



TOP STORIES / SCIENCE

SCIENCE

At face value, we could all be competent politicians ... or hairless criminals

If it takes less than a second to judge a politician based on their face, what does that say about the presumption of innocence? Neuroscientist Alexander Todorov tells us about the power of first impressions.



DW: Your book "Face Value" describes how we make snap judgments about people based on their faces, and that we do that in seconds or less. Personally, I find faces leave a stronger impression on me than names.

Alexander Todorov: Absolutely.

Why is that?

Faces are really special, socially speaking. There are lots of fascinating studies with newborns who have virtually no visual experience. For instance, if you show them a face-like stimuli and something else with equal complexity, they prefer to look at the face. So there's a good case to be made that in a sense we're born with this readiness to look at faces. And then in the first few months of life you have a massive exposure to faces. There are studies where you put tiny spy cameras on the baby's head, and you record what they see, and 25 percent of the time they're looking at faces, which makes sense because they're just being carried around. But eventually this develops ... and there are other studies that suggest we have regions in the brain dedicated exclusively to processing the face, and it seems they come online pretty early in human development. So they are really important stimuli.



And we're using these stimuli to make judgment calls - you say, for instance, we judge a person's competence or character based on their face. And that can be positive and negative. Take the 2001 terrorism events in the US. Very quickly, Osama bin Laden became this image of hate or evil. We focused everything on his face. And that happens time and again. What's happening there?

We started talking about it

being easier to remember faces than names. But it's actually the best mnemonic technique. When you try to remember something you associate it with something visual. A face is such that once you're familiar with it you never forget it. And it's very easy to tack different memories to it. Then once you have this knowledge, all of that knowledge is projected onto a particular image. So a face triggers all kinds of associations and feelings.

You also describe how experiments have shown we need hardly any time to make a judgment call. And I wonder whether, when you get down to microseconds, where the face is barely visible to the person seeing it, are we imagining a face that we want to see there - a face we like or fear - are we creating an image from all the faces we already know?

I don't think so. If that was the case, then presumably you wouldn't get any agreement between the participants [in the lab]. The first thing we do is look for agreements between participants.



© Getty Images/K. Frayer

That's some mask. But there are some things you can't cover up. We see them in a face within milliseconds

You can manipulate the amount of time they see a face systematically from 33 milliseconds to an unlimited amount of time. Thirty-three milliseconds is at the threshold of your visual awareness, so you are seeing a face, but you're not going to be able to articulate what you're seeing. And some people say that's ridiculous. But even after this small exposure your judgment correlates with judgments made in the absence of any time constraints - unlimited time. This correlation increases but it reaches a plateau at about 167 milliseconds. So you really don't need more than 200 milliseconds [to form a judgment]. It's literally a single glance impression.

Say we judge competence in a politician based on a single glance at his or her face, what else can you tell us about the role that prior knowledge of the person plays?

Knowledge is very powerful. And once you have the knowledge you see the image differently.

We did a bunch of experiments with faces of bald men - actually it turns out there were a few women too. And for many years in the lab we believed these were faces of prisoners. They were neutral images, black and white, shaved guys, looking stern. And then I decided to get hold of the original source. It was an art book called "Heads," and the artist simply took pictures of people from all walks of life, but certainly not prisoners, who were bald. That's it. One of the pictures was particularly stern. It was of a former police officer from Westchester County in New York State, and that seemed plausible, but there was nothing in the image to suggest it was true.



© Colourbox

It's standard practice to retouch photos in the media to create whatever look, perception, or mood is desired

The media landscape is getting more and more visual, influenced by social media. Traditional TV is out the window, we're told, but we're still focused on video and photographic images. So I suppose the power of faces and other visuals will only grow as more people start to understand how you can influence perceptions of competence, what's believable, who's a criminal, who's trustworthy, who can get a loan...

In the newspaper industry, editors always pick the image that fits the story. There's the example of Jared Lee Loughner, the guy who shot an Arizona senator. When that happened, I was living in New York, and the next day in every major newspaper and tabloid ... it was like the "eyes of evil" ... they strategically selected this image to fit the story. "The Guardian" was the only newspaper that ran a completely different image, where Loughner looks normal, on a college campus, smiling.

So images have a huge effect, but the knowledge also colors you so much. And once you have the knowledge, you try to find the image that fits your story.

Alexander Todorov is professor of psychology at Princeton University, where he is also affiliated with the Princeton Neuroscience Institute and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. His book "Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions" is published by Princeton University Press (2017).



© picture-alliance/dpa/N. Prokofyev

HOW DONALD TRUMP'S RUSSIAN CONNECTION UNFOLDED

2013: Mr Trump goes to Russia

June 18, 2013. Donald Trump tweeted: "The Miss Universe Pageant will be broadcast live from MOSCOW, RUSSIA on November 9. A big deal that will bring our countries together!" He later added: "Do you think Putin will be going - if so, will he become my new best friend?" October 17, 2013 Trump tells chat show host



DW RECOMMENDS

Trump psychology: Tough times demand tough talk

He makes threats and hurls insults. His gestures and language are aggressive. He uses his voters' fear and presents himself as a savior. It's Donald Trump's psychological recipe of success - and not only his. (25.01.2017)

How Donald Trump's Russian connection unfolded

Allegations of collusion with the Kremlin have dogged Team Trump since the 2016 election campaign. As the US Attorney General Jeff Sessions dodges claims he was aware of links, we look at some of the key stepping stones. (14.06.2017)

Japan's revered war criminals

The souls of 14 convicted war criminals are worshiped as martyrs in Japan's Yasukuni Shrine. DW takes a look at the perpetrators and what they were accused of. (13.08.2015)

AUDIOS AND VIDEOS ON THE TOPIC

Face Value: the danger of first impressions

How to tell when someone is lying

Date 14.07.2017

Author Zulfikar Abbany

Related Subjects [Donald Trump](#)

Keywords [Alexander Todorov](#), [neuroscience](#), [Face Value](#), [Donald Trump](#), [psychology](#)

Share [Send](#) [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google+](#) [More](#)

Feedback: Send us your feedback.

Print [Print this page](#)

Permalink <http://p.dw.com/p/2gXxE>