Picturing Presidents:
A Content Analysis of Photographs of Presidents from the Pictures of the Year

by
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Every day mass media outlets provide audience members with information about
current events involving government and elected officials. The words, photographs and
graphics used by media present the information editors think is important to informed
citizens. But aside from simply presenting information about an issue, person or event,
reporters and editors also make decisions about what information will be presented and
how it will be organized for the audience.

The selection of topic, story direction, sources, story organization and even word
usage combine to suggest a point of view for the audience to adopt (Entman, 1993).
Stories reporting hostile actions toward the United States may be presented from that
point of view that the threatening government or organization is wrong and should be
dealt with forcibly. Similarly, stories reporting unethical or illegal activity may present a
point of view that the subject should face legal consequences. The point of view
suggested in a news account is called a frame (Entman, 1993).

Framing is not limited to textual accounts of issues and events. Photographers make
decisions about what to include in an image and how it will be shown that suggest frames
for interpreting the images. The combination of elements captured in the image, their
relationship to the camera and lighting suggest whether the viewer should adopt a
sympathetic, respectful, disdainful or some other attitude toward the subject. Presidents
of the United States are not immune from visual framing. The combination of camera
angle, distance from the camera and what the photographer chooses to capture within the
boundaries of the image suggests a frame to the viewer for interpreting not only the activity of the President but also how to feel about that activity.

Research has explored the framing of Presidents in published photographs, but the publication process involves framing decisions of the editors to fit with the point of view of the publication. Research has not addressed framing that might be observed in photographs outside of the publication process. The purpose of this study is to examine how United States Presidents are visually framed in photographs that have been recognized by experts as examples of photographers’ best work.

**Review of Literature**

Prior research has attempted to define framing and its presence in media. Research regarding the portrayal of people in photographs has explored the use of camera angle and subject-to-camera distance, whereas the portrayal of Presidents has largely focused on images published in news magazines.

**Framing**

Framing refers to cognitive devices media and audiences use to organize and make sense of issues and events (Eko, 1999; Reese, 2001; Gitlin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Communicators select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a text (Entman 1993). The way a problem is framed might determine how people understand and evaluate an issue (Ghanem, 1997). Frieland and Mengbai (1996) suggested all news organizations frame as part of their work, and Jha-Nambiar (2002) suggested framing is not limited to news but takes place in every form of discourse.

Frames are determined by principles of organization that govern events (Goffman, 1974), and these rules, conventions, rituals, structures and routines of news discourse
remain largely unchanged over time (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Gans, 1979). Normative practices and standards of photojournalism, such as a level point of view and an emphasis on the intended subject, provide some governance over the presentation of photographs that determine the viewer’s involvement. The principles guiding framing are not limited to implementation by the news organization. Studies of sports photographs indicate photographers uniformly employ the standards and practices that shape framing as well (Hagaman, 1993; Cheng, 1996).

Messaris and Abraham (2001) suggested photographs are more subtle than text for framing because viewers accept images as closely linked to reality and overlook the fact that they are human-made constructions. They noted the photographer’s choice of point of view and the cropping and editing done to photographs as forms of selection with far-reaching implications for framing. As an example, Barnett (2003) found framing a television crime story with standard visual portrayals of the accused can affect audience perceptions of the degree of threat a suspect represents to society or whether the suspect is guilty of a crime.

Scholars have debated conceptual, theoretical and methodological aspects of framing research (Roefs, 1998). Maher (2001) considered framing to be a separate theory from agenda setting but noted that it has been elusive to measure. Frames are not manifest in content. Rather, manifest features of content, such as camera angle or subject-to-camera distance, suggest the latent frame the viewer is meant to discern.

**Manifest Features of Images**

The structural features of visual messages have been studied in television and photography. The structural techniques employed in producing a television message
affect the communicative ability of that message (Barker, 1985). Barker studied the horizontal space and the location of the camera in relation to the performer in television productions. Horizontal space refers to close-up, medium and wide shots. Barker determined the use of screen space and the ability of the characters to move in relation to the camera defined aspects of the characters in the production.

The point of view shown in an image contributes to its potential meaning (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). Vertical angles illustrate a relationship of symbolic power. According to Jewitt and Oyama (2001), a photograph taken from a high angle that looks down on a subject indicates the viewer has symbolic power over that subject. Conversely, a photograph taken from a low angle puts the subject in a position of symbolic power over the viewer. Photographs taken from eye level suggest an equal relationship between the subject and viewer. The camera-to-subject distance in an image suggests a relationship as well. Photographs that show subjects close to the camera suggest an intimate relationship, while photographs that show subjects far away from the camera suggest impersonal relationships like that with strangers. A person at a medium distance from the camera might be shown from the head to somewhere between the waist and knees. This distance indicates a social relationship between the viewer and the subject. Stein (2001) related an aspect of control to the camera-to-subject distance as well. She called the close-up an intrusion into the subject’s space that takes control from the subject and reinforces a sense of power over him. She noted the medium-distance image places the viewer on a middle ground with the subject. Jewitt and Oyama (2001) noted power and relationship are not the meanings of these structural features but are “an attempt to describe a
meaning potential” (p. 135). They represent the manifest content noted above that suggests the latent content of a frame.

A comparison of photographs of Afghan women showed they were portrayed more often at high angles and far away from the camera during the rule of the Taliban regime and at eye level and medium distance after the Taliban was ousted. Fahmy (2004) determined the change in manifest content indicated the women were shown as more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer in the later group of photographs.

Portrayals of Presidents

One feature of framing is that of reproducing cultural codes, including stereotyping, to distinguish legitimacy and confer status (Dickerson, 2001), and stereotyping has been one aspect of research into the portrayal of presidents in news magazine photographs. Photographic bias was one feature TIME magazine used to stereotype Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy (Merrill, 1965). Merrill’s analysis though focused on the overall impression conveyed by the photograph and not specific structural features. Moriarty and Garramone (1986) included camera angle, perspective and size of the photograph as part of a perspective index in a study of news magazine photographs of the 1984 Presidential campaign. They found an absolute difference in perspective between Reagan and Mondale that portrayed Reagan more favorably. A t-test conducted on the perspective index approached significance at a $p$-level of .06. In a longitudinal study of news magazine photographs from 1945 to 1974, Presidents were generally portrayed at eye-level, but the differences in camera angles were not considered significant (Mullen, 1997). Mullen also found Presidents were generally photographed in medium and long camera-to-subject distances but did find a significant difference in the number of close-up
images in 1953, 1973 and 1974. Mullen speculated the difference in 1953 might have been related to the Korean War while the differences in the 1970s coincided with the introduction of better telephoto lenses.

As noted, research of the visual portrayal of Presidents has examined photographs published in news magazines, which are subject to the judgments of editors as well as the photographers. Research has not addressed the use of camera angle and distance in photographs recognized by experts as examples of photographers’ best work.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Research of the news magazine photographs suggests manifest features such as camera angle and camera-to-subject distance are appropriate for analysis of the portrayal of Presidents. Research also suggests particular angles and distance suggest meanings about the relationship between the subject of the photograph and the viewer. The research suggests two hypotheses and a question to be addressed in this study.

H1: Presidents are more likely to be photographed at eye level than from a high or low camera angle.

H2: Presidents are more likely to be photographed at a medium camera-to-subject distance than far away or close to the camera.

The research indicates published photographs generally show Presidents at eye-level and at a medium distance from the camera. The publication process adds another layer between the photographer and the photograph that ends up in print, but photography editors cannot change the camera angle or distance the photographer chooses to use. Since more eye-level and medium-distance photographs end up in print, it is reasonable to believe that most of the photographs taken will exhibit similar characteristics. A study
of photographs selected by photographers and judged to be examples of the best work of news photographers will likely exhibit these characteristics in similar proportions to those depicted in published photographs.

RQ1: Is there a relationship between camera angle and camera-to-subject distance?

Regardless of the outcome of tests for the hypotheses, they do not explore any relationships that might exist between angle and distance. This question explores whether photographers who depict subjects close to the camera are more likely to use one camera angle over the others and whether similar relationships exist when subjects are depicted at medium and far distances from the camera.

RQ2: What frames are suggested by the depiction of Presidents in news photographs?

Frames are not part of the manifest content of photographs but are discerned from the subject and characteristics of the photograph. Jewitt and Oyama (2001) suggested the camera angle and camera-to-subject distance contribute to the meaning conveyed in a photograph. Certain camera angles and certain distances are related to potential meanings of power and relationship between the subject of the photograph and the viewer. The determination of which camera angles and subject-to-camera distance are more common will help to determine whether photographers utilize a common frame for interpreting the image of the President.

Method

This study analyzes photographs recognized by experts as examples of photographers’ best work. A data set was created by retrieving photographs from an electronic archive of the Pictures of the Year International competition (POY) at the University of Missouri – Columbia. Photographers submit entries to the competition they
believe best embody professional standards of excellence (Hagaman, 1993). Judges for the competition are well-respected photographers, editors and educators selected by the contest administrators (Mendelson, 1999). Judging began with photographs made in 1943, and the archive contains each winning image from the first competition through 2002.

Franklin Roosevelt is only depicted once in the archive, so the data set begins with Harry Truman and continues through George W. Bush. The competition includes categories in which individual photographs are judged and in which multiple-image stories are judged. An image that won an award in a single-image category and was part of an award-winning photo story would appear more than once in the archive. To control for this situation and for the greater freedom a photographer might have had when working on a photo story, only photographs that were judged as single images were included in the data set. Finally, photographs were only included if they depicted a President during a campaign or while in office. A photograph was determined likely to have been taken during a campaign if it was from a year in which a Presidential election was held. Photographs obviously taken well before a campaign, such as post World War II photographs of Eisenhower as a general, were excluded from consideration. Photographs of Presidents taken after leaving office were excluded as well. These criteria yielded a final set of 194 photographs for consideration. Table 1 identifies the number of photographs of each President in the data set.

Each photograph was coded as a single unit. Coders were expected to do no further unitizing of the photograph. Instances where the arrangement of different people in the
photograph resulted in multiple camera angles were not relevant since the photographs were coded solely for the depiction of the President.

Variables and categories for content analysis were suggested by previous research. The first variable was the camera angle. Each photograph was coded to indicate whether the President was photographed from a high or low angle or at eye level. Coders were instructed to look for obvious instances of camera angle and not to attempt to distinguish very subtle distinctions between eye level and a slightly higher or lower angle. The second variable was camera-to-subject distance. Each photograph was coded to indicate whether is depicted a close, medium or far distance. A close-up photograph depicted the President from the head down to the chest closer. A medium distance photograph depicted the President from the head to somewhere between the waist and knees. A far distance photograph depicted the whole body of the President. Significant differences in camera angle and subject-to-camera distance in the photographs would suggest a definite frame photographers use to present the President. The codebook developed for the study outlined the variables and categories, giving examples of each and directions for recording the proper codes for each photograph. The codebook is reproduced in the Appendix.

Two coders were trained using the codebook to outline the categories and the process of coding. Examples of each type of photograph were included in the codebook and reviewed to determine whether coders understood the application of the coding scheme. A sample set of 16 photographs from multiple-image categories of the POY archive that were not duplicated in the data set was used as a training sample. The photographs and their captions were presented on a computer screen in sets of three plus one final
Photograph. Each set was coded and the coding was discussed before moving to the next set. Agreement was acceptable for subject-to-camera distance but lower for camera angle in the early phases of training. The categories were discussed and clarified along the way, and agreement improved toward the end of training. Following training a sample of 20 photographs from the set of 194 was coded to determine intercoder reliability. Again, agreement was more difficult to achieve for camera angle than for camera-to-subject distance. Substantial agreement was reached for the variable of camera angle with a Cohen’s kappa of .68. Agreement approached perfection for camera-to-subject distance with a Cohen’s kappa figure of .93 (Landis & Koch, 1977).

One-way chi-square tests were conducted on each variable to determine whether any absolute differences in camera angle or camera-to-subject distances were significant. A two-way chi-square test was conducted to explore the existence of a relationship between camera angle and camera-to-subject distance.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted Presidents would be photographed at eye level more than from high or low camera angles. The analysis supports this hypothesis with 130 photographs coded as taken at eye level, accounting for 67 percent of the photographs in the data set. Only 20 photographs were identified as depicting a high camera angle. The remaining 44 photographs, 23 percent of the total, were taken from a low camera angle. The difference between the angles is significant ($\chi^2=103.46 \ p<.001$, Table 2).

Photographs taken at eye level generally showed the President’s head at the same level as the camera (Figure 1). Slight variations in the vertical angle did not change the classification as eye level. Photographs coded as high-angle clearly illustrated a point of
view of looking down on the President. One use of a high angle is to portray both the President and contextual elements, such as showing the faces in a crowd of people (Figure 2). Photographs coded as low-angle clearly put the viewer in a position of looking up at the President. At public events the President is often elevated on a platform to give the audience a better view. A photograph from a low angle results if a photographer desires to get close to the President at an event. Photographers may also prefer a low angle to include other elements in the photograph that would not be visible from an eye-level or high angle, such as including the stars in a flag (Figure 3).

The second hypothesis predicted Presidents would be photographed at a medium distance more than from a far distance or close to the camera. The distribution of camera-to-subject distance is not as dramatic as that of camera angle. Medium distance photographs occurred most frequently and accounted for about 39 percent of the total. Photographs showing the President from a far distance accounted for about 34 percent, and close-up photographs accounted for about 27 percent of the total. The one-way chi-square test calculation was 4.22, $p = .12$. This was not a significant difference, and the second hypothesis was not supported (Table 3).

Medium-distance photographs suggest a social relationship with the viewer, and photographs of this type often reinforce the suggestion by depicting a relationship (Figure 4). Photographs were considered to illustrate a far camera-to-subject distance if the President’s entire body could be seen or would be seen if he weren’t standing behind something (Figure 5). Photographs taken from a close distance were generally portraits that could generate emotional involvement for the viewer (Figure 6).
The first research question asked whether a relationship exists between camera angle and camera-to-subject distance. A cross-tabulation of these variables reflects both the high proportion of photographs taken from eye level and the more even distribution of camera-to-subject distance (Table 4). The two-way chi-square test resulted in a value of 11.937, \(p = .018\). The Cramer’s V value was .175, indicating the relationship is not a particularly strong one.

The second research question asked what frames are suggested by the depiction of Presidents in the photographs in this data set. The angle or distance depicted in a photograph is not the frame, but it suggests a frame for interpreting the image and relating to its subject. Jewitt and Oyama (2001) indicated camera angle denotes a category of symbolic power, and eye-level photographs suggest symbolic equality. The dominance of eye-level photographs suggests photographers generally frame the President as someone on an equal footing with the rest of society. The President is infrequently photographed from a low angle that would suggest power over the viewer and is rarely shown from a high angle that gives the viewer power over the President. Occasionally, then, the President is framed as a powerful figure, but most often the President is framed as another citizen or “one of us.”

Associating a frame with the camera-to-subject distance is more problematic due to the more even distribution of the photographs for this variable. The largest proportion of photographs exhibits a medium camera-to-subject distance, which would suggest a social relationship with the subject of the image that preserves control of the interaction for both the subject and the viewer. This combination of relationship and control suggests a frame that places the President on an equal footing with society similar to that suggested by the
eye-level camera angle. The medium distance brings the viewer into the scene and makes the President approachable but also maintains social respect by not intruding too closely on personal space (Figure 7). At times though, the President is photographed at a far distance, framing the President as either someone who is kept at a distance or someone who wishes to keep the viewer at a distance rather than pursuing a closer relationship. Other clues in the photograph may help determine which frame is more likely. A photograph from a far-distance that shows the President attentive to the general direction of the camera would suggest a frame in which the President is kept at a distance but still desires to maintain contact with the public (Figure 8).

The President was photographed nearly as frequently from a close distance. To Jewitt and Oyama (2001), the closeness suggests a personal relationship with the President, but to Stein it suggests taking over control of the President’s environment. Again, a closer reading of the photograph may hold the key to discerning an intended frame. The close-up photograph showing the President from mid-chest to head suggests a personal frame in which the viewer should relate to the emotion shown in the image. In figure 9 a smiling President Reagan is framed as friendly and sharing a moment with the viewer as he acknowledges public support during a hospital stay. A tense President is framed as dealing with a serious situation, and the viewer should share in the gravity depicted. An extremely close photograph that just shows a President’s face and perhaps even cuts off part of the head suggests a different frame that is more in line with Stein’s view of taking control from the President. This frame suggests the President has something to answer for and the viewer should join in holding him accountable for his actions. Figure 10 depicts
President Nixon in this frame in 1970 when tension over the Vietnam War may have been visible as strain on his face.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how United States Presidents are visually framed in photographs that have been recognized by experts as examples of photographers’ best work. The study was concerned with the vertical camera angles and subject-to-camera distance most often used to portray the President. The structural features of the photographs suggest interpretive frames viewers should adopt when looking at photographs of the President.

A dominance of eye-level photographs suggests Presidents are routinely framed as someone who is on a somewhat equal footing with the viewer. This frame of equality supports cultural beliefs in this country that no one is above the law and any child can grow up to be President. The frame is also in keeping with the ideal of photojournalism to present subjects in a straightforward manner rather than from a position of judgment or worship, so the dominance of eye-level photographs should not be surprising.

The distribution of photographs from close, medium and far distances did not support the hypothesis that Presidents are more likely to be photographed from a medium distance than from close or far distances. The camera-to-subject distance is more likely to suggest emotional involvement with the subject, affecting the frame that is communicated to the viewer. The POY judges rewarded photographs that featured close distances to suggest close involvement with the President in almost equal numbers to those with more neutral emotional involvement. Mullen (1997), on the other hand, reported Presidents were generally pictured at medium and long distances and only rarely close up,
suggesting photography editors choose photographs to communicate the more neutral frame.

This study examined the manifest content and suggested frames related to the content, but other factors might have affected the content that were outside the scope of this data to convey. Subject-to-camera distance is not only affected by the photographer’s choice of position and lens. It is also affected by differences in the physical proximity photographers have to the President. Photographers were able to get much closer to Truman and Eisenhower than to more modern Presidents. The change partly reflects security concerns but may also reflect attempts to control the image of the President by positioning photographers in locations that force low-angle images that place the President in a position of power.

This study also did not distinguish the degree to which a photograph depicted a high or low angle. Mullen’s longitudinal study (1997) reported a subtle shift from slightly below eye level to slightly above. Viewers may not notice such slight distinctions, which drove the decision to only code for obvious examples of high and low angles. The question of angle does illustrate another factor the data could not convey. Mullen suggested the shift in camera angle and some differences in distance coincided with technological changes in photojournalism. The switch to the single lens reflex camera raised the level at which the photograph was made, and better telephoto lenses allowed photographers to make image in which the subject appeared close to the camera despite the distance at which the photographer was kept. Technical information of this sort was not available.
This study builds on the exploration of framing in visual communication and of analysis of structural features in photographs to identify frames. The findings provide some contrast to studies of published photographs and may illustrate a difference between the views of those who take the photographs and those who select them for publication. However, the studies do not compare similar groups of photographs, and different criteria may be used to select photographs for publication than for awards. Photographers generally submit a large number of photographs to a media organization, but only a few are chosen for publication. A similar study examining the photographs taken as part of a photographer’s routine work and submitted to media organizations might better answer the question of how photographers frame Presidents. A study comparing those photographs to the usage of the ones selected for publication would better answer the question of whether photographers and editors have different goals for communicating a frame.
References


Table 1

*Frequency of Photographs of each President*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Number of Photographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truman</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eisenhower</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.H.W. Bush</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. W. Bush</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>194</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Camera Angle*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Angle</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>(% of Total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Level</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>(67.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(22.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ X^2 = 103.46 \quad p < .0001 \]
Table 3

*Subject-to-camera Distance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>(26.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>(38.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>(34.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>(100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[X^2=4.22 \ p=0.12\]
Table 4

*Relationship Between Camera Angle and Camera-to-Subject Distance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Close</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Far</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Angle</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Level</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Angle</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\[X^2=11.94 \text{ df}=4 p=.018 \text{ Cramer’s V=.175}\]
Figure 2
Figure 3
Figure 4
Figure 5
Figure 6
Figure 7
Figure 9
Figure 10