time* explained its unconventional cover art in the issue’s letters-to-the-editor section. A letter signed by Hollywood luminaries pleaded with the magazine not to provide Hitler with the distinction, fearing that ‘if his picture appears on your cover only as *Time*’s man of the year, the controlled fascist countries and uninformed of all nations will hail the selection as an award of merit’ (*Time*, 1939). The magazine’s editors responded by noting that they had observed the letter-writers’ concerns and referred them to the cover. The ‘hymn of hate’ illustration remained the most extreme departure from *Time*’s cover-art practices throughout the war. But its treatment of other particularly heinous Nazi figures seemed to adhere to the same two objectives. For one, *Time* did not extend them the aura of dignity associated with the magazine’s more neutral portraits. And second, it sought to draw a connection between the subject and a sense of innate evil by juxtaposing their image with blood, corpses, bones, body parts, and other symbols of death.

On 7 May 1945, *Time* marked the fall of Berlin, and the symbolic end of the war in Europe, with a cover illustration showing Hitler’s disembodied head crossed through by a red ‘X’ against a white backdrop (Figure 2). Hitler appeared in a three-quarter profile with his eyes directed out toward the viewer. The ‘X’’s upper-left diagonal featured two pronounced drip marks. Its upper-right counterpart bore the traces of a short, upward brush movement followed by a powerful counterstroke. The piece, by cover artist Boris Artzybasheff, went unremarked in the 7 May 1945 issue. But it was mentioned seven weeks later in a letter from the publisher. P.I. Prentice explained that the Hitler ‘X’ cover appeared on European news-stands just four days after the ‘great double-crosser’ (*Time*, 1945b) met his demise. Some American GIs, reading the European edition printed in
newly liberated Paris, were reportedly eager to pick up ‘a dozen copies’ (1945b) to hand out to unit mates.

Despite its exuberance over the end of war in Europe, *Time* did not want its readers to lose sight of the Pacific theater. A 14 May 1945 letter from the publisher displayed a miniature version of a full-page newspaper ad taken out in over 100 of the biggest newspapers in the USA (*Time*, 1945a). The ad featured a target superimposed over a cartographic image of Japan with Tokyo in the bull’s-eye. The text beneath read ‘Lest We Forget’. In its 20 August 1945 issue, *Time* ran a cover image of the red sun of the Japanese flag blotted out by a black ‘X’ against a white backdrop. The black ‘X’ was thicker than the red X that had crossed out Hitler’s face four months beforehand and did not feature drip marks. In a response to a reader letter one month later, *Time*’s editors explained that the concept for the Japan ‘X’ cover, also by Artzybasheff, ‘came suddenly but was deliberately planned before execution’ (*Time*, 1945c). The editors made no mention of the Hitler cover.

*Time* retired its ‘X’ for 53 years before reintroducing it for a cover story on cancer. The 18 May 1998 cover depicted a magnified image of a cancer cell overlain by a red ‘X’. The editors did not explain the historical origins of the ‘X’, but did clarify that it was not meant to suggest that cancer had been defeated – only that ‘remarkable strides had been made’ (*Time*, 1998). A year later, in April 1999, *Time* ran a cover bearing an infrared image of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic’s face overlaid by a high-tech sighting target. Letters to the editor that ran two weeks later voiced support for the NATO attacks on Serbia, comparing Milosevic and his actions to Hitler and Nazi
genocide (Time, 1999). On Milosevic’s arrest, however, Time did not cover the story by ‘X’-ing out the general’s face.

One month after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Time ran a cover that directly mimicked the 1945 Hitler ‘X’-out (Figure 3). Created by artist Roberto Parada, the 21 April 2003 cover featured a photo-realistic illustration of Saddam Hussein’s disembodied face crossed out by a dripping red ‘X’. The magazine ran a capsule in its ‘To Our Readers’ section featuring the 1945 Hitler cover and an explanation for the trope’s reuse. The editors contended that both Hitler and Saddam were ‘the target of a US-led war’ (Time, 2003a) and, while the immediate details of both dictators’ demise were unknown at the time of print, both regimes ‘had been ‘X’-ed’. The editorial did concede that ‘though some commentators have compared aspects of Saddam’s tyranny to Hitler’s, the two dictators belong in separate leagues of cruelty and terror’. Despite a verbal explanation, the visual equivalence created its own logic that is hard to argue with, especially for readers who may not have closely read the editorial. Three weeks later the magazine noted that many readers reacted adversely to the cover ‘by asking, Why?’ (Time, 2003b). The gist of their concerns was that Time’s comparison was inappropriate and that neither Hussein and Hitler, nor the Iraq War and the Second World War, were analogous.

Despite the chastising the magazine received from readers in 2003, Time once again marched out its red ‘X’ to mark al-Zaraqawi’s death. But unlike in 2003, Time did not offer an explanation or reference the 1945 Hitler cover – or for that matter the Saddam cover. The reason for this may have been that the issue also happened to mark the departure of

Figure 3. Time, 21 April 2003; illustration by Roberto Parada
managing editor James Kelly. *Time* featured a short letter from Kelly and a gallery of 40 covers ‘with special meaning’ that he hoped ‘captured a historic moment but also sparked a conversation among our readers’ (Kelly, 2006: 6). The al-Zarqawi ‘X’ cover was included in the gallery. The Hussein ‘X’ cover was not. The cover met with mixed reviews in letters that appeared weeks later and *Time* noted that ‘readers were skeptical about whether al-Zarqawi’s death would hasten the end of the war – and whether it merited the big-red-X treatment on our cover’ (*Time*, 2006b).

**A comparative analysis with Newsweek’s al-Zarqawi cover**

Comparing *Time*’s cover of al-Zarqawi to its closest competitor, *Newsweek*, provides an opportunity to examine alternative paradigmatic options for illustrating this event and, thus, differences in implied meaning. *Newsweek* was founded in 1933 by a former *Time* foreign news editor (Tebbel and Zuckerman, 1991). In 2005 the rival publication reached over 3.15 million readers per week (Magazine Publishers of America, 2005). The fall of Nazi Germany, the ousting of Saddam Hussein, and the assassination of al-Zarqawi received very different treatment on the cover of *Newsweek*. The magazine’s Second World War-era cover conventions were to run black and white photographs rather than the illustrated portraits favored by *Time*. *Time*’s rival responded to the fall of Berlin in early May 1945 by running a posed cover photo of a surrendering German soldier (*Newsweek*, 1945a). The photo’s subject held his arms out to the side – elbows bent at a 45-degree angle – with his hands rising above his head. *Newsweek* did run an image within its 7 May edition that closely mirrored *Time*’s cover, depicting a head shot of Hitler with a thick red ‘X’ overlaying his head (*Newsweek*, 1945c). For the Japanese surrender, *Newsweek* did not emulate *Time*’s ‘X’-ing out of the Japanese flag. The magazine instead invoked its treatment of the Nazi surrender, featuring a young Japanese soldier behind barbed wire with his arms raised and resting against a fence (*Newsweek*, 1945b).

*Newsweek*’s Second World War-era motif would prove less durable over time – at least in its contemporary editor’s eyes – than *Time* saw its own. *Newsweek* reported the ouster of Saddam Hussein by running a photo on its 21 April 2003 cover of an Iraqi man kissing a smiling US marine on the cheek. The caption below read: ‘U.S forces liberate Baghdad, April 9, 2003’. The word ‘FREEDOM!’ ran across the top of the cover. A small photo inset in the upper-right corner featured a toppling Saddam Hussein statue with a rope and chain around its neck.

*Newsweek*’s cover following al-Zarqawi’s death featured a ghostly black and white extreme close-up of the insurgent’s face (Figure 4). The headline, ‘After Zarqawi. How We Got Him. What We Learned. What Comes Next’, ran across the bridge of his nose. A small inset photo of the militant’s corpse ran to the bottom right of the text with the caption: ‘Baqubah, June 7, 2006’. *Newsweek*’s editors seemingly did not assume its readers would recognize the image of al-Zarqawi. By including his name, the editors narrowed the possible interpretations, keeping readers from making metonymic leaps to the larger war in Iraq or other terror figures like Osama bin Laden. Reader letters two weeks later voiced objection to *Newsweek*’s al-Zarqawi cover. One reader compared it to ‘the medieval European practice of displaying the heads of executed criminals in public areas’,...
while another asked, ‘Does America really need such photos to feel good about its collective nationalistic ego?’ (Newsweek, 2006).

Newsweek’s cover treatment of the Second World War, Hussein, and al-Zarqawi provides a telling contrast to Time. Newsweek also had a Second World War-era motif it could have drawn upon to visually interpret the current war. An Iraqi soldier or captured insurgent – or a model playing the role – could have been posed to emulate the arms-above-the-head surrender of the German and Japanese soldiers that graced the magazine’s 1945 covers. Instead, Newsweek used novel images to represent Saddam Hussein’s fall and al-Zarqawi’s death. Its April 2003 cover seemed to mimic Bush administration rhetoric in its own way: the photo echoed predictions that US troops would be greeted as liberators. Letters to the editors that ran weeks later pointed out this connection (Newsweek, 2003). Newsweek’s June 2006 cover was more ambiguous and appeared to have little correspondence with government rhetoric. While the magazine ran a small photo of al-Zarqawi’s corpse, the much larger ghostly image of the insurgent’s mug shot suggested that his specter may still haunt the Iraq war. The cover text reinforced this reading by alluding to the unknown of ‘what comes next’. Time ran a similar composite image within the pages of its al-Zarqawi coverage (Time, 2006a). But it is unlikely the image within the magazine could carry the same discursive weight as the cover.

Discussion

In this analysis, Time has visually represented events in the current war in Iraq through the lens of the Second World War. By emulating its 1945 Hitler cover, the magazine drew a clear parallel between the Nazi leader, Saddam Hussein, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The ‘X’, in this sense, served as an equal sign – each figure equated to the other. But even following the magazine’s explanation, it is difficult to understand the logic behind the ‘X’. In its explanation of the 2003 Hussein cover, Time argued that Hitler and Saddam’s mutual status as US targets, unknown whereabouts, and certain demise meant that both
regimes ‘had been X-ed’ (*Time*, 2003a). The editorial reminded readers that in the spring of 1945 it was uncertain whether Hitler had escaped, been killed by Allied bombs, shot by his lieutenants, or taken his own life. The editors continued by explaining that Saddam Hussein’s regime had been ousted but his whereabouts were also unknown. But if the ‘X’ was reserved for vanquished enemies whose whereabouts were uncertain, why was the trope used again for al-Zarqawi? The fate of the insurgent was anything but uncertain with portraits of his dead body running in the issue’s table of contents. And, unlike Hitler and Saddam, al-Zarqawi’s death did not equate to the end of a regime. For that matter, Saddam’s downfall did not herald the end of a war. When vetted out, only Hitler’s death seems to unequivocally fit *Time’s* own criteria for getting the ‘X’.

**The ‘X’ as a representation of evil**

In its attempt to explain the meaning of the ‘X’, *Time* did not use the word evil but it appears that that is what the ‘X’ symbolized. The magazine’s Second World War-era editors clearly saw the Nazi regime as an embodiment of evil. While they used background images to denigrate the Japanese as an enemy, the editors reserved their most gruesome imagery – blood, skulls, bones, corpses, and torture instruments – for Nazi leaders. Hitler’s ‘X’ referenced the iconoclastic destruction of powerful images and the wartime practice of crossing out icons to represent enemy kills. But its blood-red color and smeared, dripping appearance referenced the regime’s brutality. In ‘X’-ing out the Japanese flag in August 1945, *Time* referenced its cover treatment of Nazi Germany’s fall earlier that year. Once again, it drew on the contemporary trope of X-ing out an enemy kill. But tellingly, *Time* did not make the same kind of reference to evil by giving Japan’s ‘X’ a blood-like appearance. The black ‘X’ instead drew more on the contemporary trope of ‘X’-ing out an enemy kill on the side of an aircraft – fitting imagery given the dropping of two atomic bombs.

In the interim between *Time*’s Second World War-era ‘X’s and their recent reappearance, the newsmagazine featured cover images of many leaders and regimes hostile to the United States. Some, such as Milosevic, Moumar Qaddafi, and bin Laden were even identified as a ‘target’. But in that nearly 60-year period – encompassing the Cold War, wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Kuwait, and many smaller interventions and clandestine operations – no other US enemy had received *Time*’s fateful ‘X’ treatment. Only cancer, a disease that can be viewed as an enemy without conscience, striking indiscriminately and without warning, received the ‘X’, and its timing reflects the political milieu of the era. The 1998 cover appeared during a post-Cold War and pre-‘war on terrorism’ moment in US foreign policy, during which a widely recognized enemy was missing from the nation’s geopolitical stage. In the absence of a clear, foreign antagonist, the disease could emerge as a common, non-military enemy that US wealth and technology could be used to defeat.

The X’s reuse in the Hussein and al-Zarqawi covers indicates a reorientation back toward a more martial understanding of enemies confronting the United States. *Time*’s editors, whether consciously or not, saw both figures as Hitler-esque in their magnitude of evil, and as such both were in need of defeating. The ‘X’ provided a shorthand to brandish them as such. While the Second World War, as Paul Fussell (1989) has observed, was not generally experienced as an ideological conflict at the time, it soon came to be remembered as an unequivocally necessary ‘good war’ to defeat inhumanity. By referencing
its Second World War-era coverage, *Time* used the Hitler cover as a ‘frame image’ (Schwartz, 1998), directing its readers to understand the war in Iraq and war on terror in the context of the fight against Nazism. The Hitler reference was consistent with news media’s use of other Second World War-era symbols to explain contemporary horrors. As Barbie Zelizer has argued, ‘references to the images of the Nazi camps … activate a memory bank that allows viewers to visualize contemporary acts of atrocity in conjunction with what they remember from the recycled images of World War II’ (1998: 226). *Time*’s use of the ‘X’ suggests that references to Hitler are also used ‘as signposts’ (1998: 7) urging readers to interpret contemporary figures like Hussein and al-Zarqawi as on the same plane of unimaginable evil.

In using the Hitler cover as a frame image, *Time* also echoed the Bush administration’s rhetoric justifying the invasion of Iraq. ‘X’-ing out Hussein in April 2003 extended the ‘Hussein as Hitler’ discourse that originated in the run-up to the first Gulf War. ‘X’-ing out al-Zarqawi extended the terrorism as Nazism rhetoric voiced in Bush’s post-9/11 speeches. The timing of the magazine’s al-Zarqawi coverage may be especially significant given that the administration mounted a concerted effort to compare the war in Iraq with the Second World War in public statements beginning in the late summer of 2005 (Baker and White, 2005). For readers who did not get the Hitler allusion, the stark, blood-red ‘X’ could reference long-running and deep-seated practices of iconoclasm in which images of hated figures are physically attacked. Such a visceral response derives from the power and evil attributed to the individuals depicted (Freedberg, 1989).

These findings reconfirm earlier studies that have suggested that prominent news outlets have framed their war coverage within the discourses provided by government elites. Further, while *Time* would probably never verbally argue the equivalence of Hitler, Hussein, and al-Zarqawi – and in fact attempted to distance itself from drawing that kind of link – it is interesting that the magazine had no ethical qualms about making this link visually. Not coincidentally, the link between Hussein and Al Qaeda was one of the justifications used by the Bush administration in the build up to the war. And there is good reason to believe that Hitler comparisons will remain an important part of aggressive foreign-policy discourse in the coming years. Hawkish politicians and pundits have begun to draw increasingly frequent comparisons between Nazi Germany and potential next-target Iran (*ABC’s This Week*, 2007; Brown, 2007; *Journal Editorial Report*, 2007; Krauthammer, 2008).

**Time magazine and historical authority**

*Time*’s reliance on the ‘X’ motif suggests a number of insights into the way the magazine views its role as a cultural arbiter. Media outlets, and newsmagazines in particular, have increasingly staked a claim in recent decades to the role of public historian (Kitch, 2005). Journalists have used their experience covering landmark events, such as the John F. Kennedy assassination, to establish an aura of authority on the subject and, as an extension of that, contemporary events (Zelizer, 1993). In resurrecting the ‘X’, *Time* referenced its history as a news outlet that covered the Second World War and recognized the threat Hitler represented well before the United States joined the war. The magazine asserted a special claim toward recognizing historical parallels – in this case the common thread of absolute evil. *Time* thus used its historically derived authority to validate
administration claims that the current war is tantamount to a Second World War-esque struggle for civilization. Dana Cloud (2004) has argued that the magazine’s photographic coverage of the war on terror tapped into binary oppositions between self and ‘Other’ that corresponded with neo-imperialist ‘Clash of Civilization’ (Huntington, 1993) arguments. By visually equating Hitler, Hussein, and al-Zarqawi, *Time* used the popular memory of the Second World War as an unavoidable fight against evil incarnate as a frame to suggest that a controversial, unpopular war was the modern-day equivalent.

*Newsweek*’s decision not to reference its Second World War-era coverage suggests that the magazine viewed its role as a cultural arbiter differently than did *Time*. In giving Hussein and al-Zarqawi the ‘X’, *Time* made the implicit statement that its memorable covers have resonated across decades as cultural touchstones. And in doing so, *Time*’s editors asserted that the magazine could endow events with historical weight by using visual tropes their readers would recognize.

**Conclusion**

The seemingly direct rhetoric and sparse design of *Time*’s al-Zarqawi ‘X’ cover masked the complexity of the ideological argument the magazine attempted to advance. *Time*’s ‘X’ covers personalized group conflicts, presented an overly simplified good-versus-evil view of the world, and subtly reinforced arguments made by government elites. Our examination of *Time*’s cover, and *Newsweek*’s as an alternative, suggests that cover images can be seen as open-ended or closed-ended – a question or an answer. *Time*’s ‘X’ covers were closed-ended. Branding an enemy with the ‘X’ unequivocally identified them as a Hitler-esque figure in their magnitude of evil. It also identified them as defeated. In the case of al-Zarqawi, *Time* contended that al-Zarqawi was dead and, symbolically, so was the movement he represented. Al-Zarqawi was synecdochic for the insurgency, the war in Iraq, or even the entire ‘war on terror’. Perhaps he was also a stand-in for bin Laden, someone the US government has not been able to ‘X’ out. So *Time*’s cover not only spoke to what has happened, but made predictions about what would later happen. The image argued that it was only a matter of time before the war on terror was successful. In contrast, *Newsweek*’s cover was open-ended, or ambiguous, suggesting that despite al-Zarqawi’s assassination, he or what he represented would still haunt the US. For *Newsweek*, it was uncertain whether the event was as monumental as *Time*’s presentation suggested.

The case of the *Time* covers speaks to the ability of visuals to convey discourse that would not be acceptable or ethical to state verbally by a major, well-respected news organization. As previously stated, visuals speak in ways that are inherently different from words, with their own logic and rhetoric. *Time*’s original ‘X’, smeared across Hitler’s portrait, may have been an appropriate way of visually representing the fall of Nazism. When reapplied to contemporary figures, such as Hussein and al-Zarqawi, the ‘X’ drew a link between them and Hitler that patently endorsed government rhetoric – much of it based on dubious arguments – used to justify the war in Iraq and a neo-imperialistic foreign policy. *Time*’s use of the ‘X’ suggests that, in its rush to immediately historicize current events as world-changing in nature rather than just newsworthy, the magazine’s visual discourse presented an alarming lack of perspective in which the uncertainties of the present were portrayed as settled history. *Time* not only advanced this
position, but recast it through a veneer of journalistic objectivity and authority, amplifying its discursive power.

Notes
1 The *Louisville Times* also used an ‘X’-ed-out image of Hitler’s head on its 1 May 1945 front page.

References


Newsweek (1945a) Cover. 7 May, p. 21.

Newsweek (1945b) Cover. 20 August, p. 11.

Newsweek (1945c) Death of Adolf Hitler Climaxes Final Gasps of the Third Reich. 7 May, p. 31.


Time (1939) Letters to the Editor. 2 January, p. 2.

Time (1945a) A Letter from the Publisher. 14 May, p. 15.

Time (1945b) A Letter from the Publisher. 28 May, p. 9.

Time (1945c) Time’s Tall … 17 September, p. 8.


Time (2003a) When Regimes Get the X. April 21, p. 8


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