

# MEDIA ICONOCLASM: the symbolic power of images

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**ABSTRACT** Images acquire more and more space in the media field, becoming not just witnesses and evidence of the events, but the facts themselves. However, one can realize that there is a logic involving disposal in journalism, that is, images that make headlines today may simply disappear tomorrow. But some remain circulating in several devices, even those that are non-news. Therefore, this article focuses on the challenge involved in understanding how the processing of media images and the circulation of their meaning occurs.

**Key words:** Journalism. Media coverage. Photojournalism. Communication. Image.

## INTRODUCTION

This research results from the concern regarding media coverage of images as they increasingly surround us, whether the fictional images that comprise the individual imagination or the technical images produced and conveyed to and through the media. Images in contemporary society get “shape” and space as if somehow they synthesized the discourses and served as support not only for content, but especially for meaning, being themselves the crystallization of events. Considering that the individual imagination is formed largely by images already seen and internalized, the media images start to compose the iconographic repertoire, influencing somehow the way the world is created and presented. However, images presented in the media are clippings of the events, being assimilated by receivers that usually do not question their existence. However, images suffer a “strange” process of disposal. Since the media live from current news, images that appear today published on the covers, taking whole pages, tomorrow might simply disappear. This indeed would be the logic of journalism, an image accompanies a news story and then, turning the page, we come across a new image. However, some images escape from this disposal logic and remain circulating. This is the case of images of the World Trade Center and its destruction after the attacks of September 11, of Saddam

Hussein's imprisonment and death, and Michael Jackson's death and his transformation from a villain to a good guy. From these concepts this article focuses on the challenge that is involved in understanding how the media coverage of images and their meaning takes place.

### **Images of the world and world-images: cycles**

Images that are presented by the media have a life cycle determined by the logic that we suggest be interpreted as coming from the media coverage. When we talk about images we differentiate their several concepts – image as materiality, subjectivity as image, virtual images. Martine Joly (1996) separates images into two major groups: the material ones (media images, photographs, videos) and the mental ones (images that are recognized from their traces, as they refer to a perceptive model of the object which is taken by some internalized elements). Hans Belting (2004) also sustains this distinction when he addresses the relationship between exogenous images (material) and endogenous images (the interior ones). However, this work is focused on the image in its materiality, with relation or not to the texts in question (especially the titles that accompany them).

Images are displayed on several devices in a repetitive and reverberate way, that is, the agenda of the newspaper is reproduced on websites, magazines, TV channels, blogs and even on Youtube, using similar frameworks to those used by the media, which can be seen in the titles and the reproduction of these same images. This images appear and disappear according to the logic of the media field, since the more one image is replicated, the more visibility it gains in other devices, in a circular process of feedback. It is important to emphasize that the process of theme is a manifestation of the self-referential aspect in the media processes, but it does not occur only because the media want it, but because other institutions, even non-news, turn to the same thematic processes, or rather assume the media perspective.

Another important aspect is that images have a life cycle that may be observed by the duration of an image in the media. The cycle begins with the appearance of an image and its replication, the emergence of new images, in the reinforcement of the first or the last image, according to several logics to be investigated, resulting in the death of the other images regarding a certain theme. In the specific case of Saddam Hussein, which is part of the corpus of our exploratory research, despite dozens of photographs and videos, magazine and newspaper covers on the theme, the image that survived is the one of the dictator who builds a

statue of himself. The same process occurs with September 11, because a range of images was available and replicated; however only a few of them remain circulating in the media, and moreover, the image of the towers in flames became disassociated from the event, being used in reports that do not deal with the attacks. With regard to Michael Jackson's death, images concerning his "so-called" conviction for child abuse, his aesthetic changes, lost power and were deleted in order to allow the image of the King of Pop, at the top of his career in 1983, to become the one that must be remembered. Therefore, the most recent images disappear and an old image is reinforced, one that does attribute to the singer the condition of dying as an idol, that is, the image chosen by the media to be preserved allows him to be immortalized as an idol.

It is possible to say that media images turn into media products and undergo the implications of this media practice. Thus, an image appears and enters the media production, mobilizing more new devices in a kind of eternal return. News agencies generate information for several vehicles; the information is then transformed into news that is disseminated by the most diverse devices, and in the end more news is constructed, scheduling ways of seeing and producing new media events. In addition to the production of news to be consumed, there is the production for production itself (FERREIRA, 2009), that is, the openings that are left for more new guidelines to be produced from an earlier theme. In the online newspapers, because they are "pseudo-agile" devices (pseudo in the sense that this minute-by-minute feature is not real), the information is recreated every minute, expanding information and sometimes just "warming over" data already transmitted.

In this way, while selecting the photographs that are disseminated in the media, there is a selection of meanings offered, since many images lose their first meaning and start to circulate independently from the events. That is, it is not just the event that becomes news, but the image that is in itself news. Thus, the image turns into a symbol, erasing its initial characteristic and endowed with a metaphorical meaning, as in the case of the World Trade Center. When it is said that images lose their first meaning, it is because journalistic photographs are produced at first as having a referent with aspects of the social world which draw on the logic of the media to make these images visible. Afterwards, the media recreates meanings for these images, according to the logic of the media devices orchestrated by field experts from the journalistic institutions.

However, images start to circulate in several different devices, turning the image itself into news. One example is the toppling of

Saddam Hussein's statue in Iraq by American soldiers. The iconic image was seen on the cover of many communication outlets at the time and even in blogs. However, many years later this is still the image used when reporting about Iraq and the U.S. occupation. More than the fact itself, the image of the toppling becomes the fact; it is the symbol-image, not the actual image. It is not just the mere representation of the destruction of the statue, but rather the only way of interpretation; since we cannot look at the image and interpret it in a different way, the image itself becomes the symbol that it represents. And like any symbol, it requires a convention, which is produced and orchestrated by media coverage.

From these points, an exploratory hypothesis for this paper arises, because it is believed that the transformation of images into symbols that circulate independently from the events causes media iconoclasm (BELTING, 1994), that is, a process of "erasure" of previous images. For that to occur it is essential that the images be repeated in several devices, because the symbolic place (power) of an image is expressed in its replication.

### **The centrality of the media field**

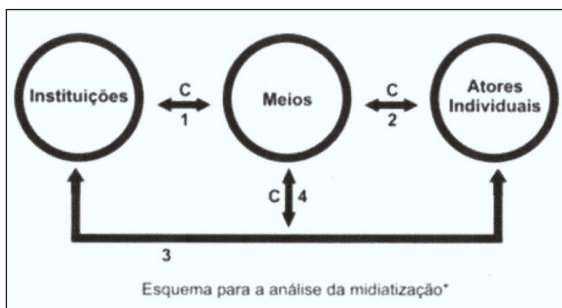
Investigating media coverage of images is possible only if the semantic fields involved (iconoclasm, journalism and media coverage) are sufficiently clear. In this connection, the first step is to understand how the media society works. For Veron (2004, p. 15), the media are not only playback devices that mimic a real approximate form, but instead are meaning-producing devices. "*Una sociedad en vías de mediatización es aquella donde el funcionamiento de las instituciones, de las prácticas, de los conflictos, de la cultura, comienza a estructurarse en relación directa con la existencia de los medios.*" That is, the media society arises when the media are not merely a form of intermediation but become institutions that act according to logic and pre-set modes. The difference of the media from other institutions is that, in contemporary society, they occupy a central place, governing and synchronizing, a term adopted from Harry Pross (1980), the lifetimes and the duration of events. It is possible to say that facts or occurrences exist outside the field of media, but without mediation these occurrences are devoid of meaning. According to Antonio Fausto Neto (2008),

Events are woven into a complex fabric, and in a society characterized by high importance of media, they project themselves far beyond the very borders of journalism. The flows of production, circulation and reception of news are subordinated to and involve a complex network of devices and a web of relationships between

fields, affected by logic, rules and operations of the media coverage itself. The facts transcend journalistic production, but involve strategies in different social fields, which does not mean that journalism is at the mercy of events, and is just a kind of a 'second discourse,' mediating other discourses. There is a new mode of interaction between the social fields, particularly characterized by the borrowing from other fields of the rules of journalistic work, such as production conditions, that are utilized to generate new processes of newsworthiness (FAUSTO NETO, 2008, p. 02).

Media coverage, therefore, relates not only to the media, but also to the logics that are employed by very different institutions, to make known and give the public access to events that have relevance or to which some relevance is assigned. In this sense, Adriano Duarte Rodrigues (1999) points to a dependency on the mediation devices for understanding the world. "In fact, our perception of today's world has become dependent upon complex and ongoing mediation devices that mark the rhythm of our daily life, overlapping increasingly in our immediate perception of the world."

It is the media field that organizes events, manages or regulates them and determines the presence of the other fields as well as their discourses. Thus, the media society is not just a mere form of intermediation, linking the living (real) and the represented, but rather a communicative agent that generates and creates actions that have impact on the lives of citizens, leading to in a certain way what Italo Calvino (1998) feared, in the *Six proposals for the new millennium*: the replacement of concrete experience by mediated experience. In Fausto Neto's (2006) conceptions, in media coverage the media start to operate not only as a representation of society or social fields, but act as "half-drive", in which they introduce a new kind of reality that is connected directly to the production of meaning by "socio-technical" means, as in the diagram below:



Picture 1: Veron's scheme

From this perspective, media coverage crosses all social practices that make use of media to reach audiences and objectives, and hence media coverage is nothing more than organizational strength attributed to the media that regulate and order what other social fields say and do. Harry Pross and Hanno Beth (1987), although not devoted to the study of media coverage, credit the media with the ability to synchronize life and the scheduling of life. In a way it is possible to make an approximation of the former's thinking with the definitions of media coverage. Through media discourse and the devices employed by the media, this social field ends up representing the others, legitimizing them and legitimizing itself, providing the synchronization. That is, what the media say is true, important and deserves to be seen, perceived, and thought. In this way, the media, through their communication skills, end up constructing the event itself, giving it meaning and social value. This can be seen at the time that religion, governments and families organize their schedules and calendars according to the time schedules followed by the media. This is evidenced by the videos posted on Youtube assembled from photographic images conveyed in magazines and newspapers about the execution of Saddam Hussein, for example, or the "tribute" to September 11, events dated and "celebrated", cyclically, in a variety of media devices, given that one of the logics of the media is the recollection of outstanding events. Even social movements make use of the protocols of the media so they can display their protests and thus have the right to a voice amid the tangle of voices that only attract attention via the media society. In summary, the mediated society is characterized by the fact that its social practices must take into account the reference of the existence of media logics. This is because, depending on the media coverage, the discourses of the various fields start to mingle, so that it is no longer possible to identify the speaker.

### **Circulation: space for meaning construction**

The possibility of any analysis of meaning rests on the fundamental assumption that the production system has left traces in products; in other words, that the former can be (fragmentarily) reconstructed from a manipulation of the latter. Looking at products, we visualize processes (VERON, 1980, p. 189).

From Veron's statement it is clear that meaning is taken from the product, in this case from images, but what matters is the understanding of the processes that are involved in the construction of this meaning. Every production system includes production, circulation and

consumption, and to address these issues it is essential to describe the operating conditions of these processes. In this sense, Veron talks about production conditions, circulation conditions and finally, consumption or recognition. For these steps to be performed there is inevitably a set of ideologies and power that are derived from the marks that are present in significant matters. However, while there will always be in operation grammars for production and recognition, circulation in turn is located between these two instances.

Production and recognition are the two poles of the production system of meaning, since circulation, in the terms of Veron (2004), is the “gap between the two,” a delay or diversion that changes with the type of significant production envisioned. So rather than looking at the mode of production and inferring how this production happened, or what effects were generated in terms of recognition, circulation results from the analysis of both processes, since it is what links them. Thus in both cases of generation and recognition, the possible readings that can be made must be taken, because the focus of circulation is on what occurs in the path between production itself with its rules and the effect generated at reception. One must bear in mind that circulation conditions vary depending on the type of media or media device, and also according to the “temporal dimension that must be taken into consideration”. Therefore, understanding circulation is to understand the work of the construction of meaning and how meaning is transformed over time.

This means that circulation is divided into two distinct stages: first there is the process of production of the discourse itself, taking as its base specific operations that involve the media field, its production routines, its way of doing, its individuals, actors and institutions. These transactions that result in the grammar of production depend directly upon the devices in which they operate and their logic. In the mechanism of circulation, the meaning generated changes in relation to the reception, and this discourse will be recognized and regenerates the meanings, producing new discourses concerning this earlier production. Thus there is a constant ratio between production operations and recognizance operations, especially in the case of recognition by the media devices and their established protocols. The recognition is necessarily influenced by the device itself which adds meanings in addition to those already planned. Communication, and journalism in particular, always involves the movement of incessant exchanges of significant material, what for Jairo Ferreira (2005) represents communication “in its genesis, circulation.”

### Saddam Hussein's Case: from capture to death

The media discourse relating to the WTC allowed the war on terror proposed by or in the media to be initiated without the need for an explicit target. If early actions occurred in Afghanistan, the focus of the war quickly changed direction, even with the video of Osama Bin Laden taking responsibility for the attack. With American troops in Iraq, new processes of media coverage were put into effect, reiterating the central area of the media field. The mention of Iraq was because of the strength of the image; what concerns us here is to identify the operations of journalism production that allow the selection of one image which could sum up an event. Watching news coverage about the U.S. occupation in Iraq, one can realize that the central fact is the toppling of the dictator's statue. The photograph of the American soldier covering the face of the statue with the United States flag was seen worldwide; it represents the double breaking of the image of the dictator, a physical one and a symbolic one, symbolic essentially because the placing of the flag on the statue's face immediately referred to the raising of the flag on the rubble of the WTC in 2001.

This image, although it was generated by a news agency, makes clear the strength of the institution involved. The U.S. military "summons" the journalists to the act and "authorizes" the photos of the toppling of the statue. From the disclosure of the event for its news values, both the media and the overlapping social fields turn to operating on the information regarding the destruction of Saddam Hussein. By recording the image of Saddam's statue being destroyed, the media field shows America attacked before, referring to September 11, to get legitimacy for his capture. This is because the event of September 11 is connected by the journalistic institutions with the toppling of the statue in Iraq. Thus, the capture of Saddam is part of the media society's game.



Picture 2: Saddam's toppling



The social field of the U.S. Army, following the capture of Saddam Hussein, had photographed the Iraqi president in his hiding place with the clear purpose of media coverage. The images were not leaked to the press, but distributed to all vehicles. Thus, on one hand there is no disclosure of where U.S. troops were performing the search for the dictator, and on the other hand, the pictures were taken with the posing of American soldiers.



Picture 3: Saddam's imprisonment

Access to images was determined by the institution involved and this affects directly how the meaning offered is handled in the media. One example is that although the capture took place on December 13, 2003, just one day later the images arrived in the newsrooms. The photos show Saddam already being examined, i.e., there is a stage set for the construction of the media discourse. Since then, this discourse focuses mainly on the conditions in which the former president was found, as an animal, and the American saying "We got him!" By saying "we got him" the media field claimed not only that the army arrested Saddam, but that the media did it, and from then on started to have the right to his image, especially since the announcement of Saddam's arrest took place with the tone of American talk shows: "Ladies and gentleman, we got him." The spectacle created of his arrest is evident; it is transformed into a bigger event, bigger than the capture itself. The placement of the capture is more important than the fact presented, since the news of the capture was orchestrated as being the point of departure in the field of media logic.

Thus, from the moment the media discourse now includes the “citizen” and the media in saying “we got him,” the media affect the relationship between institutions, the U.S. government and actors. These in turn include in their agendas not only the theme, but the guidelines regarding the capture and arrest of the dictator. The image of Saddam arrested, bearded, was inscribed in dozens of wireless devices without journalistic purposes, in what may be identified as the adoption of media discourse. But the appropriation of images by non-media instances occurred differently, some in celebration, while others were discussing the validity of the continuity of American actions in the Middle East.



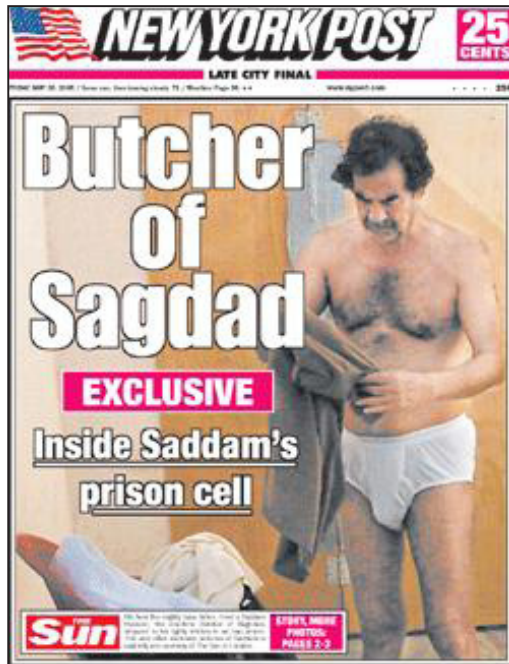
Picture 4: Newspapers’ front pages replicate images

Regardless of the viewpoint adopted, it is interesting to note that the image of Saddam Hussein as a dictator is reduced by the replication of Saddam’s image in prison. In electing the image of the broken statue and afterwards the capture of Saddam to appear on the covers of newspapers, on the main pages of online newspapers and TV networks, the media field includes on the citizens’ agenda a new image of the dictator and their own anti-terror action. Saddam was ousted from power; this power has been delegated to the field of media that promotes, little by little, the erasing of the image of the dictator. This erasing is done by deleting the photos of Saddam the dictator from the news spaces and from memory itself, since the individual memory, as says Gilbert Durand (2001), is fueled by

images already seen and which constitute the individual iconographic repertoire. Thus, if the access to images is restricted, then these images do not gain as much importance as those seen constantly. To reinforce this idea of erasure of the first image to put in its place another image, newspapers like *The Sun* and *The New York Post* placed on the covers of their editions a photograph of Saddam Hussein as a prisoner in his cell wearing only underpants, an image widely replicated on non-journalistic devices. In terms of newsworthiness, the fact draws less attention than the image; the unusual scene disqualifies even more the former dictator, who completely loses his power. The topological arrangement of the verbal text on the covers of both newspapers also enhances the effect of shattering the previous image of the “character” Saddam. *The Sun* in its verbal text says “The tyrant’s in his underwear” and shows the text divided into two blocks. At the top, over the head of Saddam, is written “the tyrant’s”, and at the bottom “in his underwear,” as if the text fits the image, maintaining it. In *The New York Post* the effect is similar, but with the headline “The butcher is in his underwear” displayed on the left side of the page, compressing the image of the dictator in the right corner, conveying the notion that he would be cornered. And more than that, by showing the dictator as a prisoner, behaving as an ordinary man, this allows the reader who is viewing this from the vantage point of his/her freedom to have the right to observe his privacy and reflect on it.



Picture 5: The tyrant's in his pants



Picture 6: Butcher of Sagdad

However, the media operations involving Saddam Hussein were not confined to his capture and imprisonment, nor were the diagramming capabilities. In 2005, the former Iraqi president was on trial and the image of the dictator, deconstructed over the years, returns to be recollected, because for a sentence to be spoken would require a new breed of media coverage. The field of the judiciary submitting the details of the trial via media devices appeals to the operations of media production to justify the sentence. So the media field cannot continue to expose Saddam as an “animal” or “victimized” but returns to the image of a dictator. For that image archives are utilized, as well as some photos taken inside the court, and the most widespread and replicated photo was the one in which the accused appears in a suit pointing his finger. The announcement of the hanging in November 2006 is made by as many devices as possible. The news sites provide the reinforcement of the dictator’s image, even when the news seems only to be informative. The helpline at the Globo G1 website “Upon hearing the verdict, Saddam with a Koran in his hand repeatedly shouted the phrase ‘Allah is Great’” justifies the death sentence; the same passage is reproduced in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in its

online and printed versions, also emphasizing the dictator's speech in which he cries "Death to the enemies."

However, it is the CNN website that draws more attention. The device of the journalistic institution makes evident the circular role of the media. Saddam's image reinforces his execution, but the links provided at the site allow the reader to see the final moments of the dictator and his legacy and the obituary says that Hussein was "a symbol of cruelty." The site permits other devices, videos, interviews and galleries to be also available and includes data on "how" the capture of Saddam occurred, without presenting his images in a transverse and cyclical texture. In December 2006, new strategies are employed by the media in the construction of the hanging of Saddam. Although no newspapers or TV networks were authorized to cover with images the execution, images taken with camera phones were posted on the web and many of their sections were transformed into stopped frames and replayed in the news. In addition to the criteria of newsworthiness, as hangings and torture images are not "authorized" to be shown by the code of ethics of the profession, the access to the image of Saddam's hanging was provided because the social fields involved worked according to the logic of the media, i.e., in order to "prove" the dictator's death it was necessary to show it, and even though the authorship of the video has not been disclosed or assumed, the mobile media device served there as an extension of the media field, because the image was made for the purpose of the media coverage. Since the publication of the video on the web and its fragmentary view on television, other videos were produced and replicated, even sent by e-mail, and there are altogether 18,500 videos found on the web about Saddam, and at least 2,000 show step by step his execution.

This is a question not only of access to the area of the media field, but also of the expansion of media space beyond the restricted practice of the journalist, because once on the web, the video underwent metamorphoses not limited to showing "what was", like Roland Barthes (1984) would say, but to produce meaning from what had already been replicated by the media. The discourse of the institutions of journalism goes beyond the headline "Saddam Hussein is hanged," because in the body of the stories one perceives the reinforcement of the idea that "The criminal Saddam was killed" (BBC website Brazil) and the same value judgments are imported into the discourse of individual actors in their blogs or orkut postings. On Hélió Mário's blog (an ordinary citizen who uses the tool to show his opinions), the headline of the posting



says “Saddam Hussein was hung at dawn in Baghdad,” and in the blog Mydejavu it was written verbatim that Saddam “was a monster”.



Picture 7: Worldwide coverage



Picture 8: The sentence and the return of the dictator

Thus the image of Saddam Hussein that circulated before his hanging supports his execution, since it occurred first in the media and was later “replayed” by them. What is important here is to emphasize that individual actors were not mere receivers of these images and discourses, but they went on to produce third discourses from the discourses generated by the media field, in a migration from one device to another. In the case of Saddam Hussein there is more than one movement of erasure, but there is a memory game: first the dictator’s face is broken, and then his picture is disqualified. In a second step the image of dictator is reestablished to reinforce his sentence, and even after his execution, the visual memory does not recover the animal, but focuses on maintaining the figure of the dictator.

### Circulation of meanings

Circulation therefore is a process in which meaning circulates, changes, alters depending on the logic of the media, which synthesize the facts as discourses (pictorial or otherwise) and reinterpret them, generating other forms of links. One could say that the pictures when they arrive in the newsroom have the meaning assigned by photographers and journalists, but that when they are disseminated by the media they begin to receive

the influence of the devices, the logic of the media and they take on a new meaning which is consumed by the final receiver who still can assume the given meaning, recognize himself/herself in it or produce new meanings. However, other social fields, not the media, are already making use more and more of the rules of journalistic work and are beginning to generate processes for news, i.e., in addition to the circulation of meaning there is a circularity of that meaning produced in order to be always returned, going, coming and being replenished with new meanings. As for images, this study indicates they are acquiring more power in the media and becoming not only witnesses, even when the indexical force of the images continues, but also symbols. Because of their media exploitation in several devices, images acquire a symbolic force that goes beyond the relationship between photography and the indexical circulating symbol. Thus the more a photo becomes a symbol, the greater its value and power of circulation, leading to production of a new code.

The symbolic power of media images, therefore, occurs on account of their washout, replication, break, revival and detachment from the fact. The fifth cycle of iconoclasm, a clear reference to the Arlindo Machado's (2001) fourth iconoclasm, is not the aversion for images, but their inclusion in what is sacred, i.e., the fifth iconoclasm is both the end of images following their deletion from the media space, and their reverence. The difference is that their worship can only occur after their break.

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