A PRESIDENT’S TALE


Eva Schram
S1932713

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Supervisor: Dr. C.J. Peters
Second reader: Dr. A. R. J. Pleijter
Abstract

This study investigates front page pictures featuring Barack Obama in The New York Times. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, a visual narrative on Obama’s presidency was found. With a firm theoretical basis in semiotics, nine variables were used to determine the presence of a visual narrative in a visual content analysis of 125 photos. Technical and compositional characteristics such as camera angle and social distance were coded for the entirety of the Obama presidency. This part of the study gave reason to think that a visual narrative was present, so a more detailed discourse analysis of eleven news photos was conducted to discover how the visual narrative developed over time. The results of this study strengthen the notion that news photography conveys stories with a certain angle. The unique qualities of photographs make them more believable as demonstrations of proof than, for instance, drawings or charts. However, like written text and moving images, they are also framed, which guides interpretation. Essentially, journalism is about telling stories. The story we are told by The New York Times’ front page pictures is under investigation in this study. It finds that The New York Times told a story of race, power and challenges.

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Eva Schram
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1. Introduction

In the fall of 2008 I was a foreign exchange student at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. The presidential elections were going on at the time and they were exceptionally interesting. Obama’s march to the political elite had been extraordinary and his grassroots campaign in Columbus was impressive. Both presidential candidates and their running mates visited Ohio, being a swing state, frequently. One day Obama himself came to speak in downtown Columbus and I convinced the editor of my university newspaper back home in Leiden to let me write an article on the event. I focused on all the local volunteers that had spent hours, days, weeks preparing for Obama’s visit and that were very invested in getting him elected. In all my preparations for the article, I had forgotten to think of illustration. Since I just needed one picture I contacted the local newspaper *The Columbus Dispatch*, in which I had spotted an interesting portrait of Obama.

![Image of Barack Obama in downtown Columbus, Ohio](image)

**Figure 1.1:** Presidential candidate Barack Obama in downtown Columbus, Ohio (Eric Albrecht - The Columbus Dispatch)

Back then, I knew nothing of visual frames and their meanings. I was simply intrigued by this picture. The way Obama is walking up the stairs, meeting an adoring crowd. His posture, facial expression and the bright blue sky. To me, it made him look like a Messiah that was ready to save America. Indeed, his popularity at that moment was extremely high. What is more, it seemed more people than usual were intending to vote in the presidential elections. The image stayed with me after Obama got

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elected, even when I moved back home in January 2009. I could never quite shake the idea that the picture had influenced me to think of Obama in a certain way. When I had to decide on a topic for my master thesis two years later, the image of Obama in Columbus came to mind. During my master program I had learned all about journalistic routines to ensure a certain degree of objectivity in news reports. How could it be then, I wondered, that this picture during election season was so allusive? I realized that news discourse was rarely (if ever) free of some sort of frame, but were the frames usually this evocative? The more I thought about it, the more feasible it seemed that news photos are not mere reflections of a live event, but artifacts that carry meaning. Therefore they are capable of influencing the way people think about news events, just like news texts are. After a lot of consideration and discussing the topic, I decided to investigate whether front page pictures of *The New York Times (NYT)* showed a visual narrative on Obama’s presidency. In doing so I hoped to reveal what message NYT was sending where Obama’s presidency is concerned.

In recent years, *The New York Times* has been criticized for biased reporting, for instance on the invasion in Iraq in 2003. The newspaper reported on events that led the public to believe Iraq had indeed weapons of mass destruction, which was the main argument for the Bush administration to invade the country. Later, it was discovered that such weapons were nowhere to be found. *The New York Times* apologized for the way they had reported on the invasion, but the damage was already done. By framing the news about Iraq in a way that favored the Bush administrations decisions, the public only saw the news in that particular way. Unfortunately, it turned out to be false. NYT’s dealings with the Iraqi invasion might seem like an extreme example of what happens when a reporter gets it wrong, but it is the very reason why it is important to investigate the stories we are being told in the media.

In this chapter I introduce the phenomena that are investigated in this thesis. It is my belief that journalism at its very core is about telling stories. Each journalistic product, whether it be an article, a press photograph or an item in the evening news, is a story told by a person who used certain conventions to do so. Chapter 2 comprises a comprehensive discussion on how this story telling can be understood academically. In short, reporters use frames to make the public see an event in a particular way. By so doing, they create a certain storyline, or narrative. This narrative stems from a newsroom ideology. Just as written text can be framed and hold a narrative, so can news photos. In fact, news photos may be more powerful in telling these stories, because the viewer usually does not realize that the picture is framed, that is does hold a narrative. When we see a picture, we think we see something ‘real’. This particular quality of photographs is elaborated on in Chapter 3, but keeping

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the example of the NYT’s ill-conceived stories on the Iraqi invasion in mind, it is important to mention here. Because pictures look so ‘real’, and because people trust them to tell the truth, it is all the more important we find out what truth exactly they are telling.

All newspapers use frames and narratives, and every topic can be framed. The reason I chose Obama’s presidency specifically for this study is explained in the following paragraph. I also elaborate on my decision to use NYT as the newspaper to investigate, and give my reasons for only analyzing front page pictures. I conclude by providing a brief overview of the rest of this thesis.

1.1 The American presidency

To a few of us here today this is a solemn and most momentous occasion. And, yet, in the history of our Nation it is a commonplace occurrence. The orderly transfer of authority as called for in the Constitution routinely takes place, as it has for almost two centuries, and few of us stop to think how unique we really are. In the eyes of many in the world, this every-4-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle.³

These were the first words of Ronald Reagan’s inaugural address on 20 January 1981. Though his speech (and later, his policy) was focused on creating a smaller government (stating that ‘government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem’⁴), he chose to start his address with emphasizing the uniqueness of the American presidency. It was the singularity of modern democracy in America that made Alexis de Tocqueville write his famous ‘De la démocratie en Amérique.’ Within this extraordinary form of democracy, virtually unknown up till that point in Europe, the singular position of the executive power drew special attention. The American president is the one and only holder of the executive power within the trias politica, the governance of state model by Montesquieu. Giving this power to one person makes him highly influential. He alone can decide how to execute laws. In addition, he is the commander-in-chief of the American military and has a veto power over bills initiated in either House of Congress.⁵ He is the most powerful person in the United States of America. And he is probably the most closely followed politician in the world. There is an official White House photography staff, in Obama’s case headed by Pete Souza, that registers every single move the president makes. Souza was even present in the Situation Room as Obama and his administration followed the raid on Osama bin Laden in 2011. And every major American news institution has its own Washington bureau that closely follows Obama.

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⁴ Ibidem, p. 251.
Many researchers have studied the use of visuals during presidential elections, and some have even looked at narratives used in commemorative journalism, focusing on racial issues in the US. But visual narratives on the American presidency as such have gotten little attention. I stated before that journalism is ultimately the business of telling stories. And the current presidency certainly meets the requirements of a good story: it takes place over a set period of time (say, four years) in which an interesting main character (for example, the first black president of the US) is faced with certain challenges (a worldwide financial crisis or the potential emergence of a hostile nuclear power in the Middle East will do). The American presidency as an institution is well-suited for an overarching narrative arc, since the president has such a great influence on American daily life, and news media spend a great deal of time and energy making his every move visible and captured for posterity. But Obama’s presidency especially is such a unique sequence of events (because of racial issues, but also because of the social-economic state of the country in the last couple of years) that we can reasonably expect to find a narrative arc in news discourse. It therefore makes for an intriguing research case.

1.2 The coveted front page spot

With a circulation of around one million copies on weekdays, one and a half million on Saturdays and two million on Sundays, The New York Times is the largest local metropolitan newspaper and the third largest newspaper nationally in the US (USA Today and The Wall Street Journal are bigger). It has won more Pulitzer prices than any other news institution (108 in total) and its website attracts thirty million unique visitors per month. NYT is one of the most influential media institutions in the world. It also explicitly values photojournalism, on its photojournalism blog Lens, and by continuing to hire independent photojournalists. They report on the American presidency frequently, with and without photographic illustrations. Obviously, most American newspapers do. Any of them could have been the subject of this thesis. However, the expectation of wide availability and its reputation

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8 An EBSCOHost search with keywords “president*” and “visual narrative” yields 276 results, many of which either do not focus on the American presidency or study presidential elections and visual narratives. Keywords “American president*” and “visual narrative” only yield 32 results, which for the majority cover studies into psychiatry rather than visual news discourse.


10 http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com
as an agenda-setting institution made me decide on NYT.\textsuperscript{11} It is important to note however that a similar study into front page pictures of for instance The Wall Street Journal, USA Today or The Chicago Tribune would have been possible.

The more important question is why I chose to focus on front page pictures. To answer this question, one must consider the special status front pages have in the newspaper business. The front page is the first thing (potential) readers see. It is therefore (financially) the most important page of the paper. It is seen far more times than pages on the inside, and the front page usually makes a potential reader decide whether or not to actually buy the newspaper. Editors consider the items on the front page the most newsworthy of the day. And since this has been common practice for decades, readers know this about front page items.\textsuperscript{12} Front page pictures are thus considered more important than pictures inside the newspaper, which make them more interesting to study. Because of the perceived importance of front page items, the spots on the front page are highly coveted by reporters. Desk editors usually argue heatedly with the managing director to get their item on the front page, because it gives status to the news desk and the journalist that produced it.\textsuperscript{13} Since the front page meeting is usually a fierce debate,\textsuperscript{14} it stands to reason that the decision to put a particular photo on the front page is very deliberate. That is not to say that pictures inside the newspaper are not deliberate choices, but on the front page editors choose a picture that will appeal to readers and that has a high news value. These pictures are the result of a process in which news stories are created. They therefore form the unit of analyses of this thesis, which investigates the stories we are told about Obama’s presidency through newspaper visuals.

To discover if there is a visual narrative, and what that might look like, a firm theoretical basis is established in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 discusses journalistic narratives, visual framing research and newsroom ideologies. Chapter 3 elaborates by arguing why news photography should be seen as a highly fashioned recreation of reality, rather than a mirrored image of it. To do so, I briefly discuss the history of photojournalism and introduce theoretical concepts that come from the field of semiotics. In this thesis I took a semiotic approach, because it focuses on the message in the communication process model. In its most basic form, this model includes a sender, a message and a receiver. Though the interaction between those elements is fascinating, my question on how news

\textsuperscript{11} Unfortunately, NYT front pages weren’t as widely available as expected. In The Netherlands, only the university library of Nijmegen holds microfiches of recent years of The New York Times. All other libraries only have a digital subscription to the newspaper.

\textsuperscript{12} David R. Gibson, ‘All the News That is Fit to Print: Desk Competition for Front-Page Space at The New York Times,’ Sociological Forum 26 (2011)2, 287-305.

\textsuperscript{13} A process that can be seen in the documentary Page One: A Year Inside The New York Times, by Andrew Rossi (2011).

\textsuperscript{14} Ibidem.
photos of Barack Obama were framed centered on the message. I was interested in the way these pictures were framed and what story they were telling. Indeed, the noted semiotician Roland Barthes starts his book ‘Image, Music, Text’ by saying ‘The press photograph is a message.’ He then spends the next two hundred pages explaining how that message came to be and how it can be understood. Though Barthes’ ideas are of a very conceptual nature, they provide an excellent analytic framework for an investigation into the stories that are told by news photographs. Other approaches are of course possible. A researcher more interested in the creation of news photographs could take an anthropologic approach. Many studies of photography have used gender studies as a theoretical foundation. However, for this project, semiotics provides the best fit from a theoretical perspective. In Chapter 4 I discuss the methodology used to investigate front page pictures of Obama. I used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to first determine if a visual narrative was present, and reveal what the narrative looked like. Chapter 5 describes the visual content analysis I conducted, revealing the technical qualities of all pictures on NYT’s front pages in the researched time frame. It gives an overview for the way the entire presidency was portrayed, but does not show how the narrative develops over time. To do so, a visual discourse analysis was carried out, which is described in Chapter 6. The results of both types of analysis show the presence of a visual narrative. In Chapter 6 the narrative is contextualized by paying attention to the ways the White House media office tries to influence the media narratives on Obama’s presidency. In Chapter 7 I reach a conclusion about the visual narrative on Obama’s presidency and recommend steps for future research.

My curiosity about news photography was fueled by a picture I saw back in 2008. Many years and a lot of hours spent reading, contemplating and researching later, this thesis is the result of that curiosity. In its totality, it is a testimony to the notion that objective journalism is an idea of the past. The results in Chapter 5 and 6 show that news stories, photographs included, are always framed. They arrange facts and leave out information to favor a particular view on the matter. The results also show that the repetitive use of frames over time contributes to a continuing storyline, creating a visual narrative. And in the case of Obama’s presidency, it ends with a massive cliffhanger.

2. What, how and why: the essential questions to a news story

In May 2011 IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn was taken off a Paris-bound flight in New York because a hotel maid had accused him of sexual abuse. The French Strauss-Kahn (often referred to as DSK) was put under house arrest for several weeks while the authorities investigated the case. In the end, DSK was not prosecuted because the hotel maid was deemed an unreliable witness by the department of justice in New York. The international press covered the sex scandal extensively for several weeks. On the day of the arrest (15 May 2011) headlines varied from “IMF chief charged over sex assault in New York” (The Times), “Housekeeper accuses IMF chief of sexual assault in New York” (The Washington Post) to “He is French toast! Cops pull ‘seductor’ off JFK plane to Paris at last moment” (The Daily News). The different ways in which the affair was covered could not be more evident. The more ‘serious’ newspapers narrated a story of possible ramifications of the scandal on international politics. The IMF plays a major role in managing the Euro-crisis by financially aiding Greece, Portugal and Ireland. Its chief being arrested was perceived as a threat for resolving the international crisis. In addition, people expected DSK to be nominated as the socialist candidate for the French presidential elections in 2012. The possibility of prosecution effectively ended any chance he had of achieving the nomination. But of course the scandal was also a story of a powerful man abusing a simple immigrant woman, which was what the narrative tabloids like The Daily News focused on. The different frames were used over and over again while the investigation into the happenings in that hotel room progressed, forming different narratives for the entire scandal.

The DSK affair is a prime example of why there is no such thing as ‘the news’. There are only news stories: artifacts made by journalists who deem certain facts newsworthy. As a society, we rely on journalists to tell us the daily happenings of our communities, like when an international financial chief has been arrested. But what scholars (and to a certain extent news consumers) have long realized is that ‘facts have no intrinsic meaning, they take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others.’ And journalists are quite aware of how their approach influences the news. In most newsrooms, reporters talk about their ‘stories’, not their articles or reports. In the documentary Page One: Inside the New York Times, you can actually hear one of the senior editors saying ‘What is your angle? How did you frame the story?’

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The days that objective reporting was deemed be possible have long gone. Though fair and balanced reporting is still valued within the journalistic community, more and more people in the industry have accepted that human communication is never free from some sort of frame, and therefore neither is the news. Accepting that all news discourse is framed in one way or another makes it possible to study these frames scientifically, thereby shedding light on a mostly covert process.

In this chapter I argue that it is in the very nature of all journalists to use storylines. In Gamson’s words, they gather news facts and arrange these in a certain way to create a narrative. I start with an introduction to the scholarly debate on narratives and focus on the use of time in narratives. I then turn to how the theory of narratives applies to visual communication. The narrative structure of news photos is what I am looking for in this thesis. In the second part of this chapter I briefly touch upon the extensive theoretical debate on framing. It is important to know about framing research because news frames are the building blocks of narratives. Framing as a research paradigm is the how of this thesis. Last, I introduce the concept of ideology, to gain an understanding of why narratives are used in news discourse. I argue that the combination of these three concepts is an excellent theoretical foundation for any inquiry into news discourse. More specifically, it is particularly well suited to this study because photography is a very powerful mechanism for telling stories. I will elaborate on the latter statement in Chapter 3. For now, I honor the journalistic rule of starting my story with a what, how and why.

2.1 What? The narrative paradigm

In 1985, Walter Fisher proposed the narrative paradigm, based on the work of great philosophers from ancient Greece (Plato, Aristotle) to famous Renaissance thinkers (Bacon, Descartes, Locke). The theory holds that all meaningful communication between human beings is a form of storytelling or narrative, and so they (the human beings) see life as an ongoing series of narratives. Because narratives are omnipresent, he argues that ‘[Humans have a] constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation.’ People are so familiar with the use of narratives in all communication, that they know when a narrative that is presented to them is untrue. Since news media make a claim for the truth, they must use narratives that ring true with what people know. This is crucial to understanding news discourse. News stories are generally new information (otherwise it would not be news), but they still have to relate to the world as people know it. Editors do this by certain conventions, for example by starting with a paragraph that

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summarizes the news, and then elaborating in the next few paragraphs with background information. Also, news institutions generally focus on news that is geographically close to the audience. A house burning a few blocks down the road will be chosen over a mugging in a town that is a hundred miles away. Knowing what we know about narrative fidelity, this makes sense. People are more familiar with their own block so they will more easily accept narratives that resonate with that knowledge. News photography is particularly powerful because it is so true to life. What people see in a picture closely resembles what they know to be true in real life, and so they accept what the picture is telling them more easily. I will return to this issue in Chapter 3.

Fisher extensively elaborated on his theory. He addressed how the narrative paradigm could be used to interpret and assess texts in which there are claims to ‘knowledge, truth and reality.’ Narrative fidelity as introduced above concerns the ‘truth qualities’ of the story. But how do you determine these truth qualities, that make for a soundness of reasoning? ‘One must be attentive to facts, particular patterns of inference and implicature, and issues – conceived as the traditional questions arising in forensic (fact, definition, justification, and procedure) or deliberative (the nature of a problem and the desirability of proposed solutions) practices.’ It should be clear then that although choosing a narrative is choosing one particular storyline, this does not mean that narratives are untruthful. They simply represent one version of the truth. Narratives can be based on facts and these facts can be uncovered by asking questions. And as I argued before, human beings do ask these questions. Narratives are not some magic tool to make people believe anything you want them to. They are subject to the rules of logic. It is particularly important to realize this when discussing narratives in news discourse, because stating that there is such a thing as news narratives, is not the same as stating that news reports are untruthful. Admitting that news narratives exist is nothing more than admitting that there are many ways of portraying the truth.

Fisher’s paradigm is a theory on how human communication takes place, it is not a model of discourse as such. Roland Barthes agrees that narratives are present anywhere and everywhere, noting that ‘it [the narrative] is simply there, like life itself.’ But, in contrast to Fisher, Barthes argues that a model based on narrative is desirable. ‘Either a narrative is merely a rambling collection of events, in which case nothing can be said about it other than by referring back to the storyteller’s (the author’s) art, talent or genius … or else it shares with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis, no matter how much patience its formulation requires.’ Whereas Fisher’s notion

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20 Ibidem.
22 Ibidem, p.80, italics added.
of narratives makes us realize that news discourse is just one way of telling the truth, Barthes’ argument gives light to the idea that one can find out what particular truth that is. He discusses extensively how to find narrative structures, focusing on different levels of description (functions, actions and narration) in a wide variety of narrative carriers. For the purpose of this thesis however, it is necessary to focus on the narrative structure of news stories, and in particular on the narrative structure of (a series of) news photographs.

What is unique to news narratives is their lack of chronology, says Allan Bell.\(^\text{23}\) Whereas Ohtsuka and Brewer state that ‘if the reader is to comprehend a narrative text, the reader must be able to derive the underlying event sequence from the given text sequence,’\(^\text{24}\) Bell argues that ‘if this is strictly so, then it has dire consequences for the comprehensibility of news.’\(^\text{25}\) Bell found that news stories are rarely chronological, but instead are driven by the value of immediacy. This value is the most defining feature of a news narrative and it makes temporal order quite irrelevant. In this digital age, news consumers do not rely on a newspaper in the morning or a news broadcast at night to tell them the events of the day. Nearly everyone can get their news online and can (if they want) be informed 24/7. News media adjust to this by making their stories immediate over and over and over again. By updating articles, tweeting breaking news stories and giving ongoing reports, they create a continuing news cycle that rarely stops. This in itself could be the topic of an entire thesis, so I will not much further address it here, but it is interesting to think about how this extreme focus on immediacy plays into narrative structure and news photography.

To start with the latter, a consequence of the digital age is that anyone with a camera can now take a news picture. News media are glad to publish grainy user generated pictures of news events they could not witness themselves. Then as a second report of the news event, they use pictures by a photojournalist that shows into greater detail the impact of the event. And sometimes, depending on what news event took place, they publish pictures by photojournalists focusing on the aftermath of the event. This cycle is most clearly visible in natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami in South East Asia. As with ‘regular’ journalism, photojournalism is first and foremost concerned with immediacy, breaking the news when it happens. Technological innovations have allowed citizens to contribute to this process, thereby greatly democratizing the profession (see Chapter 3). Chronology is less important. Some would even argue that since pictures are spatially constrained, temporal order is impossible to capture. A picture is always a frozen moment in time, so how could it even show chronology?

\(^{23}\) Bell, 1998.


This question has led many scholars to believe that narrative structure is restricted to text and moving images.\textsuperscript{26} Although temporal order is becoming irrelevant to news discourse as a whole, it is still important within a news narrative to make sense of the relationships between different facts. By reading a text that indicates at what point in time certain events happened, readers can – by establishing causal relationships – infer how these events happened. In moving images, the succession of image after image gives clues to a certain temporal order. But this is not the case in frozen images. Therefore, news photos cannot hold any narrative structure. Right?

Kress and Van Leeuwen disagree. They described into great detail “The grammar of visual design”\textsuperscript{27} and argue that the narrative structure of a single visual is determined by the presence of a vector. In physics, a vector is an entity that shows both size and direction. It is visualized by an arrow. In visual analysis, vectors are thought of lines that indicate movement. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen vectors ‘are formed by depicted elements that form an oblique line, often a quite strong, diagonal line ... the vectors may be formed by bodies or limbs or tools ‘in action’, but there are many other ways to turn represented elements into diagonal lines of action.’\textsuperscript{28} If no vector is present in a visual, say Kress and Van Leeuwen, it constitutes as a conceptual, not a narrative structure. A conceptual structure represents participants ‘in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable \textit{and timeless essence}, in terms of class, or structure, or meaning,’\textsuperscript{29} whereas narrative representations ‘serve to present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements.’\textsuperscript{30} Again, the use of time is crucial. Even though a picture is a frozen moment in time, when a vector is present, it indicates movement, i.e. something happening, at the time the picture was taken. From this vector, one can infer an event sequence. And if a viewer can do so, he can imagine what happened at the time of the picture. Then he is getting the story the picture is telling. The picture is thus a narrative. Let us illustrate this with an example. In Figure 2.1 we see a dog on a field of grass. The dog is obviously running. There are no contextual clues to make us think so: all we see is green grass in the background. But the dog’s paws and tail are forming a line that indicates it is in fact running, and not jumping up and down or standing still. Moreover, his front paws indicate in what direction he is running. If the picture had been one shot from a movie, we would see the dog running out of the frame in the bottom right corner.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{28} Ibidem, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem, p. 79. Italics added.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibidem, p.56.
\end{flushleft}
Recalling Ohtsuka and Brewers contention that the reader (or viewer in this case) has to be able to recognize the event sequence to make sense of a narrative, a problem exists in the sense that Fisher stated that a narrative is as much about perception as it is about production. And since there is already a lack of clear temporal order in news texts, viewers will likely have an even harder time finding the narrative structure in news photographs. I would however argue that people have become so familiar with the use of pictures in general, and in news discourse specifically, that seeing a picture and inferring from it what really happened, has become a second nature. A reader may not consciously think about when event A, event B and event C occurred at the time the picture was taken, but nevertheless understand what was going on. In any case, audience perception –though very interesting- is beyond the scope of this thesis, which instead focuses on the narrative structure itself.

So far, I have only discussed the narrative structure of a single picture. But what about the narrative of a series of photographs? News events concerning the American president are framed individually, but also contribute to a larger narrative for the overall presidency. For instance, a front page article about president Obama’s health care reform plan will always discuss what is the current issue at hand, but will also elaborate on what that issue means for his presidency. Within the specific article, this elaboration provides context. But if all the front page articles on Obama’s presidency were taken together, the coverage of the individual events would shape a view on the presidency as a whole. If we accept that this is probably true for written text, could it also be true for news photographs?
The narrative arc of a series of photographs stems from the series’ very nature as a ‘logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity,’\textsuperscript{31} in short: a sequence. A sequence establishes temporal order which in turn facilitates a narrative (because, as I mentioned before, the use of time enables the audience to infer relationships between facts). The presidency can be thought of as a sequence of events, one that is extensively covered by photographers. Each individual photograph can then be seen as part of a sequence that in Barthes’ words ‘is bound together by a relation of solidarity,’ (in this case, Obama’s presidency). But a series of photographs is generally understood as a collection of images on one issue or event that was specifically created as a series, usually by one photographer. Think for instance of the photographic series Yasuyoshi Chiba made on the 2011 tsunami in Japan for Agence France-Presse.\textsuperscript{32} Front page pictures of Obama are not created as a series and are usually taken by different photographers. I would argue however, that if we believe that written text can be both framed individually and contribute to a overarching narrative, front page pictures can as well. In the following Chapter I will discuss Barthes’ notions of denotation and connotation, referring to several layers of meanings in photographs. Without forestalling this discussion, these concepts explain why front page pictures can describe and frame an actual event, but also be part of a more elaborate narrative on a topic. And if narratives, like Barthes and Fisher say, are truly omnipresent, I think it very likely that everyone working at a particular news medium (in this case, The New York Times) thinks of the American president in the same narrative. Including the people who decide what pictures are chosen on the front page. If we collect all the Obama-related front page pictures in a series, I would expect it to narrate the same story you might find when analyzing written texts about Obama. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that one news medium would use several narratives on the same issue, because their audience would notice (the reason being that, as Fisher argues, human beings constantly test narrative fidelity).

Hence, even though a collection of front page pictures is not a series of photographs in the traditional sense, it does constitute a certain type of news discourse by one institution, that is open to analysis like any other. Whether there truly is a visual narrative of Obama’s presidency to be found, is the main question I will try to answer in this thesis.

\subsection*{2.2 How? Framing as a research paradigm}

In 1974 the sociologist Erving Goffman wrote that ‘any event can be described in terms of a focus that includes a wide swath or a narrow one and – as a related but not identical matter- in terms of a

\textsuperscript{31} Barthes, 1977, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{32} http://www.worldpressphoto.org/photo/2012yasuyoshichibapns1-al?gallery=2634, visited on 30 May 2012.
focus that is close-up or distant... A similar issue is found in connection with perspective. When participant roles in an activity are differentiated ... the view that one person has of what is going on is likely to be quite different from that of another. Even though Goffman was not specifically speaking of visual communication, his notion of framing accurately describes the essence of visual framing: consciously or unconsciously focusing on certain aspects of a picture.

Simple as it may seem, framing theory has been suffering from a theoretical haze, with varying definitions and a lack of coherency in framing research. Robert Entman, a noted communications scholar, spoke of a ‘fractured paradigm’ in framing theory, meaning that the conceptualization of framing was scattered. He argued that constituting framing as a research paradigm could be applied with similar benefits to the study of public opinion and voting behavior in political science or to cognitive studies in social psychology. He proposed a concept of framing as a basis for such a research paradigm.

Entman’s definition of framing is ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.’ He goes on to explain that frames exist in four locations in the communication process: the communicator (in journalism: the reporter), the text (or visual, in this thesis), the receiver and the culture. As with Fishers narrative paradigm, Entman’s framing paradigm emphasizes the interplay between reporter, story, receiver and culture that determines how frames are used and interpreted.

Another key word in Entman’s notion of framing is salience: by highlighting certain aspects of a text, those pieces of information become more ‘noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences.’ The effects of salience on judgment are linked with the process of recall. Imagine you are at a social gathering where a woman is wearing red boots. The attire stands out in the crowd, therefore it is salient. You notice the woman with the red boots, and may (subconsciously) pay more attention to her whereabouts and conversations. When someone later asks you about the party, you may talk more about the woman in the red boots than about something else that happened at the party, because you remember more about her than about anyone else. This is what Fiske and Taylor call

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35 Ibidem, p. 56.

36 Ibidem, p. 52.

37 Ibidem, p. 53.
sheer quantity of recall.\textsuperscript{38} In news discourse, salience effects work the same way. If in a news photo one subject is made salient (how this is done is discussed in Chapter 4), you will pay more attention to it as a viewer. When someone asks you about the picture, you can more easily recall that part of the picture that stood out, i.e. was made salient.

As noted above, I consider frames to be the building blocks of narratives. A news frame essentially is a filter to cover one specific event, because the reporter wants his audience to consider the event in a certain way. He creates a storyline, a narrative, and uses frames to create that storyline. Framing is thus the tool that is needed to tell a story. At the same time it is the toolbox that researchers need to uncover a storyline. In visual framing research, there are many tools to do so. For instance, ‘social distance’ is a concept that is used to describe how much of the main character is shown in a picture. If the main character takes up half or less of the picture, it is considered a ‘long shot’, meaning that the picture is framed in a way that the viewer does not have a close relationship with the character. There are many more variables that explain how pictures are framed, including variables that are based on how salient elements in the picture are (see Chapter 4). This is not to say that all pictures that are framed are narrative. One could argue that every picture is framed, just by choosing a certain outline. Including certain elements in a photo while excluding others is the most basic form of framing. But not all pictures are narrative. As Kress and Van Leeuwen argue,\textsuperscript{39} a picture is only narrative when it contains a vector. Without one the picture is conceptual.

Framing research is a much wider field than what I use it for in this thesis. I have not discussed the difference between news frames and audience frames, the difference between framing and agenda-setting, or how framing research tends to very specifically focus on frames used in one newspaper about one subject at one period of time.\textsuperscript{40} Though fascinating, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these matters. What is most important to remember is that all the stories we hear or see in the news are crafted. Bits and pieces of certain events are used, others are left out, parts of it are made salient: in short, stories are framed.

### 2.3 Why? Ideology in news media

The opening paragraph of this chapter discussed a news event that was covered in very different ways by various news media. None of these was factually incorrect, they just told the story differently. Do journalists deliberately use frames and narratives to favor a particular worldview? It


\textsuperscript{39} Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996.

\textsuperscript{40} See “Iris Chyi Hsiang and Maxwell E. McCombs, ‘Media Salience and the Process of Framing: Coverage of the Columbine School Shootings’, \textit{Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly 81} (2004) 1, 22-35” for an excellent discussion on this.
may certainly seem that way. It is no secret for instance that FOX News Channel promotes a conservative political position and that MSNBC is known for its liberal bias. In The Netherlands several print weeklies have different reputations concerning their political preferences. *Elsevier* is the right-wing, business-minded weekly, *Vrij Nederland* is the leftist, progressive magazine. What is behind these reputations and supposed biases? What role does ideology play in news reporting?

Ideology (like framing) is a concept that suffers from a theoretical vagueness, partly due to the fact that it is a common word in everyday speech. When it comes to ideology in news production, one might consider ideology in socio-political context or in the institutional structure of a news organization. Examples of the former are the classic examples we learn about in school: communism, liberalism, nationalism. But ideology can be far less dominant and far reaching. Carvalho states that ‘in the Marxist tradition, ideology has often been linked to social domination and to distortion of reality.’ She goes on to argue that ideology on a smaller scale is more about a system of values, norms and political preferences. Basically, a newsroom ideology is a common vision on the ideal world that is held by the people who work in that newsroom. That vision may help create certain frames, that in turn constitute a certain narrative.

No matter what newsroom ideology is present, however, news media still exist to report stories to an audience. They always make some kind of claim for the truth. To do so, their audience needs their reporting to be reliable. To ensure such an account, news organizations and journalists rely on certain conventions. This is the institutional structure that is part of any newsroom ideology. A classic news story opens with the five w’s and an h (who, what, when, where, why and how), then elaborates in the next paragraphs. It ends with the least newsworthy information, so that editors can cut the last paragraph of a story without thinking about it twice. There are additional journalistic conventions to ensure that news reports are truthful. Indeed, Stuart Allan argues that ‘professional ideals, such as those of impartiality and objectivity, are likely to be operationalized in ways which privilege this institutional ethos and its priorities.’ Objectivity is basically a frame journalists use to make a story a news report. The tools are an opening paragraph answering the six questions mentioned earlier, different sources that represent the different sides to the story and the absence of a personal opinion. But the use of journalistic conventions does not exclude the possibility that another narrative is present. In news photography especially, the appearance of objective reporting


is easily achieved because people believe photographs to tell the truth (see Chapter 3). But there may be much more to the story than meets the eye, even in news photos.

Lastly, there is the issue of ownership. Whereas journalists are in the business of telling stories, news publishers are in the business of selling stories. The news business is subject to free market rules just like any other business, therefore news organizations have to choose their strategy. Ideology is part of such strategies. Dirikx and Gelders, who researched the influence of newspaper ideologies on climate change reports, note that ‘in a centralized national press field that is characterized by an increasing commercialization, ideologies can serve as a form of product differentiation.’ \(^{43}\) The use of the visual to illustrate stories can also be part of commercial strategies. Tabloids for instance generally use a lot of pictures everywhere, but especially their front page is mainly visual, instead of textual. The rationale is that people want to look at pictures, which is fun and easy, instead of reading a text, which requires attention and effort. In this case, ideology plays a lesser role, because the way tabloids use visuals is mostly about selling as many papers as possible.

Dirikx and Gelders go on to say that ‘obviously, other institutional, property-related and societal factors may be relevant for the role of ideologies.’ \(^{44}\) But money makes the world go round, and news publishing is generally no exception to the rule. Since ideology can influence the use of pictures, specifically how they are framed, it is important to remember that a newsroom ideology is not always a purely immaterial matter.

To summarize, conceiving the news to be a reflection of ‘the truth’ is misleading. Rather, news is one way of telling the truth. It is the business of journalists to gather news facts and frame them in such a way that they become a news story. They do this in a way that their audience can easily comprehend the story, by creating a narrative that rings true with what people already know. Guiding the journalists in this process is a newsroom ideology, which may hold both immaterial and strategic values.

Though the use of narratives in written text or moving images is considered natural, there has been debate on whether narratives exist in photographs. I argue that they do, both in single pictures and in series of photographs. How one can find these narrative structures in photographs is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. But first, I want to turn the attention to photojournalism as a profession and the significance of the visual in Chapter 3.


\(^{44}\) Ibidem.
3. True story: news photos as narrative carriers

On internet fora and social media the importance of the photographic medium has coined a new phrase. When one internet user makes a statement— for instance that she just bumped into Ryan Gosling at the airport— another internet user might respond with the common online expression ‘Pics or it did not happen,’ indicating that the statement needs proof. The ultimate way to prove something happened is to take a picture, because to those who were not at the scene of an event, ‘something becomes real … by being photographed.’ Indeed, Seppänen and Väliverronen argue that one of the most important functions of a camera is that it serves as an extension of our senses. Specifically, they state that the camera can capture events on film that most people will never witness in real life, such as a bumblebee in flight or species that are on the verge of extinction. We can think what it must look like, this bumblebee in flight. We can conceptualize what we would see if we had the physical, spatial or temporal abilities to do so. But since sometimes we do not, we rely on photographs to tell us something we will never witness in real life. I would argue this equally applies to the American presidency. Since most people will never meet the president in person, they rely on mass media to give them information that they use to form impressions on the subject. And within the mass media the visual takes the centre stage, because, to paraphrase the all too familiar saying, one picture says more than a thousand words.

In this chapter I start with a brief outline of the history of photojournalism. I argue that technological innovations and a conflict ridden start of the century made for the ideal situation for news photography to flourish. Not only were there many wars to be visually reported, new technologies made it much easier to do so. I then elaborate on the qualities of the photograph to explain why it is a powerful tool to tell stories. I conclude this chapter with the statement that photographs are coded artifacts. I argue why I believe them to be so and I discuss what concepts help in decoding the photographic message. The actual variables I use are explained in Chapter 4. For now, let’s travel back in time to see how the news photo became a widely accepted element in modern day newspapers.

3.1 A brief history of photojournalism

Looking at newspapers from the nineteenth century can be an alienating experience. The layout of papers was very dense and had little to do with news discourse as we know it today. Photographic illustrations in newspapers existed, but were hardly common practice. This was mostly due to the long exposure time that was needed to take a photograph. The Daguerreotype that was invented mid-nineteenth century needed half an hour for the image to be fixed on a silvered copper plate.49

Photographs were printed in newspapers using woodcuts and engravings: a tenuous process, which made it difficult for photographs to be used on a large scale.50 It was not until the early twentieth century that several technological innovations made it possible for photojournalism to come of age. ‘It was a time … of press cameras with 4x5 negatives and then lighter-weight and less-conspicuous 35 mm cameras, and then stroboscopic flash that could freeze a bullet in mid-air, and lenses that could capture an almost 180-degree field of view and bring a face yards away up close and personal.’51

These inventions made all the difference because it was now possible to capture movement on film. News does not wait for an image to be fixed on a negative. Being able to catch movement on film was necessary for photojournalism to develop because it allowed pictures to become carriers for narrative structures. This is especially important to note because this the very basis of this study is the idea that photographs can tell stories, even though they are frozen moments in time. Catching movement is essential in transforming a conceptual picture into a narrative one. If the mentioned technological innovations hadn’t been invented, the photograph would have never evolved into a narrative carrier. At the same time the half-tone printing press made it possible for photos to be printed in newspapers without using wood engravings. News photos could thus be printed on grand scale, making them something readers became familiar with.

Just as photojournalism could not have evolved into a full profession without technology, it could not have matured without several wars that had to be covered. Because of the lighter cameras that could be exposed several times before reloading, ‘pictures could now be taken in the thick of battle, military censorship permitting, and civilian victims and exhausted, begrimed soldiers studied up close.’52 Newspapers were in dire competition for the reader’s attention even then, and news photography of war fronts played a major role in attracting more readers. Indeed, Peterson argues

51 Ibidem, p.234-5.
that ‘publishers learned quickly that war and photography formed a winning combination.\textsuperscript{53} It is interesting to note that research into news photography seems to focus on conflict still. The visual representation of presidential elections has been researched extensively, but the news photography of a presidency on the other hand has been virtually neglected up till now. I would argue that this is because scientists expect news photos of conflict to be more narrative than other pictures. It is easy to imagine why: in a conflict situation, there are always two or more main characters that have a past, a present and perhaps a future together. These are the ingredients of an excellent story for news media to tell. In Chapter 1 I argued why I believe the American presidency to be an equally interesting research case. But we’d never even given thought to visual frame analysis in the first place, if newspapers hadn’t started printing news photos regularly back in the first half of the twentieth century. That is when readers became familiar with pictures in newspapers,\textsuperscript{54} relying on them to show the many atrocities of warfare.

One iconic picture in this sense was the ‘moment of death’ photograph by Robert Capa. This picture of ‘a Spanish militiaman, falling backwards, arms outflung, onto the soil of the Spain he had tried to defend,’\textsuperscript{55} was the single best known photograph of the Spanish Civil War since \textit{Life} published it in 1937 and is still regarded by many as the best war photograph ever. It also was Capa’s breakthrough, leading to his worldwide recognition as one of the best war photographers of all time. The picture is full of movement, with the way the soldier’s body is positioned.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{moment_of_death.jpg}
\caption{Moment of Death photograph by Robert Capa}
\end{figure}

Yet, Knightley argues, without Life's caption (‘Robert Capa’s camera catches a Spanish soldier the instant he is dropped by a bullet through the head in front of Cordóba’)\(^{56}\) the picture would never have become what it is known for today. The caption Life added guides the reader in what he thinks the picture is saying. Had the caption read ‘Spanish soldier slipping on wet grass’, we would probably have interpreted the picture completely different. It would not have been the iconic representation of the Spanish Civil War and Robert Capa would not have been known as the best war photographer who ever lived. The relationship between text and images in news photography is a discussion that I will get to later in this chapter.

After photojournalism as a profession was established, Life and magazines like it introduced the visual narrative of photo series in the post-war period, establishing the concept of telling stories through visuals. ‘At first, stories were pieced together by editors. After the war, they came to be pre-visualized, and even, to a degree, scripted, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, structured on the form of a literary short story. Design emphasized the role of each picture and its relation to others.’\(^{57}\) Life and its photo essays were essential to consolidating the notion that the visual was of equal importance as the word, both for editorial and financial reasons. Pictures were used to portray reality in ways just words could not, but they also helped sell magazines. So by the mid-twentieth century the American Society for Magazine Photographers made an effort to secure publication rights for photographers, and discussed business practices and rates with clients. Another development was that several famous photojournalists, among whom were Robert Capa, David Seymour and Henri Cartier-Bresson, started the photographers cooperative Magnum. They initiated their own assignments and sold their publication rights for a limited time, which means that ‘pictures were sold for a specified use allowing the photographer additional sales.’\(^{58}\) Later this became standard practice for the image banks that first emerged in the 1970s, which were conglomerates focusing not only the news, but also on the advertising industry.\(^{59}\) As analog photography evolved into digital photography in the 1990s image banks grew even larger, holding a more standardized stock of photographs.\(^{60}\) This process is important to note, because a study into a visual narrative of any subject is based on the idea that each picture tells its own story, as do unique series of photographs. Now that image banks supply standardized pictures on a range of topics, there is the danger of coming across the same picture over and over again. NYT like any newspaper these days uses stock photography, but they still hire independent journalists to photograph for them. And as I

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\(^{57}\) Peterson, 1998: 518.

\(^{58}\) Ibidem.


\(^{60}\) Ibidem.
argued in Chapter 1, the front page is of particular importance when it comes to news value and the attractive force it has on readers. A front page spot is also considered as appreciation of the producer of that content.\textsuperscript{61} For these reasons, I expect that front page pictures will generally be unique photographs, not stock photography. However, even if all the front page pictures I find are from press agencies and image banks, the way they were integrated in the front page is still a process that is entirely handled by NYT staff. From this, we can still infer how a picture was framed.

Digitalization of the photo industry had more consequences for photojournalism. First, the journalistic routine got even quicker, since images weren’t fixed on a negative that had to be developed in dark room any more, but instead were translated into pixels on a sensor. With the internet, images could be send directly to the editorial office by email. Second, digital photography became ubiquitous. Small handheld digital camera’s became a commodity and anyone with a cell phone could take a picture of news events as they happened. And news media (especially online news media) were glad to publish these user generated pictures, since they often had more news value (in terms of immediacy) and did not cost a thing.\textsuperscript{62} Some online media (like the Dutch nu.nl) even changed the business model behind this type of user-generated content and now make money by selling amateur pictures to other media, giving part of the earnings to the photographer.

Digitalization also offered more and easier ways to manipulate photographs, changing the image in such a way that it no longer represents what was originally captured on film (or sensor, nowadays). This is, however, hardly a new development. Photographic manipulation has always been possible, but digitalization and the popularization of software like Adobe Photoshop made it possible for anyone to alter pictures to say something different than they once did.

The developments in the last decades led to a democratization of photography. Some have argued that this would mean the end of photojournalism, saying that the emergence of user-generated content and free image banks has killed off business for professional photojournalists. Yet this assertion ignores the idea that a trained photojournalist can see things a layperson cannot. And that people will always want proof of what they cannot see for themselves. Either physical abilities or simple matters as location, prohibit us from seeing everything we might want to in real life. A photo can serve as a tangible piece of evidence for events we weren’t able to witness ourselves and we rely on other people to produce this evidence for us. No matter how many user-generated pictures are published in news media and how large image banks get, photojournalism is not dead. In the end, ‘to say that photojournalism is dead is to say that people want to stop seeing. Perhaps some do. But the

\textsuperscript{61} David R. Gibson, 2011.
\textsuperscript{62} Newton, 2009.
best photojournalists, however they are defined and in whatever medium their work is published, will keep showing the world to itself.\textsuperscript{63}

3.2 True story

The premise of this study can be summed up in two points. First, news photographs, like news articles, tell stories. And second, pictures are particularly powerful in telling stories because of their true-to-life qualities. We believe pictures to tell the truth. It is the reason we have photographs, not drawings in our passports.\textsuperscript{64} But why are photos considered so trustworthy, exactly?

Messaris and Abraham argue that there are three characteristics that make pictures seem to be the most truthful way of portraying a live event.\textsuperscript{65} The first is the analogical quality of images, which refers to the fact that when you see an object in a picture, it strongly resembles what you would see in real life. ‘. The relationship between most words and their meanings is purely a matter of social convention, whereas the relationships between images and their meaning are based on similarity or analogy.’\textsuperscript{66} It is what Roland Barthes has dubbed the denotative status of the photograph.\textsuperscript{67} Because of this quality, visual framing is a process that can easily be overlooked. ‘Precisely because it can make images appear more natural, more closely linked to reality than words are, it can also inveigle viewers into overlooking the fact that all images are human-made, artificial artefacts.’\textsuperscript{68}

Second, Messaris and Abraham refer to Peirce’s notion of indexicality. This concept is based on the fact that a photograph is in a sense a direct product of the effects of lights on lenses and film (or video), therefore ‘the connection between photograph and reality has a certain authenticity that human-made pictures can never have.’\textsuperscript{69} Of course, through selecting a frame or by cropping a picture the photographer has some influence on this representation of reality, but once the button is pushed, the photograph is a exact replica of the object in reality (assuming the photographer does not digitally alter the photograph). Messaris and Abraham note that ‘this true-to-life quality of photographs, their ability to bypass human agency in some respects, is the basis on which Peirce

\textsuperscript{63} Newton, 2009, p.241.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibidem, p.216.
\textsuperscript{67} Barthes, 1977.
\textsuperscript{68} Messaris and Abraham, 2003, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibidem.
called them “indices” (i.e. direct pointers, as opposed to constructed representations of reality).

Seppänen and Väliverronen add the concept of ‘metonymy’. They argue that the object that is photographed continues on its way after it is captured on film and the light rays that are translated into pixels continue to flow. The only tangible thing that is left is the negative. So, they argue, ‘the photograph is in fact a material part of the object it represents.’ It closely relates to what Perlmutter and Wagner call metonymy of the image: ‘how it was used to stand for or represent the greater event.’ Both indexicality and metonymy refer to the representational qualities of a photograph, but they differ in the way they do. The first concept is used to describe how a picture is seen as a mirror-like reflection of a life event. The second refers to the photo as a possible stand in for a larger theme or issue. Both concepts are important to understand when looking at news photography, because the indexicality of a picture is why photographs are used in news discourse. They add a degree of believability to the news. But the metonymic quality of news photos is what makes the picture do more then add believability. It basically creates the memory people have of a certain event.

The last characteristic of images that makes them unique is their lack of an explicit propositional syntax. In verbal language, there is an explicit set of syntactic devices for making propositions. Cause and effect, comparisons, or any other kind of relationship can be made clear by using any of these devices. For example, one might say ‘You look the same as your sister,’ to make a comparison between me and my sister. With pictures, these syntactic devices for making propositions are not explicit, but loose and imprecise conventions. This leads Messaris and Abraham to conclude that ‘in comparison with verbal language … visual propositions are more reliant on the viewer’s ability to make intuitive sense of implicit meanings on the basis of contextual or other cues. Consequently, viewers may be less conscious of having been presented with a fully articulated set of claims than they would be if those claims were made verbally.’ This is why news photography is important to investigate. If news media make a claim for the truth, and employ narratives to do so, then news photos must also tell a story. I have argued so in Chapter 2 and in the paragraphs above. But the lack of an explicit propositional syntax makes that viewers probably do not realize they are presented with a story. It makes photo editors at news media very influential in a kind of scary way. They can make people believe what they want them to, without those people even realizing they are believing.

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70 Ibidem.
71 Seppänen and Väliverronen, 2003, p. 63.
73 Ibidem, p. 219.
presented with just one interpretation. As I argued in Chapter 2, the news does not exist. But where news photos are concerned, one might just think it actually does.

The ‘contextual or other cues’ mentioned by Messaris and Abraham are always present in news discourse. A picture does not just appear in a newspaper. After the photographer takes and processes the picture, an editorial staff decides how large it will be printed and with what headline and caption. The position on the page in relation to the article is also a deliberate choice. All of these choices make that the selection of news photographs is a highly affective business. Griffin notes that ‘as simple thematic cues, they [photographs] frequently serve as the most highly visible markers of news emphases and frames.’

Perlmutter and Wagner show how this visual framing took place during the G8-summit in Genoa in 2001. They examined a ‘photojournalistic icon’: the death of an Italian protestor during the summit. The picture taken by Dylan Martinez became an icon for the anti-globalization movement. In the photo an Italian protestor named Carlo Giuliani is featured holding a fire extinguisher in front of him, as if he was about to throw it at the police car in front of him. The car is blocked by a concrete wall. In the back of the car, a police man can be seen aiming his gun at Giuliani. On the right are two protestors, one observing the scene in front of him, the other turning away. After the moment the photo was taken, Giuliani was shot.

Figure 3.2: Dylan Martinez (Reuters), 'Death in Genoa', 2001.

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The picture became iconic because of its great metonymic quality. Without showing one drop of blood, it became a stand-in for the violent protests at the G8-summit. It obviously was not the only picture Martinez shot, yet it is the picture that was featured in newspapers most often. Editors could have chosen a picture of Giuliani after he was shot, lying in a pool of his own blood. That would have told a story of police violence. Instead they chose this picture, leaving the viewer with the notion that it was the violent anti-globalization movement that initiated the assault. Though nobody knows for sure if Giuliani would have eventually thrown the fire extinguisher at the police car, it sure is what this picture suggests he was about to do. This picture clearly tells a story, one that is easily understood by anyone who sees the photo. But knowing what happened after it was taken, one must wonder if any other stories could have been told.

The iconic status of this picture leads Perlmutter and Wagner to conclude that ‘photojournalism’s output is as manufactured and framed for consumption as any other news product.’ Pictures are thus used to tell a story and they are good at it because people see them as tangible evidence of a live scene. They paint a picture of what happened, providing certainty to what people already believed to be possible. What story they are telling is never random, because ‘more than they describe, photographs tend to symbolize generalities, providing transcending frames of cultural mythology or social narratives in which the viewer/reader is led to process and interpret other information on the page or screen.’

### 3.3 Coded artefacts

In 2009 the Italian photographer Pietro Masturzo won the World Press Photo of the Year Award for his picture of three women on a rooftop in Teheran. It was an interesting choice of the World Press Photo jury, because the denoted message of the picture is very meager. The photo (see next page) features a rooftop, somewhere in the world where women wear head scarfs. One woman is yelling something. It is late at night. That is all we can really infer from the picture. It is not until you read the caption that you understand what the picture is telling you.

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75 Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004, p. 95.
Women shout their dissent from a Tehran rooftop on 24 June, following Iran’s disputed presidential election. The result had been a victory for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, but there were allegations of vote-rigging. In the ensuing weeks, violent demonstrations took place in the streets. At night, people shouted from the roofs, an echo of protests that took place during the 1979 Islamic Revolution.77

Taking a closer look at the picture, there is more than meets the eye. The edges of the photo are darkened and the light from the windows below the rooftop are overexposed. The picture oozes something mysterious. The jury president Ayperi Karabuda was quoted saying the picture represented ‘the start of something, the beginning of a really big story’ and that it ‘gives perspective to the news.’78 There is a connoted message in the picture that says that the Iranian society is on the verge of great change.

The connotation of a picture is a sort of second layer in which the meaning of a picture is given. Barthes defines it as ‘the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it.’79 He argues that photographs are different from other visuals (like paintings or drawings) because of their strong analogical power, but that especially news photographs still have a high probability of being connoted. This does not mean that connotation in a picture is a tangible thing. It

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is an implicit story that is being told by the photographer. But Barthes does give a clue as to how to reveal the connotative layer of photographs. The concept of connotation is not only theoretical, it is also methodological.

Connotation is not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message itself ... but it can already be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production and reception of the message: on the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms which are so many factors of connotation; while on the other, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs. Since every sign supposes a code, it is this code (of connotation) that one should try to establish.\(^\text{80}\)

Speaking of signs and codes is speaking of semiotics, which is the study of meaning. As is clear from the citation above, meaning does not exist in a vacuum. Meaning is given to a text or image by those who make or choose it, and by those who read or view it. The interesting thing about photographs is that one wouldn’t expect it to be coded. Barthes, a semiotician himself, speaks of ‘the photographic paradox,’ which can be seen ‘as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art’, or the treatment, or the ‘writing’, or the rhetoric, of the photograph); ... [and] here the connoted (or coded) message develops on the basis of a message without a code.’\(^\text{81}\) Furthermore, Barthes argues that the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message.\(^\text{82}\) In news discourse this leads to people believing truth claims more easily if they are made in photographs than if they are made in written text. A picture is accepted as a representation of the truth for all the reasons discussed earlier in this chapter.

Both Capa’s ‘Moment of Death’-picture and Masturzo’s World Press Photo relied heavily on the caption to tell the viewer what was happening in the picture. Barthes names two possible relationships between the image and text: the first and most commonly found in press photographs is anchorage, where the text helps guide the viewer to understand the message of the image. It helps the viewer to ‘choose the correct level of perception, permits me to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding.’\(^\text{83}\) The relationship can also be defined as relay, where the picture and text are complementary. The words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general

\(^{80}\) Ibidem, p. 19. Italics original.
\(^{81}\) Ibidem.
\(^{82}\) Ibidem, p. 45.
\(^{83}\) Ibidem, p. 39.
syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level...’

Whereas some scholars agree that image and text always depend on each other to have meaning, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that ‘the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message – connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it: and similarly the other way around.’ Barthes’ concept of anchorage is not applicable, they say. Yes, there is a relationship between the visual and the textual, but they exist and are constructed separately. Indeed, press photographs are -like advertisements and paintings- constructed to a certain degree. It is the very premise of this study that they are. As Lister and Wells note: ‘Photographs are often treated as if they were a source of objective and disinterested facts, rather than as complexly coded cultural artefacts.’

Remembering Gamson saying that facts are meaningless unless they are embedded in a narrative (quoted in Chapter 2), it is entirely plausible that news photographs carry a visual narrative. And we if believe news photos to do so, and we contend that people consider photos to be proof of what really happened, it is especially important to unravel visual narratives, because they might greatly influence the way people think of the news. For without it, we remain woefully ignorant.

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84 Ibidem, p. 41.
86 Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 17.
4. Methodology

Whenever I tell people about the subject of this thesis, they respond by saying something like: ‘Wow, that sounds really interesting.’ Then their faces take on a puzzled look and they ask: ‘How on earth are you going to find that out?’ Admittedly, investigating whether there is a visual narrative on Obama’s presidency in NYT’s front page pictures is a project that faces several theoretical and methodological challenges. The former have been covered in previous chapters. I argued why I consider the collection of front page pictures to be a series of photographs in Chapter 2. I discussed how photographs carry several layers of meaning in Chapter 3. And I explained the characteristics of the American presidency that make it an interesting research subject in Chapter 1. Methodologically speaking, there are still several issues to address. First, front page pictures that relate to Obama’s presidency need to be collected. But do I only choose pictures that feature Obama, or will I collect all pictures that are used to illustrate an article that discusses Obama’s presidency, even if he himself is not portrayed? Secondly, what exactly constitutes an article that discusses the presidency? And third, how detailed does my analysis have to be to make any claims about the presence of a visual narrative? In this chapter I explain my research design and the underlying rationale.

The relatively young research field of visual communication has suffered from a lack of conceptual and methodological consistency. There are studies that use inductive or deductive approaches, qualitative or quantitative research methods and a variation of theoretical frameworks. This multitude of approaches is of course part of how scientific research works, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. It allows for a number of multi-method approaches, one of which I will use in this study. If chosen well, a combination of research methods can lead to a richer and more thorough understanding of the research subject. But, as Rodriguez and Dimitrova point out, ‘the meager literature that explores visual frames offers a hodgepodge of methodologies and a glut of approaches that may impair, rather than assist, our analysis of visuals as important framing mechanisms.’

This multitude of approaches makes it difficult, if not impossible, to compare distinct visual framing studies. A study that investigates how news visuals of presidential candidates in 1988 were framed based on quantitative variables is entirely different from a study into the creation of one photojournalistic icon. This leaves us with a widely scattered and rather superficial understanding of news photography. Recalling Entman’s concern about a fractured paradigm in framing research (see Chapter 2), it would serve the field of visual communication well if one or two generally

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accepted research paradigms were to arise. This would foster a deeper understanding of the rhetorics of news photos and greatly enhance the attention given to the power of the news visual, both inside and outside the scientific community.

In this study I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research methods are based on the idea that there is a universal truth in the social world, that can be accurately observed and objectively measured.\(^91\) Findings of quantitative research can be generalized and compared to outcomes of different studies with the same methodological set up. Qualitative research on the other hand ‘assume[s] the social world is a pattern of symbolic relationships sustained by human action and interaction.’\(^92\) As I noted several times in this thesis, the interplay between sender and receiver is often considered essential to establishing meaning. Cultural backgrounds of both sender and receiver influence how a message is shaped and qualitative research methods are particularly useful in exposing this. Basically, qualitative research methods are excellent for finding and possibly explaining the uniqueness of specific cases.

I start with a broad content analysis of all front pages of \textit{NYT} from the moment Obama was elected through the first three years of his presidency. This time frame allows me to assemble a large set of data to analyze. From the moment Obama became president-elect, the media gave a lot of attention to his plans and his policy. For all intents and purposes, he was already considered a president before he was inaugurated. The time frame also excludes news coverage of Obama’s campaign to for reelection, since the official campaign does not start until several months before the presidential elections. Although Obama announced his bid for reelection on 4 April 2011, he was not the official Democratic nominee for the 2012 elections until 3 April 2012, when he won the Maryland and Washington DC primaries, giving him enough delegates to secure the nomination. From this point in time, one would expect the incumbent president to actively campaign against his Republican rival, which Obama has indeed started to do since then.\(^93\) The focus of this study is on the presidency, not Obama’s campaign or private person, therefore I limit my timeframe to the day after his last State of the Union address before facing reelection. There is of course the question to which extent Obama’s persona is part of his presidency. It is true that the American presidency is of an extremely personalized nature.\(^94\) Therefore certain personal characteristics, such as his intellectual capacity or his eloquence, are part of the presidency as an institution. But personal affairs, like the life of the first

\(^91\) Ibidem.


\(^93\) Although some would argue an American president in his first term is constantly campaigning to get reelected. I will not take such a cynic point of view.

family’s dog95, are only considered part of the presidency if it directly influences the presidential decision-making process. Bo Obama, the dog, has never done so.

After the content analysis, I take a closer look at a selection of pictures that were taken during defining moments in Obama’s presidency. This way I intend to obtain a more detailed view on whether and how president Obama was visually narrated in NYT.

4.1 Part 1: Visual Content Analysis

Originally developed as a method to interpret written and spoken texts, content analysis is a quantitative way of investigating a (series of) text(s). It has rules and procedures that make it possible to replicate and validate the results of the investigation. The core of any content analysis is counting the frequency of certain variables in a clearly defined sample and then analyzing those frequencies.96 Each variable has mutually exclusive values. For instance, in my research I will use the variable ‘camera angle’, which has three values (high, middle, low). Using several variables, any visual or text can be coded. A researcher defines his variables (including their values and classification table) at the outset of data collection and analysis, not knowing if he indeed will find them. Note that that the variables are coded on what is represented in the visual, not on what happened at the live event. Content analysis is used to see what pictures show, not to find out what really happened.97 This seems appropriate for the current study, which aims to find out what story NYT is telling about Obama’s presidency through front page pictures, not what his presidency factually entailed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size on front page</td>
<td>Extra large (&gt; ½ front page)</td>
<td>Extremely important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large (¼ – ½ front page)</td>
<td>Very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium (⅛ – ¼ front page)</td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small (⅟16 – ⅛ front page)</td>
<td>Slightly important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in relation to article</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bottom</td>
<td>Real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in photograph</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Focus on one person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

95 http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bo-obama-growing-up-in-the-white-house/2012/04/30/gIQAI6ifsT_gallery.html#photo=1, visited on 25 May 2012.
The variables I use in my visual content analysis are partly of a descriptive nature—corresponding to the denotation of the pictures—and partly derived from compositional analysis—exposing the connotative layer. The descriptive variables are based on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s theory about newspaper layout. According to these groundbreaking scholars in the field of visual communication, the position of an element on the front page has information value. When a layout is divided in two by a vertical line, the left side represents the Given, the right side the New. The former is presented as common-sense and self-evident, the latter as unknown, and therefore the crucial part of the message. When there’s a clear opposition between top and bottom of the page, the top represents the Ideal, an idealized essence of information. The bottom represents the Real, a more down-to-earth and detailed message. These distinctions are used for front page layouts, but are equally applicable to single pictures. Kress and Van Leeuwen do not mention whether it applies for the position of the picture in relation to the article. I contend that it does, since the very assumption of this theory is that elements on front pages are related to each other. In this study, I will consider the position of the photo in relation to the article, because I am primarily interested in the place the

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visual takes in the coverage of Obama’s presidency, not the place this coverage takes in the context of other news events.

In addition, Kress and Van Leeuwen theorize about how elements on a front page gain salience. Recalling Entman’s definition of framing (quoted in Chapter 2), salience is given to the facts in a story that the sender of the message deems most important, thus creating a news frame. Judging salience in visuals is a complex procedure, because it depends on a variety of indicators and is largely culturally and socially determined. Nonetheless, there are some common indicators of perceived salience of themes and subjects. The variable concerning salience will be size in relation to the entire front page. Another indicator for the salience given to Obama’s presidency by The New York Times is the sheer quantity of articles that is illustrated with a picture. Therefore I will count how many Obama-related articles were published on the front page during the selected time frame. I will then count how many of those were illustrated with a picture.

The second set of variables used in this part of the study is based on compositional analysis. Rooted in filming techniques, compositional analysis uses three widely accepted variables to determine the relationship between subject and viewer. First, the camera angle along the vertical axis of a visual is indicative of the power relationship between subject and viewer. A low angle shot signifies the subject being powerful, a high angle shot the opposite. Shot from below, the subject of a visual forms a triangle which base sits at the bottom of the frame, giving an impression of great stability. ‘The apex of the triangle is the site of greatest power... and a triangle set on its base is incapable of toppling.’ Another variable that explains the subject-viewer relationship is the use of space in photographs.

In everyday interaction the norms of social relations determine the distance we keep from each other. This translates into the ‘size of frame’ of shots. To see people close up is to see them in the way we would normally only see people with whom we are more or less intimately acquainted. Every detail of their face and their expression is visible. We are so close to them we could almost touch them. They reveal their individuality and their personality. To see people from a distance is to see them in the way we would normally only see strangers, people whose lives do touch on ours. We see them in outline, impersonally, as types rather than as individuals. This does not mean of

101 Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001, p. 27.
course that the people we see represented in close-up are actually close to us, or vice versa. It means they are represented as though they belong or should belong to ‘our group’, and that the viewer is thereby addressed as a certain kind of person.¹⁰³

Methodologically speaking, this translates into the variable ‘social distance’ with three distinct values that are borrowed from cinematography. The long shot, showing a wide view of the visual field with a human being, who usually takes up less than half the height of the frame. The medium shot, where a human subject may take up the entire height of the frame and the close up, which offers a very narrow view of the field and where a single feature of the human subject (for example its face) may take up the entire frame.¹⁰⁴ The kind of shot used in a picture also determines whether or not other people than the main subject are shown. In a close up, there’s obviously no room for any other person to be featured than the main subject. But there is in a long shot or sometimes in a medium shot. One of the variables used to expose the denotative message in this study is whether or not secondary subjects are shown in the news photos, because it can give information on the preference of possible relationships between the main character and any other subjects. The third variable that gives us information on the relationship between the represented subject and the viewer is the horizontal angle. A frontal angle with the subject signals involvement, saying ‘what you see here is part of our world, something we are involved with.’ An oblique angle means detachment, it says ‘what you see here is not part of our world, is it their world.’¹⁰⁵

Just as salience can be given to the visual as a whole on a front page, salience can be given to certain elements within a photo. One of the most noticeable tools for making elements salient is depth. An element in the foreground of the photo is more salient than an element in the background. Another tool is the size of the main subject of the picture, which is already established in the social distance variable. The more space a subject takes up in the picture, the more salient it is. It follows that a long shot is equivalent to a small subject size, a medium shot to a medium subject size and a close up to a large subject size.

These variables will be coded for all of the NYT front page pictures in the selected time frame that feature Obama. One could argue that news photos accompanying Obama-related articles that do not feature Obama, could also contribute to a visual narrative of his presidency. A story about Obama’s policy regarding the Afghanistan war could be illustrated with a picture of American soldiers. This

picture could be framed in a way that negatively addresses Obama’s presidency. However, the scope of this thesis forces me to limit the number of pictures in my analysis. The personal nature of the American presidency justifies the decision. In addition, it will be interesting to see how Obama is framed in relation to other people. To do so, I need to focus on pictures that at least feature Obama. They can however also feature one, two or more other people.

After coding the variables I will analyze the data to see if certain values occur more than others. If, hypothetically, the social distance variable is coded for the value close-up more than for the other values, this might indicate that NYT narrates a story of Obama’s presidency as if he were a close personal friend. I will also analyze how certain frames develop over time. Again hypothetically, the variable vertical camera angle could repeatedly be coded low during the beginning of Obama’s presidency and high during the ending of his first term, indicating that NYT considered Obama more powerful at the start of his term than towards the end. The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 Part 2: Discourse analysis of defining moments

Although a content analysis yields large quantities of data, it may not quite register the cultural and societal context. For practical reasons, it is also not possible to pay attention to contextual clues such as the headline and caption in part 1 of this research. It would take too much time to code each and every caption and headline that accompany all of the pictures that are included in the analysis. For these reasons I will conduct a discourse analysis of selected images featured during defining moments of Obama’s presidency in addition to the extensive content analysis described above.

But what actually are defining moments? Who determines which moments are? To do so, one must consider the unique characteristics of the American presidency. The first and foremost characteristic of the American presidency is its uniqueness. There is no institution like it anywhere in the world. The responsibilities and privileges of the American president resemble both that of a king and of a prime minister. The president of the United States is the sole representative of the executive power, like a king. Unlike a kingdom, the federation is not the sole sovereign entity: states hold a strong degree of sovereignty. The president’s power, though absolute, is thus limited in many areas. The president’s role as sole executive power is perhaps most evident in his role as commander-in-chief of the military. The American constitution reads ‘The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several

States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.”

This role then is one in which the president can exercise his absolute power. If he does, it is a defining moment for his presidency that will be closely monitored by every news institution in the country. During Obama’s presidency to date, two decisions regarding the military stand out as defining moments: the decision to withdraw American soldiers from Iraq and the day Osama bin Laden was killed.

Another important characteristic of the American president is his veto power. The president can decide not to sign a Bill and send it back to the originating House. The Bill then can only become law if both Houses pass it with a two thirds majority, overriding the president’s veto power. So far president Obama has vetoed two bills. On 30 December 2009, Obama vetoed a Bill making further appropriations for the fiscal year 2010, claiming the passing of an earlier law made this Bill unnecessary legislation. On 8 October 2010, the president vetoed a Bill about interstate commerce stating that further deliberations were necessary about the unintended possible ramifications of the Bill. In both cases, Congress tried to override the vetoes, but both attempts failed. Both of these vetoes can be seen as defining moments for Obama, because his veto power is one of the defining characteristics of the American presidency.

Though the president does not have any legislative power (which rests solely in Congress), he does have great influence over domestic policy, because of his potential to command public attention. The president and his administration are also crucial to the implementation of legislation, giving them power over how laws are practically used. This influence is informal since it is not written in the constitution as one of the presidential prerogatives. But it stands to reason that this power does define the presidency in certain ways. In Obama’s case, this manifests most clearly in the Healthcare Reform Act. One of Obama’s promises during his campaign was to implement universal health care in the US. So far, it has been a struggle to get the legislation passed. There are several moments during his presidency that are of importance to this continuing battle (see Table 2).

Certain campaign promises translate into defining moments of the presidency because the president is the sole executive power and can thus decide what legislation should be emphasized. News institutions and the public alike will monitor whether or not he makes good on his promises. For Obama, bridging the gap between the Democratic and Republican Parties was one important promise. Exemplifying for this promise is the Debt Ceiling Deal between both parties in August 2011.

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109 Ibidem, p. 3; De Tocqueville, 2000, p. 114-5.
The members of Congress were deeply divided on this issue and it took the president a great effort to come to a deal. It was a defining moment for Obama, because many commentators thought he wouldn’t be able to live up to his promise to unite the parties. It is still questionable if he did, in the end, because the deal was only temporary.

Last but not least, defining moments of the presidency can also be found in elections. Obama being elected on 4 November 2008 and being inaugurated on 20 January 2009 are big moments for his presidency, not in the least because he was the first black president ever to be elected in the US. The midterm elections for Congress are also defining to his presidency, because they serve as a halftime evaluation for the president. The State of the Union Address is the president’s annual speech for the members of Congress. Since the constitution requires the president to inform Congress on the ‘State of the Union’\(^\text{112}\), this annual event is considered an important landmark for presidents. I will include his first and last (in his first term) address in the analysis.

Defining moments of Obama’s presidency are thus determined by presidential prerogatives fixed in the constitution, by campaign promises and by election related events. The news photos that were published on \textit{NYT}'s front pages during these defining moments and that relate to Obama’s presidency, will be the input for a qualitative discourse analysis. In some cases, \textit{NYT} paid attention to the event for several consecutive days. In that case, I will analyze all those front pages.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Defining moment} & \textbf{NYT Front Page dated…} \\
\hline
Obama being elected President of the United States & 5 November 2008 \\
Inauguration Day – President Obama taking the oath. & 19, 20, 21, 22 January 2009 \\
First 100 days in office & 30 April 2009 \\
Health Care Reform Act passed by The House of Representatives & 8 November 2009 \\
Obama vetoes first Bill & 30 December 2009 \\
First State of the Union Address & 28 January 2010 \\
Health Care Reform Bill becomes law & 24 March 2010 \\
Obama announces the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom & 1 September 2010 \\
Obama vetoes second Bill & 8 October 2010 \\
2010 Midterm Elections & 3 November 2010 \\
Osama bin Laden killed by US forces & 2, 3 May 2011 \\
Debt ceiling deal & 1, 2 August 2011 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Defining moments of Obama’s presidency and their corresponding NY Times front page dates.}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{112} Michael Nelson, 2008, p.6.
Discourse analysis is particularly suitable to analyze news texts or visuals because these discourses make a claim to the truth. The question of how news photos do this has been discussed extensively in Chapter 3, so let it suffice here to say that this claim to the truth makes news discourse authoritative. Every *NYT* front page features the motto ‘All the news that is fit to print’ for a reason. This is how the *NYT* journalists declare their mission to unveil the truth, since that is their reason for existence. Because people rely on newspapers to do so, these institutions have some degree of power over the masses when it comes to deciding what is true and what is not. Hence, they are authoritative. Discourse is a means to an end, a way to enforce authoritative power. Discourse analysis then seeks to expose this relationship by finding the ideology in discourse. To do so, discourse should be analyzed within context, in order to reveal its social and thus ideological foundations.\textsuperscript{113}

To properly analyze the selected photographs I will elaborate on their denoted message, gathering all the ‘objective’ information from it. I will describe the ‘analogical plenitude’, entailing the subject(s), size and position.\textsuperscript{114} This purely descriptive information will aid in interpreting the connotative layer of the photograph, for the photograph as a message is bound to tell the viewer more than can be seen at first sight (see Chapter 3 for a comprehensive discussion on denotation and connotation).\textsuperscript{115} I will then add the information gathered in the content analysis and look more closely for vectors, which indicate a narrative structure (as I argued in Chapter 2). A vector is a line of action in the picture, formed by the subject itself (for instance by a look or gesture), by background structures or even the position of the subject in relation to the viewer. Any oblique line indicating a direction can be a vector, but they are often strong, diagonal lines.\textsuperscript{116} From this line, one can infer movement, which is crucial, as I argued in Chapter 2, because from that movement one can infer an event sequence. A vertical line is strong but relatively unstable, whereas a horizontal line indicates stability.\textsuperscript{117} If no vector is present in the picture, it is not narrative but conceptual.\textsuperscript{118}

Another element that I will analyze at this point is the gaze of the subjects. Where does it lead, to the viewer, to another subject in the picture or out of the frame? In case of the latter, the observer of

\textsuperscript{113} David Weintraub, ‘Everything You Wanted to Know, but Were Powerless to Ask,’ in: Keith Kenney, 2009, 198-222.
\textsuperscript{114} Barthes, 1977, p.19.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{116} Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{117} Kawin, 1987, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{118} Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 56.
the picture is left to wonder what the subject is looking at or thinking about, ‘creating a powerful sense of empathy or identification with the represented participant.’ When the main subject of the photo is looking directly at the viewer, the producer of the photo is demanding the viewer to enter into a relationship with the featured subject. What that demand is precisely, depends on other vectors or information in the picture. For instance, a smile indicates that the producer wants the viewer to engage in a sympathetic relationship to the featured subject. In news photos, it is unlikely that the producers will demand something from the viewer. Rather they keep an invisible barrier between the depicted and the viewer. Kress and Van Leeuwen call this kind of picture an ‘offer’, meaning an offer of information or something to contemplate.

When the main subject of the picture is looking at another person in the picture, it suggests an action or relationship between the two.

In this part of my research, I will also pay attention to the headline and caption accompanying the photo. Though Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that visuals can be viewed as independently structured messages, in news discourse they are always headlined and captioned. In fact, Kenney argues that a visual cannot be thought of as discourse without taking into consideration the headline and caption. Notwithstanding the power of the visual, readers of newspapers still need written text to guide them in interpreting a picture. In the end, it seems too restrictive to expect a photo to be analyzed out of context; this holds even for Kress and Van Leeuwen, who have articulated an extensive theory on the information value of newspaper layout in which the position of one element gives meaning to the position of another. If context is key, then so are captions and headlines. Therefore I will note and analyze in the discourse analysis of selected photographs. I will take Barthes’ notion of anchorage (see Chapter 3) and see in what ways the caption and headline anchor the meaning of the visual. If, as Barthes says, the caption can focus your gaze and understanding, I want to know how that is done for the selected photographs. Indicators for such a focus can be the use of certain adjectives, a positive or negative interpretation, or the extent to which a caption explains what can be seen in the picture (the information density, so to say). Since this discourse analysis is an inductive approach, I will not set out what variables I expect to find before data collection, but instead interpret the captions and headlines as I start the analysis.

There is no guarantee, of course, that a visual narrative will be found. But using a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, attention will be paid to

119 Ibidem, p. 66.  
120 Ibidem, p. 124.  
121 Gillian Rose, 2007, p. 250.  
122 Barthes, 1977, p. 17.
compositional indicators, contextual clues and narrative structures, thereby analyzing the denotative 
and connotative layers of the pictures. If there is a story to be found, I intend to find it.
5. Visual Content Analysis and Results

Benjamin Franklin once wrote that nothing in this world is certain but death and taxes. Embracing this notion is especially prudent for those involved in scientific research, which is about exploring the unknown. In previous chapters I argued why there is reason to believe that front page pictures in *The New York Times* function as a photographic series that narrate a story of Obama’s presidency. To investigate this proposition, I first conducted a visual content analysis of all front page pictures between 5 November 2008 and 25 January 2012 that featured Barack Obama, to see if a visual narrative was present. I then did a visual discourse analysis of Obama’s defining moments as a president to uncover what that visual narrative was exactly. This chapter provides a description of the visual content analysis and discusses the results of that analysis.

The front page pictures in this part of the study were collected from microfiches in the collection of the university library of Nijmegen. Many pictures could have been found online, but the context of the picture would have been different from the original printed versions. Because the headline and caption of a picture are as much part of the visual discourse as the photograph itself, it was necessary to collect the original front pages.

This part of the study was not a quantitative research method in the traditional sense, where a random sample is taken that is representative of a larger population. The set of data used, meaning all the photographs that feature Barack Obama printed on the front page of *The New York Times* within the time frame of this study, was a purposive sample. No statistical tests were needed to determine whether the data collected was representative of a larger population, because the data was the entire population, so to speak. Since every picture was coded by me, there was also no need for a test of intercoder reliability.

The visual content analysis served to provide an overview on how Obama was pictured for the totality of his presidency. Based on technical qualities (such as camera angle) and compositional factors (such as depth), it gives reason to thinking a visual narrative is present, but it does not entail any information on how the narrative develops over time. That is why a visual discourse analysis was carried out, which investigated how the visual narrative progressed as the presidency did. Chapter 6 describes this part of the study.

In the following paragraph I describe the data set used for analysis. The second paragraph shows the result of the coding process, by paying attention to how many times certain values for variables were coded and what that might mean. To further investigate how certain variables related, I cross tabulated them in the third paragraph of this chapter.


5.1 Key statistics

*The New York Times* is printed daily, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. The time frame used in this study covers over three years. That means that roughly a thousand front pages of the *NYT* late edition were scanned to see if they featured an Obama-related article. Of those that did, 163 were illustrated with a picture. Of those Obama-related pictures, 125 actually featured Barack Obama himself (see table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of front pages in total</th>
<th>995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of articles related to Obama’s presidency</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Obama-related articles illustrated with a picture</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of pictures that feature Obama</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of pictures in analysis</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1: Key Statistics of Visual Content Analysis

While doing the analysis, several unforeseen issues arose. First, there were a couple of visuals that could best be described as ‘pictures in pictures.’ In these photos, a picture, poster or other illustration of Obama was shown. A photo of a crowd watching a telecast of Obama speaking at the White House for instance, is a visual featuring Obama, but was not included in the analysis. In Chapter 4 I argued why I only included pictures that featured Obama. In short, this is because the presidential office is of a highly personal nature. The person who is president has a significant impact on the narrative of a president and their presidency. Since every photograph is already a representation of the truth (see Chapter 3), a ‘picture in picture’ would be a representation of a representation. It could be interesting to see how this influences the photographic message, but it is far beyond the scope of this visual content analysis, which serves to explore whether a visual narrative of Obama’s presidency can be found. In addition, the variables used in this visual content analysis are for the larger part based on composition. They are not designed with the purpose of investigating ‘metaphotographs.’

Second, after initial coding began it became apparent that the position of the photograph to the accompanying article missed a value which represented the record was a ‘stand-alone’. This value was given to pictures that did not have an accompanying article on the front page. The caption sometimes referred to an article inside the newspaper, but other times there was just a photograph with a headline and caption. So the pictures were recoded for this variable, to include a fifth value of ‘Another Page/Stand Alone.’ This category is interesting because when this happens, the photograph is considered more newsworthy than the written text or at least informative enough to stand alone.
Either way, it strengthens the notion that the visual is of at least equal importance as the written text.

Third, sometimes more than one picture featuring Obama was used on the front page. On the front page of 21 September 2009 for instance, five photos of Obama talking to different reporters in each photo were printed. In these few cases, all the pictures on the front page were coded separately.

After coding 125 pictures for eight variables, I used the data set to determine the distribution of each variable over its categories. Again, this does not provide any clues over how a possible visual narrative develops, but it does yield information about the presence of such a narrative and what themes might be important.

5.2 Distribution of values for each variable

From the moment Obama became president-elect (November 2008) to March 2010, news stories about his presidency were fairly often illustrated with a picture on the front page. The second half of his presidency featured him on the front page much less often. The exceptions are the months November 2010, when the midterm elections took place, and May 2011, when Osama bin Laden was killed (see Figure 5.1).

In terms of a possible visual narrative, this chart shows that if there is one, the main themes of the narrative will have been established in the first year of Obama’s presidency. I argued in Chapter 2 that frames are the building blocks of narratives. By using a certain frame repeatedly, a narrative can
be established. Think of the many ways different news media covered the DSK-scandal in May 2011. News media choose frames for the beginning of a story, and as that story progresses, they continue that storyline by repeating those frames. The longer a story continues, the less often the frames have to be repeated for readers to understand the narrative. This pattern is clearly visible in the distribution of Obama-pictures on the front page of NYT.

Note that the end of the time frame of this study is not the end of Obama’s presidency. It is possible that the end of Obama’s first term (and possibly, his presidency) show more pictures of him again. Obviously, we cannot know this because the 2012 elections have yet to take place. This chart provides an interesting overview of the attention given to Obama on NYT’s front page. It gives reason to think that a visual narrative is present. To identify what that possible narrative might be, we should look at the variables discussed in Chapter 4. Using the data gathered after coding each Obama-picture, pivot tables were created to see how many times certain values were coded for each variable. If one value was much more present than another, it could give a clue for themes used in the narrative. For instance, the variable ‘camera angle’ gives a clue about how the power relationship between pictured subject (Obama) and the viewer is. If the value is low, this means Obama is a powerful figure because the reader is looking up at him. Eye-level indicates an equal power relationship, and high signals the viewer being more powerful. In our time frame, the distribution of these values was as follows (see Figure 5.2).

![Camera Angle](image)

**Figure 5.2: Distribution of Camera Angle**

We can see that the majority of Obama-pictures were coded as eye-level for the variable Camera Angle. Thus, NYT usually showed Obama as a person equal to the viewer. Sometimes though, he was showed more powerful than us, and occasionally, as less powerful. For discovering a visual narrative,
this information is useful in the sense that we should further investigate the power attributed to Obama. The US president is, in fact, considered the most powerful person in the world. Yet he is not shown that way most of the time, as far as this variable is concerned.

There are more ways of making someone look important or powerful in a photo. One of the variables also concerned with the importance of the pictured subject, is depth. Someone in the foreground is considered more important than in the background. Focus is closely related to this variable, but that aspect is only discussed in the discourse analysis (see Chapter 6). For now, let us see how many times Obama was featured in the foreground of a photo, and how many times in the background in Figure 5.3.

As you can see, Obama was featured in the foreground far more often than in the background. He was thus considered the most important subject of the picture in three out of four pictures. This does not necessarily mean he was also the most powerful subject in those pictures, but it does establish him as the main character of the visual narrative. Since I am only looking at pictures of Obama, it might seem obvious he is considered the most important person in those pictures. Although this is true, the observation is still noteworthy because in pictures that relate to Obama’s presidency, a couple of other subjects are also frequently portrayed. For example, secretary of state Hillary Clinton or vice-president Joe Biden are both often pictured together with Obama. Indeed, if I had looked only at pictures of Joe Biden, Barack Obama would have featured in many of them and he would have been the center of attention in those, not Joe Biden. The variable ‘Depth’ shows that in pictures of Barack Obama, he is the most important person. He is thus the main character of the visual narrative.
Another variable that conveys information about the importance of a pictured subject, is its size in relation to other elements in the picture (see Figure 5.4). Three values were used to code Obama’s size in the picture. Large means that only a part of Obama was visible in the picture (like in a close up), in which case he was definitely the most important element of the picture. Small means that Obama’s entire body was visible in the picture, with space around him (like in a long shot). He was not necessarily the most important person in those pictures (but could still have been, depending on other framing techniques as focus and lighting). Medium is the value in between, when Obama was visible (almost) entirely but not with a lot of space around him. As you can see, this was the value most often coded (70% of the time). Based on the distribution chart alone, this variable does not seem to be critical in explaining the perceived important of president Obama. But it might work together with another variable (such as depth) and reveal interesting information. The next paragraph cross tabulates variables to see if there is more to this neutral finding.

Two variables in this study are concerned with the salience of the photo on the front page. The more salient the picture (i.e. the larger the picture), the more salient Obama (as main character of the picture) is considered. The second variable that has to do with the position on the front page is the position of the picture in relation to the accompanying article. As explained in Chapter 4, four positions are available. Left to the article means we consider the information in the picture as given, right as new. If the photo is printed above the article, it is considered ideal, if below, real. In the course if the coding process, it turned out a fifth value was needed to indicate the accompanying article was to be found inside the newspaper, not on the front page. This value was also used if no reference to a written text was made. Thus, if the picture was a stand-alone. This category is

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Figure 5.4: Distribution of Subject size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject size</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

particularly interesting, because the producers of the message considered the picture more important than or at least sufficient without written text. For these two variables, the distribution is as shown in Figure 5.5.

![Picture Size](image1)

**Figure 5.5: Distribution of Picture Size**

About half the pictures were coded as large, which indicates that when Obama is given attention to on the front page through a picture, it is usually of reasonable importance. One extra large picture (over half the front page was taken up by the picture) was printed, on 5 November 2008, the day after Obama’s election.

![Position to article](image2)

**Figure 5.6: Distribution of Position to article**

Both the values ‘Left’ and ‘Another Page/Stand Alone’ are coded more often than the other three, which are distributed quite evenly (see Figure 5.6). It is striking that the ‘Top’ and ‘Bottom’ values are coded almost evenly. This indicates that as far as Ideal versus Real situations go, _NYT_ hasn’t really made any real bold statements. But the ‘Given’ versus ‘New’ values do differ, in a way that supports
the notion of the presence of a visual narrative. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that when editors want readers/viewers to pay special attention to a certain element, they place it on the right. They do this with 'new' information, something that is problematic or when the information is ‘at issue.’ It follows that when information is placed on the left, the editors do not wish to draw special attention to it. They do this for information that is considered given, commonsensical or self-evident. In terms of an overarching narrative arc, we would expect recurring themes to be placed on the left. The more elements are placed on the left, the more we can consider those elements to be a continuation of information introduced at an earlier stage. Table 5.6 shows that this is the case for pictures of Obama. To strengthen this notion, the distribution of the values ‘Given’ and ‘New’ was charted in Figure 5.7.

![Information value of pictures](image)

Figure 5.7: Distribution of values ‘Given’ and ‘New’

The chart shows that most new information was introduced during the first half of the time frame under investigation. The value ‘Given’ is more or less evenly distributed over the entire time frame, indicate of a storyline that was continued throughout the first three years of Obama’s presidency.

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The horizontal angle of the picture is an indicator for the level of involvement the viewer has with the pictured subject. A front angle signals involvement, an oblique angle detachment. It is interesting that by far the most pictures of Obama showed him in such a way that the viewer feels involved with him (see Figure 5.8). It tells us that NYT considers (albeit subconsciously) the president as ‘one of us,’ even though he is in fact not that close to the average American at all. Most people in the US will never meet Obama in person, let alone speak to him. Yet he is pictured as part of the people. An explanation might be a shared feeling of Americanism between the viewer and the person in the pictures, their president.

There is one more variable that of which it is interesting to see how the values are distributed. Social distance is a variable that gives information on how close the relationship between viewer and subject is thought of. We already saw that the message of most pictures signaled involvement with Obama, but that does not have to mean that it also expresses closeness to him.

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Figure 5.8: Distribution of Horizontal Angle

Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996.
As you can see in Figure 5.9, most pictures of Obama were taken as a medium shot. He was not particularly portrayed as someone who stands at a considerable distance from the average viewer, but he was not often portrayed as someone we might now personally either. If this variable is telling us anything, it is that most pictures that showed Obama, convey the feeling that we somewhat know this man, but are not very close.

### 5.3 Variables working together

Some variables do not seem to give a lot of information at first sight. But they might turn out more useful if they are cross tabulated with other variables. For instance, the variables depth and subject size both pertain to the perceived importance of the subject. If we cross tabulate these two variables, we can see that Obama was featured as very unimportant (Small & Background) twelve times (see Table 5.2). This may seem like a detail, but it shows that in one out of ten pictures, Obama was represented as very unimportant. For a series of photographs about him, this seems like quite a large percentage. The distribution chart for the variable Depth (Figure 5.3) gave evidence of Obama as the leading character in the visual narrative, but this cross tabulation adds meaning because it shows that at times Obama was portrayed as the supporting character in his own storyline. Table 5.2 also shows that Obama was featured as very important (Large & Foreground) in eighteen pictures (which is 14% of all pictures in the analysis). But mostly, he was featured medium size in the foreground, indicating he was the main subject (as already established) but not of very great importance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foreground</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.2: Depth versus subject size*
Two other variables that are interesting to cross tab are the picture size and its position to the article. Especially the latter variable showed a fairly even distribution, so it is interesting to see in which cases the picture was considered more important on the front page (when it was printed large), especially because the distribution of the values ‘Given’ and ‘New’ suggested the presence of a visual narrative (in Figure 5.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extra Large</th>
<th>Large</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Left [Given]</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Right [New]</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top [Ideal]</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bottom [Real]</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Another Page/Stand Alone</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Picture size versus position to article

Table 5.3 shows that most large pictures were printed left of the accompanying article, signaling that the information in these pictures was important, but not new information. This was the case for nearly 25% of all pictures in the analysis. The finding further strengthens the notion that a visual narrative is present. As I argued before, the fact that the information is assumed to be a given indicates the presence of a storyline. But since this information is also considered important most of the time, signals that the given information is not a mere repetition of information but the continuation of it. Thus, there is evidence for the presence of a visual narrative in the front page pictures of Obama in NYT.

The variable social distance did not seem too valuable in this analysis. Most pictures were coded as medium, indicating that the viewer was not particularly close nor distant to president Obama. The camera angle is another variable that concerns the relationship between pictures subject and viewer. A cross tab of these variables (see Table 5.4) shows that most medium shots were also eye-level, signaling an average level of closeness of equal powerfulness. It is interesting to note though there was only one picture in which the viewer was on a higher power level and very close to Obama, characteristic of an idol falling off his pedestal. There are six close up shots however in which the viewer is placed lower than Obama, establishing him as someone we are close to and look up to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Long shot</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Close up</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eye-level</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: Camera angle versus social distance
In the end, the visual content analysis of 125 front page pictures that featured Obama revealed the presence of a visual narrative. More pictures of Obama were printed in the first year of his presidency than in the following two. The pictures with new information (that were printed on the right side of the accompanying article) were most often found in the first half of the time frame. Photos with given information were found throughout the entire time frame. Nearly one in four of all pictures was given information but was still important, because its size was coded ‘large.’ Even though the number of front page pictures of Obama declined after the first year of his presidency, every month showed a steady occurrence of Obama-pictures on NYT’s front page. This means that after setting out the initial storylines, occasional pictures on the front page served to continue the narrative. How that narrative started and developed was not clear from the visual content analysis, because the variables were only analyzed for the totality of the presidency. The results of this analysis are the starting point for a more detailed analysis into selected photographs. The data showed that the visual narrative may entail great involvement with Obama, perhaps due to a nationalistic feeling. Yet the pictures did not show an extreme, but rather average closeness to the president. Most pictures placed the president on eye-level with the viewer, but there were a number of situations in which Obama was pictured as particularly powerful. There were also a few cases in which he was portrayed as weaker than the viewer. These findings indicated that power may be a recurring theme in the narrative, but more research was needed to confirm this suspicion. For this reason, a discourse analysis of selected photographs was conducted in which a textual analysis of headlines and captions was included. Chapter 6 describes the analysis of this part of the study and chronologically uncovers the visual narrative of Obama’s presidency.
6. Visual Discourse Analysis and Results

A quantitative analysis of front page pictures can only tell us only so much about a visual narrative. Through this analysis, it seemed probable that a visual narrative of Obama’s presidency exists on the front page of NYT. But what exactly that narrative looks like is hard to uncover from numbers alone. That is why a qualitative analysis was necessary. To ensure reliability, I analyzed the photographs in chronological order step by step, thus showing how the narrative developed over time. This was based on Kenney’s step-by-step plan for conducting discourse analyses, giving attention to content, context and construction. Each analysis starts with a brief description of the photo, providing a characterization of the denoted message. In doing so, I examined if and how Obama was made a salient element in the picture. The more salient he was framed, the more importance is credited to him. I then delved deeper into posture, facial expression, gazes and vectors. From this, I inferred the connoted message of the picture. Lastly I turned to the headline and caption of the picture, to see if and in what way they anchored the meaning of the photograph. Most of the time, the written text that accompanies a photo does provide a direction to help the reader/viewer arrive at an interpretation. Sometimes though, it is of such descriptive nature it is no use to one determining what a picture is saying on a different level. In the analysis of photographs of official presidential news events (the events that are scheduled in advance for the entire presidential term, such as the first 100 days in office mark and the State of the Union addresses), special attention was given to the way the White House may have orchestrated the scene of the photo. For instance, in a lot of those photographs American flags are visible in the background. They are usually put there by the White House media staff to craft their own narrative on Obama and his presidency. In these staged pictures especially it is difficult to distinguish between the photographic message NYT is sending and the frame the White House is trying to convey.

There are ten pictures of Barack Obama in this visual discourse analysis and one picture of Republican politicians. Chapter 4 describes into great detail which pictures of Obama’s presidency should be qualitatively analyzed. The unique characteristics of the American presidency (veto power, executive power, commander-in-chief and election cycle) helped guide this decision. Thirteen defining moments of Obama’s presidency were chosen, which resulted in a list of eighteen front pages to analyze (see Chapter 4). Some defining moments of Obama’s presidency were reported on the front page on more than one day (for instance, the inauguration on 20 January 2009 was featured on the front page on 19, 20, 21 and 22 January). But not all of these defining moments were illustrated with a picture, and not all illustrations featured Barack Obama himself (in the case of the

inauguration, only two of those front pages featured a picture with Obama in it). This was the case for six of the eighteen front pages. In addition, two front pages could not be found online. The front page of 1 September 2010, the day after Obama announced the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and the front page of 25 January 2012, picturing Obama’s last State of the Union address, were not available through the website of Newseum\textsuperscript{127} or any other online resource. The latter picture was available on the NYT-website, but without the original context. It is therefore printed without headline and caption in this thesis. Unfortunately, the front page picture of 1 September 2010 by Stephen Crowley was not available online. The copy from the microfiches from the university library in Nijmegen was of very poor quality. The picture was therefore excluded from this discourse analysis.

Although Barack Obama was not featured in the picture of 3 November 2010, which illustrated an article on the midterm elections, this photo was used in the discourse analysis, because the GOP winning the midterm elections was the first real blow to Obama’s presidency. It was a moment in which the public seemed to have lost trust in Obama, so it seemed prudent to see how this translated into a picture of his opponents.

In the end, in this discourse analysis eleven front page pictures were investigated. The pictures in the discourse analysis revealed a story in which the main character was celebrated, tested and tried. Recurring themes were power, race and the antagonism between two political belief systems. In the end, Obama’s presidency has been visually narrated throughout the entire time frame chosen for this study. Not all pictures in this part of the study were narrative in themselves, some were of a conceptual nature. But all of them contributed to an overarching narrative arc.

In the remainder of this chapter, photos of defining moments are shown, followed by a short analysis. As we progress through Obama’s presidency, so does the narrative. Each photograph and its analysis are marked as a separate paragraph. A conclusion on the presence and content of a visual narrative will be given in Chapter 7, in which I also place my research findings into a broader context of how our view of the American presidency (and Obama’s in particular) is influenced by the press and the White House respectively.

\textsuperscript{127} \url{http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/archive.asp}, visited on 21 March 2012.
In a medium shot, president-elect Barack Obama can be seen with his family. His wife Michelle Obama is on the right, Barack Obama is on the left and in between are their two daughters Malia (left) and Sasha. The family is neither in the foreground nor background. They are in the middle of a large expanded space, meaning that from foreground to background this picture is very wide.

A lot of American flags can be seen that are clearly in movement, both in the foreground and the background. Barack, Michelle and Malia seem to be looking to the same point to their right, Barack is
waving in that direction. Sasha is looking at something else, to her left. In the foreground, several cameras can be seen out of focus. It is obvious the family is standing on a stage in front of an adoring crowd. There are no significant landmarks or buildings in sight. The camera angle is eye-level and frontal, indicating a close, personal relationship with the new first family.

The most dominant colors in the picture are black (in the clothing of the Obama’s), red (in Malia’s and Michelle’s dresses and the flags) and blue (in the background). The combination of red and blue could contribute to a sense of Americanism, because these are the colors of the American flag. The Obama’s are clearly the central focus of the picture, which is also established through highlighting them and darkening the foreground and background.

Looking at the looks and gestures of the Obama’s, several things stand out. None of the subjects is looking directly at the viewer, but staring out of the frame. This is what Kress and van Leeuwen call an ‘offer’, giving the viewer something to contemplate and creating a powerful sense of empathy or identification. Barack is smiling and waving to someone in the public. We cannot see who this is, but it is probably not someone he knows personally. This picture was taken after it was announced that the American people had chosen Obama as the 44th president of the United States. Grant Park,

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128 Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996.
where Obama gave his victory speech, was packed with thousands of people who wanted to get a
glimpse of the new president-elect. Nevertheless, Barack’s smile seems genuine, which of course
indicates happiness. Note that the second button of his jacket is undone, which can be seen as a sign
of informality.

Michelle’s facial expression is different. Her lips seem pursed and she has a tensed expression on her
face that indicates something like confusion. Her back is a little hunched, she is leaning in to see
better, so it seems. She might think she recognizes something or someone but cannot see properly.
She seems less relaxed than her husband. Malia’s expression resembles her mother’s. Pursed lips,
clearly focusing on something in the distance. For the viewer, both women are less easy to relate to
than Barack because of their expressions. Little Sasha is clearly unaware of being photographed
(which seems hard to imagine, because there must have been hundreds of photographers at the
scene). Based on looks and gestures, this picture seems to be telling a story of a first family a little
undone by the news of being elected (where Sasha, Malia and Michelle are concerned), but also of
great relief and genuine happiness (most visible in Barack). The fact that the family is photographed
as one entity, all holding hands, indicates that winning the election is considered a family effort.

Turning to the caption and headline, other elements are noticeable. The headline reads ‘OBAMA |
Racial barrier falls in decisive victory’. It clearly focuses on the implications of electing a black
president. It implies that Americans have overcome racial prejudice by electing a black president.
This issue is not immediately clear from the photo, but the headline can direct the way a viewer will
interpret the photo (recall Barthes’ notion of anchorage). With the headline in mind, we might
interpret Michelle’s and Malia’s perceived confusion as feeling disbelief that a black family is moving
into the White House. But the headline seems to imply that the US will be free of racial issues from
now on (particularly because of the words “decisive victory”), which is in no way a sure thing and also
does not resonate within the picture. We might notice that there are no Caucasian people in the
picture, but this is logical: it is a picture of the first family, which happens to be a black family. The
caption, which reads ‘President-elect Barack Obama with his wife, Michelle, and their daughters in
Chicago on Tuesday night, is fairly descriptive and does not provide any indication as to what to look
for in the photo. It does, however, introduce the most important people in Barack Obama’s life, as is
common at the beginning of a story.

No vector is present in the photo, making it a conceptual instead of a narrative structure. The key
characteristic of conceptual pictures is that they are timeless.129 It is not strange that the election of
the first black president of the United States is framed conceptually. As the headline states, Obama

129 Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996.
getting elected was a decisive moment in history, even though no one knew at the time if it would have any lasting influence on racial issues in the US. But by establishing the beginning of Obama’s presidency as decisive in racial issues, a clear beginning of a story of ethnicity was created. Add to that Malia and Michelle looking rather overwhelmed, we might expect other pictures of the first family to be framed in the same manner.
6.2 20 January 2009 | Obama to be inaugurated as the 44th president of the US

In this picture, printed on the day of the inauguration, Barack and Michelle Obama are featured in a room full of people. Barack has his head turned from the picture and is holding a Caucasian baby. Michelle is looking at them. In the background on the left (out of focus), an African-American and a Caucasian male can be seen observing the scene. On the far right (also out of focus), a Caucasian woman seems to be looking at the scene. There are no clear indicators to give us an idea of where this event took place. It could be any room that holds a group of people in the world. Since the picture was taken a day before in the inauguration, it is safe to assume this picture was taken in Washington DC.

We cannot see the facial expression of Barack Obama, because his head is turned towards the baby. His posture seems relaxed though, as if he is perfectly at ease with this baby in his arms. Though we cannot see his eyes, we know he is making eye contact with the baby, which in turn is looking up at him. The baby and Barack are exchanging a look. Michelle is observing this scene from up close, and smiling while she does, expressing happiness. The baby also looks happy. The picture gives no clue as to who the parents of this child are. The only thing we know for sure is that the Obama’s are not.
Looking for vectors reveals something interesting. The looks in the picture form two triangles, both of which point to Barack. One small triangle between the baby, Michelle and Barack, and one big one between the two men on the left, the woman on the right and the Obama’s with baby.

In both triangles, Barack forms the top of the pyramid. In the red (small) triangle, Michelle and the baby form the base. In the blue (large) triangle, unknown onlookers form the base. These vectors indicate a narrative structure. What is more, the red triangle seems to be pointed up. Both Michelle and the baby look up to Barack, indicating he some sort of power. In the blue triangle, the power relationship is not so clear. The woman on the right is sitting down, looking up to a more powerful Barack. But the men on the left are on eye-level with Barack, implying an equal relationship. But since they are in the background and out of focus, they are far less important than Barack is in this picture. As one might expect on the day of the inauguration, Barack is the center of attention in this story, portrayed more powerful than most other participants.

Turning to headline and caption, the racial issue seems to resurface. ‘On eve of history’ states that a unique event is about to happen. The viewer immediately knows that this event is the inauguration of the first black president of the US. This caption leads the viewer to noticing that the picture features both African-American and Caucasian people. By featuring Obama holding a white baby, his ‘blackness’ is emphasized. Yet he is also pictured as the most powerful man in the room. In this light,
we can interpret the picture as a story in which for the first time ever, an African-American is the most powerful man in the world. The caption, again, is not very revealing in the sense that it does not serve as an anchor to the photo. But the narrative that started at the election of Barack Obama seems to continue.
The day after the inauguration, 21 January 2009, *NYT* opened with a large picture of the Obama’s that covered nearly half the front page. Front page pictures are rarely printed this big, so we can imagine how important the editors thought the news of the inauguration was. Compared to front page on the day after election night, the importance of the news events seems equal when we consider that both front pages were dedicated entirely to those events (the election and the inauguration respectively). But in the case of the latter, more attention is given to the visual because it is printed much larger.
The picture features four people, but focuses on Barack and Michelle Obama. Again, there are no clear markers of where the picture was taken, but it is common knowledge that the inauguration takes place in Washington DC. Therefore indicators for the location of the picture are not really necessary. You can see a piece of an American flag in the top right corner of the picture, giving just a hint of a nationalistic feeling. Color wise, Michelle’s attire stands out. Whereas the rest of the people in the picture are dressed in black mostly, she is wearing a light colored dress and jacket. This makes her stand out, the attention is drawn more to her than to Barack on her right. It is notable that in the pictures of what I describes as ‘defining moments’, so far Michelle has been featured next to Barack every time. The visual narrative of Obama’s presidency at least for now seems to focus on Barack and Michelle as a team, rather than Barack alone.

Both Michelle and Barack are staring out of the frame, leaving the viewer to think about what they are looking at. It creates a sense of empathy. They are not looking to the same thing. Instead, it seems like they are not really looking at anything, but just staring in a direction. We cannot know what it is they are seeing, but we can infer from their posture and facial expressions that they have been talking and are enjoying a moment together. Because of the front angle, eye-level camera position and the laughing couple, the viewer is pulled in personally. The secret service people in the background looking very serious indicate that this is a very powerful couple that is featured in the picture. There’s just one thing that gives away that Barack, not Michelle, is the most powerful of the two. Michelle is leaning in to Barack. If she’d stand upright, she would be taller than Barack. Because
she is hunched over, they appear to be of equal length. This gesture suggests that – although Michelle’s attire makes her stand out – it is in fact Barack we should be looking at. Again, though very subtly, Barack is portrayed as the most powerful man in the picture.

A vector can be seen in the picture because every pair of feet is pointing in the same direction. If one would draw lines through the feet of the people in the picture, you would have eight more or less parallel lines. It is clear that all four people are walking in the same direction. This action is confirmed by the caption, that states that Barack and Michelle are walking to the White House. So by looking at the picture, a viewer knows that the actors in the picture are walking. The caption provides the destination (the White House). What is interesting about the caption is that it says ‘part of the way’, leaving the viewer to wonder what they did for the rest of the way. Did they take a car, did they ride horses or were they carried? The picture provides no information on this issue, but a car ride seems the most likely option. What is clear from the caption is that the moment of the photograph is taken after the official inauguration, because Obama is now headed to the White House. The walk is classically noted as the last relaxed moment before the presidency begins, which helps explain the expressions on Michelle and Barack’s faces. It was a moment of great joy and one of the few in which now president Obama could relax. The headline does not provide any anchorage to the picture. It might provide anchorage to the written text, but that is beyond the scope of this analysis.

This picture does not seem to add to the narrative of racial equality that has been used so far, but does strengthen the storyline of Obama’s powerful status. Furthermore, it establishes Michelle Obama as relevant to the story of Obama’s presidency. On its own, this photo can be seen as the last time we will see Barack Obama as a person, instead of president Obama.
In this picture we see Barack Obama as a small figure together with a couple dozen agents of the press. Most reporters are anonymous to us, as we see only the back of their heads. Between the
reporters and Obama is some open space, highlighting that Obama is what we are supposed to look at. The light at the top left does catch our eye, but it also illuminates Obama’s figure. Note that Michelle Obama is not in the picture. She is not deemed relevant to the news of Obama’s first hundred days in office.

It is a very static picture, no vectors can be found, making it a conceptual photo. Indeed, if the viewer does not know it is a picture of Obama talking about his first hundred days in office, he could assume it is a news conference given by Obama at any point in time. The American flag behind Obama is used to emphasize his American-ness. Using the flag to do so has been common for all American presidents so far, Obama is no different in that respect. Not that this display of nationalism is not necessarily something NYT wants to emphasize in the narrative, since the flag was placed there by someone from the White House staff. It stands to reason that a media officer did so to craft its own visual narrative of Obama. NYT is not creating this visual narrative on its own, but is dependent on the scene that is set by the West Wing, especially in the photo opportunities that take place inside the White House. NYT could circumvent this influence on its visual narrative by choosing another picture, but in this instance, it is quite likely that all pictures would have captured an American flag in the background, because these settings usually include several.

Obama’s posture and facial expression are very stern, which could lead us to think that now that he is officially president, he is more serious and less frivolous than he was as president-elect. This formality attributes to the story of his newly gained powerful status. This power-relationship is
further established by his surroundings. He is placed higher than the group of reporters, many of whom also have their heads bowed down. Again, Obama is pictured as the most powerful person in the room. By continually framing Obama this way, NYT is creating a clear narrative of Obama as the most powerful person.

This picture is a ‘stand alone’, meaning that the accompanying article is not printed on the front page. The picture is used as a teaser for an article that is printed inside the newspaper. In that respect, the headline ‘100 Days and Counting’ is a necessary anchor for the viewer to tell him what the picture is about. As I noted before, without this headline, it could be a picture of any arbitrary news conference by Obama. The headline signals what it is we are looking at here, and the caption adds information on time, location and topics that have been discussed. In doing so, the editors set a standard for what topics will be most important in the remainder of Obama’s presidency. Pakistan, interrogation techniques, the economy and the military are topics we will have to pay extra attention to in Obama-related reporting from now on.

As far as the overarching narrative arc goes, NYT has moved on from the rise of a black man to the most powerful place in the world, to a president in office, including all the traditional signs that go with it (formal posture, American flag in the background and presidential seal on the platform).
8 November 2009 | Health Care Reform Act passed by the House of Representatives

**Sweeping Health Care Overhaul Passes the House**

Slim Margin for Plan to Cover 36 Million

BY CARL HUSE
and ROBERT PEAR
WASHINGTON — Facing President Obama a hard-fought victory, the House narrowly approved a sweeping overhaul of the nation’s health care system on Saturday night, advancing legislation that Democrats said could stand as their defining social policy achievement.

After a daylong clash with Republicans over what has been a Democratic goal for decades, lawmakers voted 219 to 212 to approve a plan that would cost $1 trillion over 10 years. Democrats said the legislation would provide overdue relief to Americans struggling to buy or hold on to health insurance.

“This is a moment to revolutionize health care in this country,” said Representative George Miller, Democrat of California and one of the chief architects of the bill. Democrats were forced to make major concessions on ins-

Figure 6.9: Picture by Doug Mills (The New York Times)

Focused on Obama in the background, this picture features four men (including Obama) and a small part of a woman’s head (on the left), but we cannot make out any more than that. We do not know where exactly the picture is taken, but the two American flags on the left indicate that it is somewhere where official government actions are taken. Flags that are positioned the way they are in this picture are usually not found in informal settings. Though Obama is in the background, he is still the most salient in this picture, because his face is the only one that is in focus (together with the flags). But what really makes Obama stand out in this picture, is his look and gesture.

Figure 6.10: Close up of president Obama
Obama is looking directly into the camera, and thus directly into our eyes. This is what Kress and van Leeuwen labeled a ‘demand’ picture, in which the pictured subject is demanding something from the viewer. What exactly that is, is for us to determine. His facial expression is fairly neutral, though his eyes look a little puffy, which suggests he is tired. We might interpret his look as a sign that he would like to be left alone for a moment. This notion is strengthened by the fact that he is waving goodbye. Not only can we infer that he is leaving the room, by waving in the direction of the photographer specifically, he is creating a distance between himself and the audience. This distance is emphasized by the contrast between foreground and background. Also, the other people in the picture have their backs to Obama, leaving him alone. Their actions of walking away are established by the vectors that are seen if one draws a line from their eyes to the direction in which they are gazing, and by the way their bodies are positioned. The latter indicates they are walking, the vectors signal the overall direction in which they do.

Again, the headline (‘Sweeping Health Care Overhaul Passes the House’) tells the viewer what exactly it is this picture is showing. In no way does the photo itself show that Obama has just gained a big victory by having his health care bill passed. Quite the opposite actually, by just looking at the picture one might think Obama has just had bad news. When we read the caption (‘President Obama leaving a meeting with House Democrats on Saturday in which he urged passage of health care legislation’), our idea of him leaving is confirmed.

130 Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996.
It is an interesting choice that this photo was printed at a moment in Obama’s presidency which could be marked as a victory. We saw NYT starting off by presenting Obama’s presidency as a victory in itself, focusing on the historical significance of his election. Roughly one year later, Obama’s first actual victory as president happens and NYT frames it in a way that makes Obama look tired, yet successful. As the caption says, the other people in the picture are fellow Democrats, who were off to vote in favor of the health care bill. At the moment the picture was taken, Obam thus knew his legislation would pass. As far as storylines go, we seem to have come to the point in which the hero of the story starts feeling the stress of his quest. Obama promised change to America, NYT is now telling us that change does not come without struggle.
In this photo, Obama is in the very center and he is surrounded by people of different ethnicities. Some of the people are focused on him, but there are also several people that are looking in different directions. Close behind him is Vice-president Joe Biden. You can see a small ring of space around these two men, presenting them as a team, that stand apart from the rest of the people in the picture. There is not a lot of depth in the picture, all the subjects are more or less in the same focus. The way Obama and Biden are placed in the middle of the composition is what makes them the center of attention in the picture. It also establishes the couple as the people with status, power. Obama even more so, because Biden is positioned behind him, only visible from the neck up. That is why it is peculiar that the camera is positioned above the scene, looking down on Obama and Biden. This would indicate that we think of Obama as less powerful than ourselves, but that does not
resonate with what the picture is telling us. We have to keep in mind though that this was probably the only way to show Obama’s entrance in the chamber. The camera angle should then not be taken as an indicator of a power relationship in this instance. But why did NYT choose to print this picture of Obama’s entrance in the House chamber? They could have also used a photo of Obama at the dais delivering his speech, shot from below. That would have continued the narrative of a powerful president speaking to the people quite traditionally. Perhaps NYT wanted to break free from the frame of an all powerful American president delivering a speech that the White House was staging. The fact is that the picture that was printed, features Obama in the middle of lots of people. We are thus left to determine how president Obama compares to these other people in the photograph.

There are two vectors to see in the picture, in the hands that are extended to Obama. Since these vectors point in the direction of Obama, we can conclude that the action that is carried out in the picture, is done to Obama. This establishes Obama as the center again, around whom others circulate.

Figure 6.13: Picture with vectors
Obama’s jaw is clenched, his gaze firm. He emits confidence, which makes him seem commanding. It seems *NYT* is picking up its storyline about Obama being the most powerful of all again. Evidence for this statement can also be seen in the headline and caption.

Both headline and caption use Obama as the subject of the sentence, making him the actor in the sentence. The headline could have easily read “Nation cannot afford politics of no”, in which the quotations marks would serve as markers that the sentence is a statement made by someone. Instead, the headline includes ‘Obama says’, bringing emphasis to the fact that Obama made this claim. By focusing on Obama and on the nation in one sentence, *NYT* summarizes the position of Obama in one sentence. Both the picture on its own, and in co-operation with the headline and caption, positions Obama as the leader of America, the person that is in control.
With about a dozen people behind him, Obama is seen sitting down, signing a piece of paper. Obama is in focus and in the foreground, making him the most salient element of the picture. At second glance, we might notice the gaze of Joe Biden and the facial expression of the man on Biden’s left, but our main attention is drawn to Obama. Two presidential seals can be seen, on the table Obama is sitting at and on the platform at the far left. We can make out a small portion of the American flag, in the same official use as we saw earlier. The way this flag is positioned together with the presence of the presidential seals indicate the location of the picture is a formal presidential room, perhaps in the White House.

To Obama’s left is a child of African American origin. What he is doing there is not immediately clear. He is watching Obama and he seems indifferent, with his hands in his pockets and his indifferent gaze. What is most noticeable about him is his race. Next to Obama, he is the only black person in...
the photo. On the right stands someone who appears to be Hispanic, but the rest of the crowd is Caucasian. The presence of the kid could be orchestrated by the media office of the West Wing, to signal that less privileged youth would be aided by the health care bill. But NYT chose to print the picture this way. They could have cropped the picture to exclude the kid, who signals Obama’s success in helping people of different origin defeat their underprivileged position.

The narrative of Obama’s presidency was kicked off with a clear focus on racial issues in the US by the headline used after the day he was elected (“Racial barrier falls in decisive victory”). Since then, race has returned as a theme in the visual narrative occasionally (for instance in the picture that was printed on the day of his inauguration), but has received less attention than one might expect after the frame used on 5 November 2008. It seems to return now, through the presence of the child on the left. It is a subtle sign, but there seems no other reason for the kid to be in the picture. We know it is not one of Obama’s own children, since he has two daughters, and the child does not seem to have a clear relationship with any other subject in the picture. His position and gaze are focused on Obama, like he is looking up to him in the figurative sense (because in the literal sense, they are on the same level). In fact, together with the woman behind Obama he forms a triangle of which Obama is the top (because Obama is not looking back at either of them, but their gazes hold the same direction – they are thus vectors, indicating a narrative structure). More precisely, the top of the inverted pyramid is in fact the sheet of paper Obama is signing. Obama is signing something that appears to be of great importance. And with a grin on his face, he looks satisfied and confident doing it.

![Figure 6.15: Picture with vectors](image-url)
Again, Obama is pictured as the most powerful person present, even though he is sitting down and thus lower than most objects in the picture. This powerful position is emphasized by the fact that a group of people literally stands behind him. He is the frontrunner of the group, backed by supporters. And there is a young African-American, which manifests Obama’s role as emancipator for African-American youth.

So here we have a leader, who has power and supporters that have his back, and who is confident about something. The headline and caption will further our understanding of this picture.

The headline, which reads ‘Health Care Overhaul Becomes the Law of the Land,’ gives understanding as to what it is that is happening in the picture. The piece of paper Obama is signing is the Health Care Reform Act, his own initiative as president. We can then understand his satisfied expression, because one of his campaign promises (universal health care) has just become reality. Also, the headline features the words ‘the Land’, so we might interpret the group of people in this picture as an average of the American people. The presence of the black kid can then indeed be seen as a sign of Obama’s role as a fighter of racial inequality. And since Obama is the most salient element of the picture, and the top of the triangle, he is also portrayed as the most powerful of this cross section of the American people. Thus, once more, the narrative of a powerful man that brings people together, that is confident and successful, is established. The caption (‘President Obama, with 20 pens, signed health care reform into law Tuesday at ceremonies in the East Room of the White House.’) confirms what we already suspected, that the picture was taken inside the White House. It brings special attention to the twenty pens he has by his side. Using several pens to sign bills is a Washington tradition that goes as far back as Franklin Roosevelt. Each pen that is used is given to people directly related to the legislation. President Johnson reportedly gave one of the 75 pens he used to sign the Civil Rights Act in 1964 to Martin Luther King Jr. The pens on Obama’s desk let us know he is a Washington insider now.

President Obama is not featured in these photos, so it might seem irrelevant to analyze these two pictures. I argued earlier (in Chapter 4) that I would only analyze pictures that feature Obama, because it is his portrayal that I’m most interested in. But the midterm elections of 2010 that were won by the Republicans were of such significance to Obama’s presidency that I wanted to take the time to look at this front page. Note that the two pictures feature mainly white people. Marco Rubio (being Hispanic) in the bottom picture is the only person of another race. What is also remarkable is the presence of indicators of American-ness: in the top picture, the word America is featured over and over again on the screen in the background. In the bottom picture, ten American flags are...
shown. The whiteness of the people in the picture tied together with the clear signs of nationalism, seem to suggest a blow to Obama’s progress in binding together different races.

The headline ‘G.O.P. Takes House’ helps the viewer understand what celebration he is seeing. The under title reads ‘Setback for Obama and Democratic Party; Cuomo wins; Show of strength by Tea Party.’ It is very powerful in anchoring the meaning to Obama’s presidency. A setback, that is what we see here. When connected to the Republicans pictured here, we can certainly understand what that setback is. Two years into his presidency, Obama’s efforts to unite the nation have seemingly come to a halt. The under title focuses on the Tea Party, which we know to be a fervent adversary of Obama and his policy. Obama’s campaign promise to unite the country was not necessarily focused on bringing together different races. Obama himself has never focused much on the color of his skin, The New York Times (and other news media) did that. His mission to unite was focused primarily on bridging party differences. This front page on 3 November 2010 is the first in which he is framed as failing at that. His persona did not even make it into a picture on the front page. He is only mentioned in written text. The Republicans have taken the stage, at least for now.
On this Monday morning, the world was awed by the news that special US forces had killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda. A small picture of Obama is featured on the front page bringing this news, on the far right of the picture. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, elements on the right of the page have new information value. It is important to keep this in mind. We are thus seeing Obama in a new light.
Obama is featured in a shot between medium and close up, indicating a close relationship with the subject. The camera angle is low, so we are looking up at him. He is featured as a powerful person. There are no clear indicators of location, but we are safe to assume the picture was taken inside the White House. Obama has a pin of the American flag on his lapel, as a sign of his nationality. He has not one, but two microphones in front of him. What he is saying is considered that important, several microphones are needed to record it.

The picture is static, there are no vectors present in the photo. It has a timeless essence, because of its conceptual nature and because there are no other signs of time. Obama’s look is stern, formal. We are looking at a president here, the picture is clearly saying. Yet, without context we have no clue as to what is going on at the time of the picture, other than that Obama is giving a speech. Race, party differences or other policy goals do not seem to play any role in this photo. This is just the leader of a country, an authority we are listening to.

The headline is very descriptive, acutely guiding the reader in what he is seeing. The picture of Obama is him declaring that ‘justice has been done.’ The newness that is signaled by the position of the picture on the page can be viewed in terms of what role Obama now plays. The low angle, the subtle reference to his American nationality (the pin) and his formal appearance make this a timeless picture showing the world that this is their leader. The picture was probably staged this way by the White House. Obama had been facing increasing critique and his approval ratings were very low. Killing Osama bin Laden was a news event that Obama’s media officers used to frame his presidency in a positive light. By placing the picture on the front page, NYT copied that frame. But by printing it on the right, the editors added the information that this was a new way of looking at Obama. The picture is not very large though, compared to the photo of Osama bin Laden or to earlier front page pictures of Obama in this analysis. This indicates that NYT perhaps did not place as much emphasis on Obama’s power status as the White House was aiming for. Note that this is the only AP-catalogue picture in the analysis. We do not know if NYT staff photographers were not present at the scene, if they were unable to shoot a good photo or if the NYT editorial staff had other reasons for printing the AP photo.

After racial equality and trying to unite party differences, the way this picture is framed indicates that Obama’s position as a world leader is now a third theme in the visual narrative of his presidency. But the theme will be less important in the narrative, judging on the picture size.
In a medium shot of Obama, we see a partial American flag and an emblem of the White House, signaling the location of the picture. Obama is the only one in the photo, making him the center of attention. He is also in full focus and in the foreground. In a front angle, eye-level shot, we sympathize with Obama because we are positioned as his equals. When before we were positioned as his inferior, we are now at the same power level as the president.

Figure 6.19: Picture by Philip Scott Andrews (The New York Times)

Obama’s head is tilted forward, creating a weak vector. Obama’s eyes are closed. The way Obama is portrayed here creates a feeling of empathy for him. Next to the pin on his lapel, the picture does not provide much more information to gather facts from. His attire is the same as in other pictures.

Figure 6.20: Close up of president Obama with vector
where he was presented as the leader of the nation and even the world (in case of Osama bin Laden’s death). But his posture and facial expression suggest a defeated feeling. We are looking at a president at the end of his tether. We might be able to infer why is portrayed this way from the caption and headline.

The headline is not very useful in helping to understand the picture. Reading ‘Leaders agree on outlines of deal to end debt crisis,’ we devise that Obama must be one of the leaders mentioned, and that he has just reached a compromise in the debt crisis. But the caption (‘President Obama said the accord would “begin to lift the cloud of debt and the cloud of uncertainty that hangs over our economy”’) is much more helpful in understanding the photo. It quotes Obama saying that clouds will be lifted, thus giving the message a positive sound. But that does not quite seem to resonate with the photographic message, which gives a feeling of being overwhelmed. Perhaps it is more accurate to take the message of the caption as a sequel to the photographic message. This event in itself is visually framed as a near defeat of Obama, which he has barely survived. In the overarching narrative arc, this event is one of those chapters that tests and tries the main character. Most stories have a moment that can be best be described with the cliché quotation ‘What does not kill you makes you stronger.’ If this is that moment for president Obama in NYT’s visual story of him, depends on what the final picture in this discourse analysis tells us.
6.11 25 January 2012 | Obama’s last State of the Union address before facing re-election

Figure 6.21: Picture by Luke Sharrett (for The New York Times)\textsuperscript{133}

In this photograph, the viewer is looking over Obama’s back onto a piece of paper. We look down on the scene, there is a microphone visible, so clearly Obama is speaking. We cannot really make out what is in the background, but what is on the piece of paper seems like a text. The microphone and the text suggest Obama is giving a speech. This is confirmed by Obama’s posture (his left arm forms a vector, indicating movement) and facial expression (his mouth is slightly opened). There are no clear indicators of location and no other people in the picture. Thus the epicenter of this picture is Barack Obama. Because there are no signs relating to the presidency visible (the American flag or the presidential seal), we are led to relate to Obama in a personal way. This is strengthened by the close up shot, signaling a close relationship to the person in the picture. It also indicates that there was less involvement of the media office of the White House in the staging of this picture. They usually create scenes that emphasize power, status and nationality. None of those themes are visible. Since this is an official and scheduled presidential news event, we can expect the White House media office to have created such a scene. But since \textit{NYT} is not showing us that, it is breaking away from what the White House wants us to see to what \textit{NYT} wants to tell us. In that respect, what is intriguing about this photo is the camera angle, both vertically and horizontally. Shot from above, the viewer looks down on Obama, making him look weak. And this picture is one of few in which the horizontal angle

\textsuperscript{133} There was no digital front page available for this date on newseum.org. The picture was downloaded from the \textit{NYT}-website, but unfortunately does not feature the original context from the front page.
is an oblique one, signaling detachment. This information is all the more interesting because the moment of the picture is the last defining moment of Obama’s first term, and possibly his presidency. And it is telling us this person is someone we used to be close to, but now feel detached from and look down on. Turning to the headline and caption gives an interesting twist to the matter.

The headline (‘Obama Sets Goal of Economy Built for the Long Run’) talks of Obama’s future plans, as does the caption (‘In his State of the Union address Tuesday, President Obama presented a list of economic proposals, including tax code changes’). But the photo seems to suggest a farewell. If we combine the two elements, the photograph seems to suggest that even though Obama is hopeful of a second term, NYT does not think it likely. The visual narrative will thus soon come to an end. And it is notably different from the beginning of the narrative, in which Obama was featured as unique and of historical significance.

After identifying the most notable variables for the entirety of Obama’s presidency in the visual content analysis in Chapter 5, this chapter served to contextualize those variables by describing the visual narrative through detailed analysis of selected photographs. It showed that the visual narrative of NYT is at times heavily influenced by the White House media office. They orchestrate presidential news events in such a way that they create their own narrative. Especially certain anticipated markers for the presidency, such as the first 100 days in office or a State of the Union address, are staged in a way that favor a positive view of the president. At times NYT tries to break free from this White House frame by choosing a picture that does not feature any of the traditional presidential signs (the American flag, the presidential seal). For instance, the pictures of the first and last State of the Union addresses were peculiar because of their camera angles and the lack of traditional signs visible. This chapter showed how different frames used over a longer period of time related to each other. In addition, it also connected the visual to the textual information, thereby shedding light on the discourse of front page photos. The implications of my findings in a broader context are discussed in the next chapter, which also features a discussion on the methodology used in this study.
Conclusion and Discussion

In four months Barack Obama faces reelection. The polls predict a tight race between him and his main opponent Mitt Romney. Whereas Obama’s 2008 campaign was centered around the themes ‘Hope’ and ‘Change’, in 2012 he has chosen to campaign with ‘Forward,’ trying to take advantage of his position as incumbent president. By saying ‘Forward,’ Obama says he is not finished with America yet.

But is America finished with Barack Obama? One way to find out is to look at job approval ratings (which are at 46% in June 2012). Even though the majority of the American people approved of Obama during the first 300 days of his presidency, after that his ratings were never over 50% (unlike his predecessor George W. Bush, who stayed over the 50% line during both his terms). Another way to discover what people might think about Obama is to look at his portrayal in the mass media. News institutions constantly broadcast or print stories on Obama’s presidency, each containing a message about it. This study focused on the photographic message of The New York Times front pages. In previous chapters the premise of this study was set out: what role narratives and frames play in journalism, the unique qualities of the visual and the photograph in particular, and how news photographs can be investigated in an academic manner. Using a visual content analysis of all front page pictures from NYT that featured Obama, and a discourse analysis of selected photographs, a visual narrative on Obama’s presidency was found.

The visual narrative of Obama’s presidency started on 5 November 2008, the day after Barack Obama got elected as 44th president of the United States. A visual narrative of Barack Obama as a person may have already existed, but it was not until that moment that his persona and the presidential office merged into one, thus creating one narrative. From the outset, the narrative focused on the historical significance of Obama’s election. Race was an important recurring theme, especially in the first couple of months. During that time Obama was usually also featured as the most important and powerful man in the picture. Generally, a symbol of American-ness (most often the American flag) was featured in those pictures, leading the viewer to extend this powerfulness of Obama from the scene of the photo to the country. The photos taken while Obama was still president-elect explicitly feature Michelle Obama, which suggests winning the presidential office was not something Obama did on his own, but with the help of many around him, most importantly of his wife. They also appeared less orchestrated, although Barack Obama holding a white baby in the

photo that was printed on Inauguration Day may have been staged by a campaign team. Due to lack of traditional signs connected with the president, it seemed more spontaneous though.

After Obama’s first hundred days in office, the narrative shifted to that of a regular president, fulfilling the usual presidential tasks. There were fewer references to his race, though occasionally they did surface, particularly at moments of great victory for Obama. For instance, in the photo of the moment Obama signed his healthcare reform bill, his race was emphasized by having a little black child standing at his side. Since the child and Obama were basically the only minorities in the photo, it can be seen as a metaphor for the current (Obama) and future (healthcare law) hope for minorities.

Obama’s status of power was also reestablished in that photograph. Interestingly, months before a picture was taken when Obama’s healthcare reform bill had just passed the House, in which he was pictured as someone who wanted to be left alone. He was not necessarily portrayed as someone who had lost a battle, but neither did he seem victorious. More than anything else, he seemed worn out. The visual narrative shows that about ten months into his presidency, Obama was for the first time feeling how invasive and exhausting the office really is. But several months later, after his first inauguration speech, the narrative returned to the confident, powerful Obama. This was continued in the picture mentioned earlier, in which Obama signs the healthcare reform bill. The story so far showed a man who changed history, whose very existence helped solve racial issues and who was by all means an extraordinary president.

One must wonder how much of that narrative was created by NYT and how much by the White House. President Obama has an entire staff at his disposal that is fully dedicated to making him look good. They stage scenes so that photos of that scene will feature Obama in a positive way. This is done especially for anticipated markers of the presidency, such as the first 100 days in office or the first State of the Union address. NYT can only break away from that White House narrative by choosing to print pictures from a different scene or by framing and cropping a picture so that it excludes the connotative elements placed by the White House. They did so for Obama’s first and last State of the Union address, which means they wanted to tell their own story in those instances. If a picture is printed that does not feature traditional signs like an American flag in the background or that through technical qualities (such as camera angle or the sort of shot) makes Obama looks particularly powerful, it should be considered a sign that NYT was trying to create its own narrative. Whether this is consciously done remains the question. It stands to reason that photographers and editors deliberately choose a picture that is less influenced by the White House orchestration, but in terms of the visual narrative they are creating by doing so, we must contend that it could be an
entirely instinctive process. This current study focused mainly on the photographic message. How exactly that message was created and how different actors worked together to do so, is a fascinating question for another research project.

A photograph that the White House media office had no hand in came in November 2010, after the midterm elections. The photograph that was printed on the front page after the GOP won the majority in the House, was used in this discourse analysis to add context to the visual narrative of Obama’s presidency. What was striking about this photo was the lack of variation in race pictured in it. Marco Rubio (being Hispanic) was the only non-Caucasian person in the picture. Combined with the clear markers of nationalism in the picture (numerous flags and the word ‘America’ are clearly visible in the background), this picture seems to emphasize conservative, middle-class Americans. In doing so, it stresses that Obama is none of those things. The headline also states the moment to be a setback for Obama. In the entire series of front page pictures, this moment is indeed framed as a blow to Obama’s presidency. But again, the scene of the photo was heavily influenced by media professionals trying to convey their own frame. NYT could hardly have printed pictures from a different event, because the main news event was the GOP win. They could have excluded the signs of nationalism by printing a close up of John A. Boehner or Marco Rubio at the dais, but that would signal personal closeness to the subject. It is interesting to note that NYT chose not to print such pictures, which may be indicative that they do not feel close to GOP politicians.

In the following months, the narrative did not change a lot, basically continuing the themes set out earlier. Then, in May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by special US forces. President Obama, as commander-in-chief, made the final decision to attack the Al Qaeda leader. In the picture of Obama giving a speech announcing Bin Laden’s death, Obama was portrayed as very powerful, American (by the pin on his lapel) and someone the viewer is close to. This is the only picture in the selection of defining moments that was not taken for The New York Times alone. The picture was taken from the AP catalogue, which means the context of the picture is different. An AP photo is taken with the purpose of printing it in newspapers worldwide and at any time. It is thus likely to be taken in a more timeless manner. We do not know if NYT deliberately chose the AP photo over a picture by their own staff. If they did, it might mean they thought this event to be of such historical significance they illustrated it with a timeless photograph. But the reason for the AP photo might have been very practical: no NYT photographer was available at such short notice or the pictures were of low quality. We do not know why at that particular moment an AP photo was printed. All we know is that after being portrayed as the emancipator for minorities in the US, Obama was now pictured as the leader of the free world. Only months later, in early August of 2011, there was not much left in the visual narrative of this powerful world leader. After making a deal in the debt ceiling crisis, Obama was
pictured as defeated, a president at the end of his tether. The caption of the photo indicates that there is still hope for the future, so the visual narrative comes at a crossroads at this point. Either the story ends with a positive outlook, or it does not. The final photograph in the discourse analysis shows the second option is most likely. Looking down on Obama in a detached manner, the viewer is led to think that a farewell of this president is close at hand. This frame is all the more powerful because at this anticipated news event of Obama’s presidency, NYT broke away from the scene the White House no doubt had orchestrated. They took the picture from an unusual angle, both vertically and horizontally, cropping it so the viewer does not see the traditional signs the White House regularly uses.

The ending of the visual narrative found in this study is one of its key findings. Recall the heavy criticism NYT received after its coverage of the 2003 Iraqi invasion. The NYT reporting was scrutinized for its bias in favour of the Bush administration policy. A newspaper with the reach and status of The New York Times can be highly influential in the way the public thinks. NYT’s bias can become the public’s bias. In the case of this study, NYT saying goodbye to president Obama might influence the public in thinking about Obama as a one-term president. This is in no way a research finding of this study, but rather speculation. Time will tell if Obama will indeed be a one-term president. And even then, more research is needed to see if NYT’s visual narrative of Obama’s presidency in any way influenced public opinion. This study did not set out to investigate whether such influence existed, but did find evidence that news photos are framed to tell news stories. Yet we should not overstate the bias in news discourse. In the visual content analysis conducted for this study, the value ‘medium’ was coded by far the most for several variables. There were cases in which ‘medium-long shot’ and ‘medium-close up’ would have served well to give a more detailed understanding of the collection of pictures and a possible bias. On the other hand, the number of pictures in the analysis was fairly small: too many categories per variable would have made it difficult to interpret the data.

It was through the visual discourse analysis especially that meaning of selected photographs was revealed. Yes, news photos tell a story, they are framed, but an average reader will not consciously pick up on those frames. This is the particular quality of photographs I discussed in Chapter 3. When an average viewer looks at the picture of Barack and Michelle Obama walking up to the White House on Inauguration Day (Figure 6.5) he might just see them enjoying a moment together. He might not consciously register the secret service looking very serious in the background or the way Michelle is leaning in to Barack. But those elements do convey some meaning the viewer may unconsciously pick up.
The study also showed that a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods works well to acquire a thorough understanding of the photographic message on the front page. By paying attention to both framing techniques for the total visual coverage of the presidency and by looking at selected photographs in depth, a visual narrative for the Obama presidency was found. It is remarkable because a collection of front page pictures is not traditionally thought of as a photographic series. Front page pictures are shot by different photographers and have to have high news value to be put on the front page. They thus differ from a single picture in a traditional photographic series, because they are always independently framed for a particular news event. But this study showed they also contributed to an overarching narrative arc. On its own, the denotative layer of a news photograph depicts an individual news event. The connotative layer frames that event in a particular way, but at the same time it can contribute to a longitudinal storyline. For example, the photo of Barack and Michelle Obama that was printed on Inauguration Day (Figure 6.3) showed the then president-elect and his wife in an informal setting. Denotatively, the trio Barack, Michelle and baby depict a scene of ease and relaxation. Connotatively, the baby being white emphasizes the Obama’s race. And the onlookers in the picture all focus on the threesome in the middle, signaling that there is something special about them. The event itself is framed so that it shows both a relaxed moment and anticipation for what is about to happen (the inauguration of the first black president of the United States). But the signs in and around (caption and headline) the photo also contribute to an overarching narrative arc: the event is of historical significance because of Obama’s race.

What is more, this study found that to have an overarching narrative arc, not every picture has to have a narrative structure in itself. Conceptual photos can be framed and contribute to an overarching arc. The timelessness that characterizes conceptual photographs can in fact be very beneficial to a visual narrative of a photographic series. For instance, the photo that was printed on the day after Obama was elected, was of a conceptual nature. But it was also the starting point for the visual narrative that focused on race, power and success.

As suspected, front page pictures were usually made by NYT’s own photographers. In the discourse analysis, only one out of ten photographs was taken from the AP catalogue. This is evidence of the significant status of front page pictures. I argued in Chapter 2 that frames and narratives used by news institutions stem from a newsroom ideology. The front page of a newspaper is the flagship of this ideology because it is the page that is seen by the most people every day. Front pages also serve to tell the reader what the most important news of the day is. Front page pictures thus have to be of high news value, attractive to potential readers and convey the newsroom ideology. This cannot be done with stock photos, because those pictures have to be timeless (since they are part of an image
bank out of which subscribers have to be able to take pictures at any time anywhere). I suspected that front page pictures of Obama would generally be commissioned by NYT, and at least in the discourse analysis, this suspicion was confirmed.

An interesting venture for future research would entail analysis of illustrations of Obama’s presidency that do not actually feature Obama himself. A written text that goes into Obama’s foreign policy, illustrated with a picture of American soldiers in Afghanistan, can be intriguing from a visual analysis point of view, for it could influence the way we value the information in the written text.

This study has only focused on the photographic message, but someone interested in the perception of such messages could set up audience studies that investigate how a visual narrative of Obama’s presidency influences public opinion. This is tricky, because one can never – no matter how thoroughly the research is conducted – say without a doubt what influences public opinion. A cause and effect relationship can never be proven. But researchers with time and money could see if job approval ratings of Obama and the way he is represented (visually) in the press are correlated.

In the end, this study has convincingly shown that front page pictures can be thought of as a photographic series, and that this series can hold a visual narrative. What is more, it showed that NYT’s reporting on Obama was not as objective as the newspaper might have you believe. The visual narrative found in this study is further evidence for the notion that all visual reporting is framed. Whether the story ends here is in the hands of the American people. If they reelect Obama on 6 November 2012, the visual narrative found in this study will probably carry on. And if that is the case, part one of the story must end with the legendary words ‘to be continued...’
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