



Figure 1: Opinion: The worst-governed state now turns to indoctrination

Images of the Day

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One of the best ways to learn how to use images for narrative is to see how others use them. At the same time this helps us become more discerning readers. It is easy to include an occasional discussion of “images of the day” – either images that you see or images that your students bring in. As an example, Figure 1 accompanied an opinion piece,¹ dated February 5, 2021, by George Will in the Washington Post that began:

Correction

An earlier version of this column stated the State Board of Education’s “Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading” program was reworted Feb. 1. The wording was approved in December. This version has been updated.

The worst-governed state – Illinois had triple the population loss of the state with the second-highest out-migration between 2010 and 2020 – is contemplating another incentive for flight. On Feb. 16, a joint committee of the state

¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-worst-governed-state-now-turns-to-indoctrination/2021/02/04/da6e5c4a-6725-11eb-886d-5264d4ceb46d_story.html Accessed February 1, 2021.



Figure 2: Education: New rules make N.C. schools discuss racism. Some officials opposed ‘anti-American’ change.

legislature will decide whether to turn into a legal requirement the State Board of Education’s recommendation that – until a slight rewording – would mandate that all public-school teachers “embrace and encourage progressive viewpoints and perspectives.” If the board’s policy is ratified, Illinois will become a place congenial only for parents who are comfortable consigning their children to “education” that is political indoctrination, audaciously announced and comprehensively enforced.

Imposing uniformity of thought is the board of education’s agenda for “Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading” (CRTL). This builds upon Illinois’ 2015 law requiring teachers to implement “action civics,” which means leading their pupils in activism on behalf of various causes. CRTL would make explicit that only woke causes are worthy causes.

The quotations below come from a story,² dated the same day, in the Education section by Marisa Lati. Figure 2 is the photograph accompanying that story.

²<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/02/05/north-carolina-social-studies-standards/> Accessed February 8, 2012.

North Carolina’s state school board on Thursday approved new standards requiring social studies teachers to discuss racism, while some board members slammed the move as “anti-American” in one of many fights playing out across the country about how schools teach history.

The state Board of Education voted 7 to 5 to pass the standards for K-12 schools after months of negotiations over the framing of the policy meant to promote a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges the experiences of marginalized students.

This pair of pieces is important and part of a much longer story – a great topic for stimulating classroom discussion. One way to start this discussion is by asking students for examples of the larger context of these stories – perhaps our longest running war – the war over what students learn in classrooms. Examples that students might mention include the Scopes Monkey Trial:³

Scopes Monkey Trial Begins

In Dayton, Tennessee, the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial begins with John Thomas Scopes, a young high school science teacher, accused of teaching evolution in violation of a Tennessee state law.

The law, which had been passed in March, made it a misdemeanor punishable by fine to “teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” With local businessman George Rappleyea, Scopes had conspired to get charged with this violation, and after his arrest the pair enlisted the aid of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to organize a defense. Hearing of this coordinated attack on Christian fundamentalism, William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential candidate and a fundamentalist hero, volunteered to assist the prosecution. Soon after, the great attorney Clarence Darrow agreed to join the ACLU in the defense, and the stage was set for one of the most famous trials in U.S. history.

and the ongoing efforts, usually at the state level, to mandate the teaching of “creationism,” mandate “abstinence only,” restrict mentioning homosexuality or condoms, and even restrict how climate science is taught.

Comparing and contrasting these two pieces is both rich and revealing. As a mathematician, I am duty-bound to begin with George Will’s mathematical malpractice. He begins with unattributed data “Illinois had triple the population loss of the state with the second-highest out-migration between 2010 and 2020.” This data raises many questions.

³<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/monkey-trial-begins> Accessed February 8, 2021.

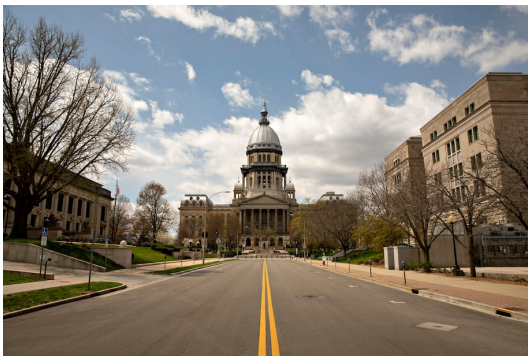


Figure 1 (George Will's piece)



Figure 2 (Marisa Lati's piece)

Figure 3: Figures 1 and 2 side-by-side

One obvious question is whether population loss is an absolute number or a per capita number. But, the more serious malpractice is relying on an aggregate statistic. People move from one state to another for many different reasons. One statistically important reason is weather. A fairly large number of retirees move to warmer states. Illinois' weather is certainly not evidence of poor-government any more than Florida's hurricanes are evidence of poor government or California's earthquakes evidence of poor government.

As an amateur photographer I'm struck by the photograph (Figure 1) accompanying Will's opinion piece. This photograph is right out of Horror Movie Photography 101. We're looking straight up an empty street, directly at and perpendicular to the front of the state capitol, which is centered in the photograph. The converging lines lead our eyes toward the dark and almost monochromatic building. Serendipitously, my wife and I rewatched "The Sound of Music" the same day I read these two pieces. The scenes when Maria first arrives at the Von Trapp house are composed exactly the same way, foreshadowing the rigidity of Cpt Von Trapp's relationship with his children. Figure 1 visually evokes a sinister view of government. Contrast that photograph with the one (Figure 2) accompanying Marisa Lati's piece. This photograph provides a very different context. Consider these two photographs together with the first sentence of each piece.

- George Will's Figure 1 with the sentence "The worst-governed state – Illinois had triple the population loss of the state with the second-highest out-migration between 2010 and 2020 – is contemplating another incentive for flight."
- Marisa Lati's Figure 2 with the sentence "North Carolina's state school board on Thursday approved new standards requiring social studies teachers to discuss racism, while some board members slammed the move as "anti-American" in one of many fights playing out across the country about how schools teach history."



Figure 4: Biden. Won't restore Bar Association's role in vetting judges

George Will's photograph is a subliminal message supporting his view of government (or, at least Illinois' government) while Marisa Lati's is almost a political Rorschach test reflecting her even-handed reporting. Most readers will see the tension between two opposing points-of-view in her photograph but different readers may have very different reactions to the Black Lives Matter billboard and to the Confederate flag. As you read stories with accompanying photographs you should notice how the photographs may or may not subliminally reinforce any message the writer or the editors may want to convey.

Figure 4 appeared in the New York Times⁴ and accompanied an article by Charlie Savage that began:

WASHINGTON – The Biden administration has told the American Bar Association that it will not restore the group's quasi-official gatekeeper role in vetting potential judges before the president decides whether to nominate them, ac-

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/us/politics/biden-american-bar-association-judges.html> Accessed February 6, 2012.

cording to the legal group’s president, Patricia Lee Refo.

The policy, a first for a Democratic president, echoes that of the last two Republican administrations. The bar association’s role had dated to the Eisenhower administration and served as a way to ensure that judges who have tenure for life are qualified.

Perhaps the most natural question is – why did the editor choose this particular photograph to go with this story? Editors have access to vast libraries of photographs. In addition, reporters and photographers often bring photographs in every day. This photograph looks like it was taken in February, very possibly on the day the story was written. It was taken near the White House. Perhaps the story was written after a White House press conference and the reporter took this photograph after the press conference. It is a great photograph – truly striking. But, what does it have to do with the story? You and your students could have a lively discussion about what, if anything, this photograph adds to the story. You could ask students what kind of photograph would they pick to go with this story. My guess is that it was chosen as eye candy. It is a striking photograph and is likely to attract readers to the story but really adds nothing to the story.

Daily newspapers play an interesting role in the information tsunami. They provide much more context for information than the frenetic stream-of-consciousness flow of information from social media and 24/7 cable news but much less context than books or even the Sunday editions of the same papers. Photographs can help provide context. Notice the way that another photograph, Figure 5, used in the New York Times on Sunday, February 7, 2021 provides context and adds to the story.

One of the big themes in our current political discussion is the role of institutions. Populism is often anti-institutional. See the quote below from an interview (An Appalled Republican Considers the Future of the GOP: Yuval Levin traces the party’s path from Ronald Reagan to Marjorie Taylor Greene) by Ezra Klein of Yuval Levin in the same issue of the New York Times⁵ as the ABA story.

And that, I think, has encouraged the kind of anti-institutional mind-set that, in some ways, is always there. Populism is always anti-institutional, and there’s always been a populist element of the right. But the American right, at its origins, was in the business of defending the institutions.

The ABA story fits nicely into the populist vs. institutional framework. A quick Google search reveals a wealth of stock images of imposing American Bar Association buildings. The American Bar Association is very much an institution and a photograph of one of its buildings would visually provide that context. See Figure 6.

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-yuval-levin.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage> Accessed February 6, 2012.

A New Front in the Anti-Vaccine Fight Emerges in California

For months, far-right activists have rallied against masks and lockdowns imposed during the coronavirus pandemic. Now some protesters have shifted their focus to the Covid-19 vaccine.



Protesters outside of the vaccination site at Dodger Stadium last week. Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times, via Shutterstock

Figure 5: From the New York Times Sunday, February 7, 2012



Figure 6: An Image Found with a Google Search

This is also a great place to talk about the art of photography. One of the choices photographers, writers and editors make is whether to use black-and-white or color images. The first photographs were all black-and-white. Color photography was invented early in the 20th century, well after, for example, Matthew Brady's photographic documentation of the U.S. Civil War. Color photographs are not inherently better than black-and-white photographs and the latter did not immediately replace the former. In fact, some of the best and most well-known photographs, even those taken being taken today, are black-and-white. Those of Ansel Adams are really good examples.

Modern photographers, like you and your students with cellphones, can easily switch back-and-forth between color and black-and-white photography with the click of a button in a photo app – for example, I made the bottom image in Figure 7 from the top photograph, the one from New York Times ABA story. Comparing these two images provides some insight into the differences and similarities between the two media (black-and-white vs. color). Color images have more information than black-and-white ones and that additional information may add to or distract from the photographer's narrative. What do you see as you compare these two images? Is one better than the other? What do you see in each?

Many photographers cringe at the experiment we just did. The two media are different and a photographer usually composes a photograph differently for black-and-white than for color.

That New York Times ABA photograph (you can tell that I really love it) is also a great place to look at how geometry impacts photographs. I love photographs of reflections. Look at the two photographs in Figure 8. Notice that in the bottom photograph the bottom half is an almost exact reflection of the top half but in the top photograph the bottom half is quite different from the top half. Asking students to explain why the two halves are so different is a good exercise in geometry.

We close with some practical tips. The point of discussing photos-of-the-day in class is stimulating classroom discussion and I try to remain silent as long as can but it does help to have some ideas that you might want students to consider. When I bring photos-of-the-day into class I have a chance to think about them in advance. I usually ask my students to email any photos they'd like to discuss ahead of class so I can project them in class. This gives me an advance look. In addition, I often ask students to discuss the photos themselves in groups before we discuss them as a whole class. Finally, I always invite my students to continue all of our classroom discussions using, for example, email.



Figure 7: Compare black-and-white with color



Figure 8: Reflections