

# BOOK REVIEW

## Social Media Images and Conflicts

Mortensen, M., & McCrow-Young, A. (Eds.). 2023. *Social Media Images and Conflicts*. Routledge. ISBN 978-1-03-201056-4. 137pp. Listed price: \$44.95 (Paperback). Also available as eBook: \$40.45

*Review by Brandon Hardy, Georgia State University*

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**S**ocial Media Images and Conflicts, edited by Mette Mortensen and Ally McCrow-Young, is a collection of journal articles that explores how digital images and the framework of social media shapes the way social and political conflicts are played out, represented, perceived, and discussed. The volume focuses on the participatory nature of image sharing and meaning-making from three perspectives of critical inquiry: actors, images, and platforms. Each chapter addresses the interplay between social media platforms and the images they host, providing qualitative and quantitative methods for analyzing the commercial, cultural, political, and legislative factors that mediate the public's view of global conflicts in mass and news media. As stated by Mortensen and McCrow-Young, this collection aims to develop original theoretical frameworks and respond to the challenges of commercial digital platforms. The editors and contributors of this book emphasize that social media is a fluid space of self-performance and co-production that necessitates a reflexive look at the contexts and platform-specific dynamics that inform discourse around images and the conflicts they relate to. Filled with empirical insights about the image genre and the ever-growing network of mass media, this volume offers interdisciplinary avenues to new research in the fields of social science, digital humanities, journalism, communication, and rhetoric.

This book places itself in conversation with current scholarship on journalistic practices, social media iconicity, information policy, and censorship by examining recent incidents and ongoing conflicts. The authors analyze the usage and interpretation of images and hashtags from the Syrian Civil War, Manchester Arena bombing, Hong Kong Umbrella movement, and Black Lives Matter movement to highlight how representations of conflict spread and get repurposed to fit personal agendas or the information-sharing culture of a social platform. A recurring idea presented in this book is that as visuals and language are appropriated or mediated by human emotion and social media algorithms, they run the risk of becoming misinformation and a complete departure from their original meaning. Although the authors reiterate this observation through a lens of news reportage and photojournalism, it is a perspective that also intersects with scholarship in digital rhetoric concerning embodied expression and online performances of identity. Moreover, the potential frameworks presented in these articles can be applied to further research on the effect digital spaces have on how we consume, share, and understand information. The book also has pedagogical use as a resource full of cited examples and experiments that can be referenced to teach the rhetoric of social media and the critical evaluation of visuals and words spread through mass media.

The first three chapters delve into the practices of photojournalism and the proxy professionalism of human rights activism in the context of social media and eyewitness video. While the authors do provide a brief introduction to theoretical methods for evaluating news media and citizen journalism posted online, the focus of the articles is skewed more toward photojournalists and activists doing the news reporting. This section of the book does not speak much about the regular users on social platforms who like and share news media. These are actions that also contribute to the mobilization and vetting of images in the sense that they spread visibility for the sake of discourse, but not necessarily reportage. Some additional discussion relating to this would have broadened the scope of these articles. In fact, it would have also been an effective segue into later sections where user participation is mentioned in an analysis of the co-production of social media icons. Nevertheless, these authors still effectively illustrate the issues faced by journalists and human rights collectives as they navigate social media.

The book also addresses gaps in current scholarship and contributes approaches that have either not been considered or lack discussion. For instance, Mortensen asserts that existing scholarship has not answered how social media icons are made sense of by the public. The author contributes a potential answer to that question by proposing that icons are frequently interpreted through a framework of evidence and emotion. Mortensen states that this framework can be grasped by observing the tension between authenticity and symbolization that surrounds icons. And this is also a particularly effective method for understanding how images become repurposed as icons. Icons have a dual performative capacity to be “authentic” images of a historical instance and direct emotion as a symbol. Even if an image is used out of its original context, the emotional connection it evokes may serve as a measure of its authenticity as an icon. The author even connects this framework to ongoing debates on the credibility of using icons as evidence, analyzing the skepticism that disinformation, manipulated images, and deep fakes have caused.

Blaagaard also identifies a space for new research: the implications of embodied gestures paired with digital protest imagery. The author posits that digital embodied political acts create discursive counter-publics. The article illustrates this theory using the embodied slogan of “Hands up, don’t shoot” and the hashtag “#IRunWithMaud,” which the author describes as “political acts that generate critical memory and a black public sphere” (79). These embodied gestures open spaces for the appearance and discourse of minority voices; they invite engagement, communicate solidarity, and signal public belonging. The #PrayForAriana hashtag discussed by McCrow-Young highlights a similar trend of opening a connective space for discourse by individuals within a community.

Understanding the participatory and performative qualities of image sharing and expression is crucial to new research about online ritual communication. The theories presented in these articles offer an approach to uncovering “the difference between top-down and bottom-up perspectives” of social media discourse (108).

This edited collection is an excellent source for scholars looking to do research in social media, journalism, digital humanities, or rhetoric. Each author points out places in existing scholarship where there is a lack of research and an opportunity for the reader to put the theoretical frameworks they have presented to use in their own studies. The book

is also a fascinating read for anyone interested in social media activism, image recognition in artificial intelligence, and photojournalism practices.