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Depicting the Work of Police Foundations on Social Media: A Visual Communication Analysis

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Visual imagery is a fundamental element of our communication systems. Unlike spoken or written words that deliver meaning one word at a time, images convey multiple messages instantly with powerful impact. This study explores the content embedded in the social media images used by nonprofit police foundations in the United States through archeological visual analysis. Findings reveal that public service organizations navigate curation choices when selecting images for social media accounts, such as how best to depict the mission of the organization. The prioritization of image curation is imperative, especially with the growth of social media as a space for promoting encounters with, not just information distribution to, citizens. In the public service, the importance of image curation lies in the potential to reinforce the work of organizations, but the risk is miscommunication with consequences for public trust.

Keywords: Communication, Visual Analysis, Police, Social Media

Introduction

The public receives messages about the role of public servants from many sources—media, the internet, politicians—on an almost continuous basis. Politicians and members of the media may tell stories of government failure, using charts, images, and other symbols for emphasis. Certain images and stories may become archetypes that symbolize problematic public service or the role of government in society, such as ‘red tape,’ the ‘welfare queen,’ or the ‘outrageous spending’ on toilet seats and coffee pots by the U.S. Department of Defense (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011; Hancock, 2004; Hartung, 2016). Whether or not these images or stories capture the full truth or even any truth becomes immaterial—they convey a story that can become institutionalized and hard to overcome, almost to the point of myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Carefully curated images of the good that public and nonprofit organizations do for society also resonate and often become indelible symbols; picture the American Red Cross helping people after a hurricane devastated a town, firemen raising the flag at Ground Zero after September 11th, or a police officer carrying a young child away from a tragic accident. The phrase ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ is a common adage in society and the power of images to convey meaning in the public service is an under-explored aspect of how public service organizations¹ communicate with the public and other important stakeholders (see

recent work by Alon-Barkat, 2020; Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2017; Teodoro & An, 2018). The choice of images on the outward-facing communication channels of a public service organization, whether through social media platforms or the organizational website, quickly conveys a message to interested stakeholders, such as funders, clients, citizens, politicians, and interest groups. Failure to choose these images carefully or consider how the images align with the organization's purpose could lead those interested stakeholders to form mistaken opinions or to take their support or interest elsewhere.

In this study, we explore the role of visual images in the communication of public service organizations through the case study of image use at nonprofit police foundations. We conducted an exploratory study of these nonprofits that play a role across the public and nonprofit sector: nonprofit police foundations created to support local government police departments. As public funding declines across jurisdictions, the nonprofit sector has been stepping up to fill this gap, with nonprofits created to buttress public spending on what are often considered core public services (e.g., parks, schools) (Addonizio, 2000; Gazley et al., 2018; Nelson & Gazley, 2014; Yandle et al., 2016). In the case of foundations created to support the operation of a school district or to maintain a state or local park, these are public services that may not engender a lot of controversy, as these services involve positively constructed target populations, such as children and families, and common goods, such as public education and green space. Nonetheless, questions about equity and transparency in funding arise when nonprofits are driving a portion of public service funding. This becomes even more paramount in the case of nonprofits involved with local police functions. The target population (i.e., police) and the common goods (i.e., public safety) do not have a positive construction due to documented connections to systemic racism (Walker & Archbold, 2019).

Police foundations are private nonprofits that raise money and provide other forms of support for municipal police departments (Lippert & Walby, 2017; Walby et al., 2020). Therefore, while supporting a public organization, these foundations operate in the nonprofit sector and must consider how to raise money and tap into charitable inclinations and behaviors. In seeking community support for police departments, which has challenges in 21st century American society, these nonprofits are conveying messages about the role of police departments vis-à-vis the public and the community. The role of the nonprofit police foundation as a broker between these two groups and their choices about how to visually convey their operations is compelling and worth study. The images these nonprofits select to represent the organization's work may accomplish multiple purposes—generating financial support, conveying legitimacy on the police department's role in the community, and so forth.

Drawing on an analysis of visual images on the Facebook pages of a sample of police foundations, we explore the content of the images with observations across the size and age of the organizations. From our analysis, we discuss the implications of content choices for public service organizations. This article asks the following research questions: what messages are conveyed by the central banner image on these nonprofits' social media pages? What public service values are conveyed in the images? Finally, more broadly, how do visual images give public administration scholars a lens to examine the outward communication of organizational mission and purpose? This article concludes by developing theoretical propositions for analyzing visual images in the public service, along with future research questions on the role visual analysis can play in public administration research to understand the interface between public service organizations and various stakeholders.

Power of Images, Curation, and Choice in the Public Service

People communicate through language, behavior (e.g., facial expressions, hand gestures), and through images, both static and moving pictures. Visual imagery is a fundamental element of our communication systems (Cram et al., 2016). For as long as humans have been

communicating, we have also been creating visual images to convey information to others (Ayiter, 2005; Cram et al., 2016). Before the invention of the camera, images were drawn, painted, sculpted, or printed for sharing. Following the turn of the 20th century, imagery could more easily include photographic representations for communicating. Today, digital technologies have increased the amount and type of images we can generate and share quickly and often instantaneously or in real-time. As a result, images are a persistent element of our culture.

Defining imagery as a concept of study in public administration requires a look at a broad range of literature across fields, including but not limited to sociology, archeology, and marketing. Scholars in these fields find images are the visual mode of “discourse and meaning construction” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 287). That is, visual images are one method for constructing, conveying, and organizing information for others. Scholars note that images are representations (Bailey & McAtee, 2003, p. 48), and care must be taken to understand the context in which the image was created, curated, and displayed. Visual images are also not neutral transmissions of information; visual images have a point of view that must be acknowledged in processing the meaning conveyed. In other words, visual images are “subject to the influences of their social, cultural and historical contexts of production and consumption” (Miller & Brewer, 2003, p. 341). Researchers assert “the idea that valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analyzing, and theorizing its visual manifestations” (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011, p. 1). Still, the study of images is under-researched and, consequently, under-theorized (Meyer et al., 2013).

In terms of communication, images are not secondary to text. They are a primary mechanism for communicating information (Meyer et al., 2013) and implicitly communicate complex concepts with a single glance from the viewer (Rindova & Schultz, 1998). Unlike written or verbal messages, which are processed piece by piece (i.e., word by word), an image contains multiple points of information conveyed “instantaneously and memorably” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 494). However, as with written and verbal communication, visual images can be individualized or curated in ways that reflect the context of their creation and meaning to convey a complex story, albeit one processed quickly and then examined with further reflection (Meyer et al., 2013). Written, spoken, and/or visual imagery can tell a story or communicate a message to a recipient. These forms of communication are powerful tools in the arsenal of a public service organization looking to convey messages to its stakeholders (Cram et al., 2016). At a time when images are quickly transmitted to the public and can lead to a lasting impression, how those images are curated—how they are selected and distributed—has become an essential part of the external facing nature of public service organizations.

Still, because images convey information differently from other modes of communication (Magliano et al., 2016) and the interpretation process can be subjective and hard to capture (Meyer et al., 2013), there exist challenges and opportunities for image-based research. Scholars have begun turning their attention to this question in public administration research. The scholarship of images in public administration is diverse but still emerging. In their work exploring how the imagery of older adults shapes public policy responses, Keyes and Dicke note “images are pervasive, shaping political views, human interactions, bodily images, and consumer choices” (2016, p. 116). Zavattaro (2012, 2013) chronicled the connection between the public branding of cities and imagery, pulling extensively from the theoretical work of Baudrillard (1994, as cited in Zavattaro, 2012; 2013). As Zavattaro explains, Baudrillard theorizes that all “objects lose their reality value” and the world will instead rely on “symbols and signs of reality” (2012, p. 216). This is accomplished by images moving through various phases, where images become divorced from their actual origins and instead become symbols with a different type of relationship to viewers. If an image is chosen to represent a brand for a public service organization, understanding the relationship between that image and ‘reality,’ and in what phase the image exists, is critical for processing the impact of the brand in relation to that which it is signifying.

The process by which images and symbols become recognized brands for public service organizations and jurisdictions has been the focus of much of the research on visual images in public administration (e.g., Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2017; Teodoro & An, 2018), with scholars focusing on the relationship between aspects of branding (such as favorability or negative images) and outcomes such as trust and public support. While branding plays an essential role in the perception and opinions of public service organizations, images may convey meanings separate from the designed (or anticipated) brand, depending on how they are used. The meaning of transmitted images may change over time, such as those posted and archived on a social media account over time. In that case, it is important to understand how this happens and what the implications may be.

Social media images have important considerations beyond branding. Public administration practitioners and scholars explore how government uses social media to form and sustain relationships with the community. Government agencies and citizens can exchange real-time images in the case of emergencies to manage crises (Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2015). Government agencies can use social media channels to try to improve citizen satisfaction with services and influence citizens' trust in government (Porumbescu, 2016). Social media can be used by government to encourage action and behavioral change on the part of citizens, with a current example being public health departments seeking to encourage the COVID-19 vaccine.² Social media content can be used to cultivate coproduction in an online space (Criado et al., 2013, 2017; Mergel, 2013; Zavattaro & Brainard, 2019). As a tool to expand transparency and bi-directional communication with government, Mergel (2013) explains that social media, when conceptualized with the lens of coproduction and as a function of e-government services, supports the goals of Open Government. Keying into these insights, Zavattaro and Brainard (2019) explore how social media is a frontier of government-citizen interaction that can be classified as encounters at the micro-level (see also, Stout & Love, 2017). In this sense, social media interactions as micro-encounters greatly influence the perception and realization of government activities and outcomes.

Images in public administration are not limited to government entities. For those focused on nonprofits, research has been conducted about the role of imagery in nonprofit fundraising appeals, though this remains an emerging area of research. Examples include studies on the impact of imagery in fundraising, looking at the impact of negative images on donor's motivation to give (Jordan et al., 2019), processing of negative images (Bae, 2019), or increased attention paid to advertising (Santos et al., 2017). Many of these studies are experimental and increasingly complex, involving data collection of eye movements and cognitive processing of images. Findings generally show negative images increase the likelihood of a donation. However, the size of the impact can vary, suggesting other variables may also play a role, such as the name and reputation of the organization. These studies show that the curation of images by nonprofits, whether for use in marketing, fundraising, or accountability purposes, becomes an intentional decision that conveys great depths of information to the viewer.

Police Foundations and Images on Social Media

For this study, we consider a specific type of nonprofit organization: police foundations established to provide monetary aid and gifts-in-kind to support police departments. Police foundations are nonprofit organizations formed to support a local police department, including county or municipal departments (Lippert & Walby, 2017). These foundations generate resources that can be used for various purposes, such as supplementing the department's budget, supporting the police families, or helping the department in charitable endeavors (Walby et al., 2020). Scholars differ on the first established police foundation, but the most prominent one was the New York City Police Foundation, established in 1971 (Walby et al., 2020). This foundation was created during a period of publicly recognized corruption in

the police force as a way of funding reforms and innovative programming to improve the operation and reputation of the police force (Walby et al., 2020). Police foundations have continued to be established at the city, region, state, and national levels for decades and increasingly are under scrutiny for channeling large donations to support controversial purchases for police departments without public oversight (Paul, 2020).

Police foundations can materially support the police in doing the fundamentals of policing or purchasing larger, capital-type equipment, essentially providing resources not in the government budget. During the COVID-19 pandemic, foundations helped departments secure the necessary protective gear such as facemasks (Philadelphia Police Foundation, 2020). Foundations can also sponsor community events and initiatives for officers to support the community, such as ‘Shop with a Cop,’ where officers take children shopping for holiday presents (Metropolitan Police Department, 2020). Programs like these help the police navigate their relationship with their communities and provide citizens with the opportunity to show their support of officers. In this sense, the foundations function as brokers to bring the two sides together to promote better community relations, engaged youth, and other positive community outcomes.

When thinking about the role of images in the work of police foundations, as well as connecting the above discussions about the role of images in branding and coproduction, we anticipate: (1) visual images can be found on police foundation social media pages and (2) the images used by police foundations likely connect to broader narratives of police culture, harnessing those police narratives through the images to convey the narrative visually. There are three common narratives found in the literature: police as communitarians, police as guardians, and police as warriors (see Community Policing Consortium, 1994; Rahr & Rice, 2015; Wood & Groff, 2019). Police as communitarians is grounded in the notion that police promote social order through relationships with the community (Community Policing Consortium, 1994). Police as guardians is the concept that police promote social order through the protection of citizens (Rahr & Rice, 2015; Wood & Groff, 2019). Lastly, the police as warriors achieve social order through battle training, accoutrements, and weaponry (Rahr & Rice, 2015). In the brokering role between police departments and the community, we anticipate these narratives being present to gain resources that can be given to the police departments to support their work. However, the brokering role could operate differently depending on the existing relationship between police and the community, the challenges and issues facing the community in terms of crime and citizen well-being, and other factors such as high-profile police/citizen interactions. When these nonprofits use images to convey their work and the work of the police departments in the community, they must be thoughtful about the narrative conveyed. The foundations need to consider—how do we want stakeholders to respond? What messages about police departments and our work in supporting them do we want to communicate? And are we being successful at this?

In summary, there are several important observations across the body of literature on social media in public service and how social media images are used in practice. First, images are pervasive and powerful. While we have explored a selection of the work on the use of imagery in public service organizations, we assert more attention is needed. Especially considering the 24-hour news cycle and the growth of live streaming on social media, as well as images’ ability to reach the public and democratize communication channels in the public sphere (Cram et al., 2016), these forces shape the imperative of attention to images for public service organizations. If public service organizations are not consciously curating the images they transmit, they are underutilizing this communication channel and its power. This is the second important observation: images are powerful tools that connect organizations to the individuals they serve. If public service organizations overlook this important outlet for collaboration and communication, they risk forgoing rich opportunities. This could possibly impact the ability to gain multiple sources of resources, including financial resources, human resources, and

public support. We turn now to a discussion of the methodology used for our visual image analysis of police foundation depictions on social media.

Image Analysis Methodology

This article adopts an exploratory approach to understand the use of visual images by nonprofit police foundations and the messages these images communicate or transmit about the police. Specifically, we explore individual images through archeological visual analysis. Meyer and colleagues describe this approach as a “window” to understanding the cultural systems in which an image is produced (2013, p. 509). As the most recent comprehensive review of visual analysis research of organization theory within business administration, Meyer et al. (2013) present how this conceptual orientation categorizes the content of the images relying on tools from an established and cross-disciplinarily body of work (Anderson & Imperia, 1992; Benschop & Meihuizen, 2002; Campbell et al., 2009; Dougherty & Kunda, 1990; Duff, 2011; Friedel, 2008; Hancock & Tyler, 2007; Hardy & Phillip, 1999; Kuasirikun, 2011; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Sørensen, 2010). The review by Meyer and colleagues argues archeological visual analyses enhance “our understanding of the specific meaning structures that are created and maintained through visual means” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 509).

An archeological approach to visual analysis employs content analysis of the visual imagery. The unit of analysis is individual images, and the content being analyzed are specific components within the picture. Table 1 contains the logistical elements of our research approach. Adapted from Meyer et al. (2013) and their distillation of dozens of archeological visual analyses, this table summarizes essential elements of our approach to the visual research of police foundations.

The archaeological approach is appropriate for this research because it aligns with the specifics of our image database and coding structure, which is described below. For example, the research team collected and interpreted the social media images that are produced by police foundations themselves. The images were generated for use on social media, not for research, and have been curated by field actors and not researchers. We collected the images using an archival technique to standardize the images for analysis. Finally, while we have created a complete dataset, the total number of images (n=201) is large enough to draw conclusions but small enough to apply the archaeological approach.

Compiling the Police Foundation Database

To understand how images can be studied as a method of communicating organizational roles and purposes, it is crucial to briefly return to the public service organizations examined in this research: police foundations. As nonprofits, police foundations are established with a mission that aligns with the standards established for nonprofit entities and exist outside the realm of traditional police department budget and purchasing oversight. Therefore, as with other ‘Friends of’ nonprofit organizations, police foundations generally exist to support local police departments with funding to cover expenses for purchases outside the scope of the public budget (Walby et al., 2020).

This article draws on a researcher-compiled dataset of Facebook banner images and demographic data for police foundations in the United States. A single source of all the registered police foundations in the United States was not readily available; therefore, the research team built this database through a combination of web searches, searches of GuideStar, an information service on nonprofits in the United States³ and the Nonprofit Explorer by ProPublica. To build this database, the research team first conducted several searches using the key term ‘police foundation.’ These searches took place over two years

Table 1. Overview of Archeological Approach to Visual Analysis

Domain of Visual Research	Definition in Archeological Research Design
Relevance of visuals	“Visuals are artifacts that ‘store’ and ‘transmit’ the social knowledge of a specific community or society and, thus, retrospectively allow for a reconstruction of the meaning structures they materialize”
Nature of data	Natural (not produced for research)
Producer	Field actors
Interpreter	Researchers
Research focus	“Content and/or meaning of visual elements of discourse; reconstruction of the meaning structures in which the visual artifact is embedded”
Conceptual focus	Identity; categorization; construction; translation of legitimacy, credibility, authenticity, ideology, truth, and power
Typical visual artifacts	Primarily photographs and composite visuals photograph/picture and text; can also include artificially created images, schematic visuals, drawings, cartoons, and visual art images
Data collection methods	Archival material collected from various media outlets
Methods of data analysis	Content analysis, rhetorical analysis, deconstruction, critical analysis
Amount of data	Based on the qualitative nature of most research designs using visual images, total data are often smaller

Note: Adapted from Meyer et al. (2013), p.503–505

(May 2017–May 2019), with periodic update searches to determine if any new police foundations were created and, therefore, appearing in our searches. The team eliminated foundations from the list of foundations that focused solely on memorial fundraising (i.e., soliciting donations to provide them to families of deceased or injured public safety officers) or those targeted for highly specialized police purposes (e.g., K9 Foundations to support police dogs). These foundations maintain an inherently different mission orientation than those intended to be observed in this article. Our search yielded 335 foundations.⁴

We used the list of 335 foundations to capture information on the websites and social media information for those organizations with an active Facebook page. Facebook was selected because it was the most prominent form of social media used by the foundations and afforded the greatest number of comparable images. After an initial capture of images from websites and Facebook pages, the research team performed a preliminary review of the images to determine a coding structure. During this review, the research team encountered tremendous difficulty comparing images from different websites and Facebook pages due to the variety of styles, layouts, size, amount of content, and curation of images across different platforms. The research team decided it would be important to obtain a collection of images that are more directly comparable in size, location on the page, and purpose to ensure comparability. This resulted in selecting 201 organizations with an active Facebook page to compare the banner images. These images are consistent in size, shape, and reflect a comparable curation decision made by each organization.

In addition to the visual data, each of the 201 organizations with Facebook images were

Table 2. Summary of the Inductive Coding Process (Adapted from National Archives, 2017)

Stages of Coding	Description of the Coding Stage
Step 1	<i>Pre-coding.</i> Which artifact are you reviewing? (Name of Foundation) Who is reviewing it? (Researcher Initials)
Step 2	<i>Meet the image.</i> Close your eyes, open them. Describe what you see first in the image.
Step 3	<i>Observe the image.</i> List the people, objectives, and/or activities you see. Use commas to separate each concept. In one sentence, summarize the photo as if you were explaining it to someone who can't see it.
Step 4	<i>Make sense of the image.</i> What message does this image convey to you? Why do you think this image was chosen for the Facebook banner? What cultural or national memories does this image trigger?

examined on GuideStar or ProPublica to determine the tax-exempt ruling year, NTEE code⁵, and any financial data from the form 990s that may be available. In some cases, we located organizations with a Facebook page but were no longer active nonprofit organizations in their respective states according to state database searches (n=5). As a result, we excluded those organizations from analysis, and our findings yielded 201 'active' police foundations with relevant Facebook banner images and nonprofit administrative data available for analysis.

Coding the Images

The research team manually collected images through a PDF copy of each Facebook page. Following this, the research team developed an inductive coding protocol to reflect tools available at the National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives, 2017). Table 2 contains a summary of the coding process, including the steps and a description of each stage of coding. The inductive protocol follows three substantive steps: identify the most prominent part of the photo, identify all the many parts, and make sense of the photo from cultural or national memories. Several questions guided the coding process, and responses were collected using a survey in Google Forms. Coding was iterative, and reviews of coding strings were conducted after every 20 organizations. Each member of the research team coded a selection of images. One member of the research team conducted coding across all the organizations to ensure consistency in coding. Checks were conducted by the other members of the research team for conceptual and practical consistency.

Following our inductive coding process, the research team then engaged in a deductive coding process. The coding guide developed utilizes the responses from the prior inductive coding process. A summary of the questions and response options are presented in Table 3. Images were coded using a new survey in Google Forms to standardize and expedite the coding process. Qualitative data analysis software is often time-intensive because it predominately relies on point-and-click tools to assign coding values. The Google Forms survey allowed for coding to be compiled in a more streamlined fashion. The survey is also available to all research team members without concerns about differences in operating software, internet platforms, or cost.

For the deductive coding process, the entire research team-performed coding and responses were collected from the entire research team after an initial group coding session to check for interrater reliability. Additionally, each image was coded by at least two research team members with roughly a third of the images being coded by all members of the research team. The final responses were converted into an Excel spreadsheet for data cleaning. Responses that were inconsistent across the research team were reviewed and a final determination was made by one member of the research team after consultation with the research team. In total, less than 15 images required this action. In 90% of the cases, the discrepancy across responses was for 'Step 2' or the emphasis of the image.

Table 3. Summary of the Deductive Coding Process (Adapted from National Archives, 2017)

Coding Stage	Description	Response Options
Step 1	<i>Pre-coding</i>	Write in name of foundation. Write in researcher initials.
Step 2	<i>Meet the image</i> Close your eyes, open them. What is the primary focus point in the photo? [select one]	• Police officer(s) • Person/people (not an officer) • Police service animal(s) (i.e., dog, horse, etc.) • Police vehicle(s) (i.e., car, motorcycle, etc.) • Police memorial (i.e., statue, building, plaque) • Police badge(s) • Logo or words • Sky (i.e., sunset, sunrise, or behind a city skyline) • Building, sidewalk, or street • Tent or table for special event • Uniform • Weapon • Flag • Buildings (i.e., city skyline or municipal buildings) • Other
Step 3	<i>Observe the image parts</i>	
Step 3a	What are the people you see? [select all that apply]	• Police officer(s) • Person/people (not an officer) • Diversity of ages (click if yes) • Diversity of race/ethnicity (click if yes) • Diversity of gender (click if yes)
Step 3b	What are the objects you see? [select all that apply]	• Police service animal(s) (i.e., dog, horse, etc.) • Police vehicle(s) (i.e., car, motorcycle, etc.) • Police memorial (i.e., statue, building, plaque) • Police badge(s) • Foundation logo • Words or phrases (describe below) • Sky (sunset, sunrise, or behind a city skyline) • Building, sidewalk, or street • Inside of a building • Flags • Tent or table for special event • Uniform • Weapons • Other
Step 3c	What activities do you see?	• Fundraising event • Community event • Recognition event • 'Traditional' police activity • Other
Step 4	<i>Make sense of the Image</i>	

Step 4a	Classify the message of this photo. What does this image convey to you? [select one]	• Police as warriors • Police as guardians • Police as communitarians • None of the above
Step 4b	What cultural or national memories does this photo trigger? [select one]	• Honoring our service men & women • Blue Lives Matter • Police in the community • Drama of service • Police officers as ‘the finest’ • Police as fundraisers

Findings

This section provides our findings, beginning with organizational characteristics, followed by the findings from the visual analysis coding. In performing our visual analysis, we identified findings across three areas: first impressions, images of police, and images of police activity. We discuss each of these in the following sections.

Organizational Characteristics of the Police Foundations

Table 4 presents descriptive information of the 201 police foundations with a Facebook banner image that were still operating nonprofit organizations. Our dataset included several descriptive codes for classifying the characteristics of foundations in our sample. This project utilizes geographic regions developed by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Statistics, which divides the United States into eight areas (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019). In our dataset, approximately half of the sample is in the Far West (32%) and Southeast (25%). Within the Far West region, which includes four states, California holds the largest number of foundations (n=44). For context, the next two states with the largest number of foundations are Florida (n=15) and Texas (n=15).

We also collected information on the age of the nonprofits, with a derived value calculated from the number of years that have passed from the tax-exempt ruling year to 2020. The sample includes foundations across the spectrum of organizational age. In our analysis, however, we did find that 88% of organizations (n=176) were founded after 2001, a year with a noticeable increase in police foundations. The year 2001 is notable because the September 11 terrorist attack occurred and scholars have documented how federal grants to support antiterrorism dramatically changed demands and funding structures for police departments (Davis et al., 2010, pp. 19–38).

For added context, this project included both the collected Facebook images and financial data available from the IRS Form 990s collected from both GuideStar and ProPublica. From the 990s, we collected data on revenue, expenses, revenue less expenses, and assets. For our dataset, most organizations with financial data available of the police foundations has revenue less than \$100,000 (See Table 5). Consequently, we also see that the operating budget and expenses less revenues for most organizations with financial data available are less than \$100,000. These distributions fit national research on the average size of nonprofit organizations, as reports by the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2018). Interestingly, however, is the persistent percentage of organizations at the top of the revenue and assets. In our sample, 7% of organizations had revenues in excess of \$500,001 and 10% had assets in excess of \$500,001.

Table 4. Distribution of Police Foundations by Organizational Age and Region

Region	Age of Organization in Years			
	0–5	6–10	11–20	21+
Far West (n=64)	41%	25%	16%	19%
Great Lakes (n=16)	38%	31%	25%	6%
Mideast (n=25)	36%	20%	28%	16%
New England (n=6)	50%	17%	17%	17%
Plains (n=14)	43%	21%	36%	0%
Rocky Mountains (n=6)	33%	50%	17%	0%
Southeast (n=50)	36%	24%	32%	8%
Southwest (n=20)	60%	20%	20%	0%
<i>All Organization (n=201)</i>	<i>41%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>11%</i>

Table 5. Distribution of Police Foundations by Size of Organizational Finances

	Revenue		Operating Budget		Revenue Less Expenses		Net Assets	
	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
No Financial Data	41%	82	41%	82	41%	82	41%	82
Less than \$0	0%	0	0%	0	15%	31	0%	1
\$0–\$100,000	34%	68	37%	74	36%	73	28%	56
\$100,001–\$250,000	14%	29	10%	21	3%	6	13%	26
\$250,001–\$500,000	3%	7	4%	9	1%	3	8%	15
\$500,001 and up	7%	15	7%	15	3%	6	10%	21

First Impressions of the Images

The second finding from this work relates to first impressions of visual images chosen by these public service organizations on their Facebook banners, specifically, if the images tell a story about the work of the foundation or of police more generally. In analyzing the results of the coding, the first question we asked, which was one of interpretation on the part of the researchers, what is the intention of the visual image? When opening a Facebook page, the viewers' eyes are drawn to the banner image, as it anchors the page at the top of the screen and is central in the visual field. Therefore, this inquiry focused on the first impression received from that anchoring image—was there an image, and did it convey a clear message about the organization? The analysis of the visual images fundamentally began with the question of did the nonprofit appear to take care with the selection of this image to connect it with their mission, or is the image a more generic scene about the police in general?

Table 6 presents the data on this first impression about the degree to which these organizations have curated the first impression received through the focal visual image on the organization's Facebook page. Fourteen percent of the nonprofits either had no image at all or an image with no clear message about the organization and what it does, such as a generic city view or an out-of-context advertisement for a fundraising event. For those that did have a clear image that conveyed a message, that message was more about the role of the police in the community versus the nonprofit's role in supporting the police. For examples of these coding categories, please see Appendix I.

Images of Policing

While collecting and analyzing the Facebook banner images, we quickly noticed that many of the police foundations included images that contained pictures and phrases reflecting the local

Table 6. Police Foundations by Message Type, Age of Organization, and Net Assets

Message Type & Age of Organization	Organizational Net Assets						Grand Total (n=201)
	\$0– \$100,000 (n=56)	\$100,001– \$250,000 (n=26)	\$250,001– \$500,000 (n=15)	\$500,000 and up (n=21)	Less than \$0 (n=1)	No data (n=82)	
<i>Clear Message about Police (n=97)</i>	46%	46%	47%	57%	100%	48%	48%
0–5 years old	16%	8%	7%	0%	0%	34%	20%
6–10 years old	13%	23%	7%	10%	0%	9%	11%
11–20 years old	16%	15%	13%	19%	100%	4%	11%
21+ years old	2%	0%	20%	29%	0%	1%	5%
<i>Clear Message about Organization Mission (n=75)</i>	43%	31%	47%	38%	0%	34%	37%
0–5 years old	13%	12%	13%	0%	0%	21%	14%
6–10 years old	13%	4%	0%	10%	0%	11%	9%
11–20 years old	11%	12%	20%	24%	0%	2%	9%
21+ years old	7%	4%	13%	5%	0%	0%	4%
<i>No Clear Message/No Image (n=29)</i>	11%	23%	7%	5%	0%	18%	14%
0–5 years old	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	12%	6%
6–10 years old	2%	8%	0%	0%	0%	5%	3%
11–20 years old	2%	8%	7%	5%	0%	1%	3%
21+ years old	2%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
<i>Grand Total (n=201)</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

police departments they supported—either on their own (as discussed in Table 6) or in relation to the nonprofit and its mission. These nonprofits exist to support local police departments, but that nature of support may vary. It could be to help the police department get better equipment; it could be to foster better relations between the community and the police department, it could be to honor the service of police officers as public

servants—these nonprofits may reflect multiple public values in relation to their brokering place between external stakeholders and the police departments. In addition, in the time period examined in this study, police departments' relationships with their communities are increasingly complex, as evidenced by protest around the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in 2014, Freddie Grey in Baltimore, MD in 2015, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY on March 12, 2020, George Floyd on in Minneapolis, MN on May 25, 2020, and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement (Hoffman et al., 2016; Jean, 2020; Lebron, 2017; Merkey, 2015; Williamson et al., 2018). This makes understanding images of policing and the choice behind them even more imperative and raises the question of what images and values the nonprofits convey in relation to the police departments they serve.

During our inductive coding of the Facebook images, we utilized three different perspectives of policing to make sense of the values conveyed by the images. Drawing from the scholarship of policing and police culture (Community Policing Consortium, 1994; Rahr & Rice, 2015; Wood & Groff, 2019), as stated earlier, we classified these perspectives: police as communitarians, police as guardians, and police as warriors. Drawing from the literature, we conceptualize the communitarian perspective to mean that the images display how police promote social order through relationships with the community. The research team conceptualized the guardian perspective to include images of police promoting social order through the protection of citizens. Lastly, we conceptualized the warrior perspective to be images of police achieving social order through battle training, accoutrements, and weaponry.

We performed coding for police culture on the Facebook banner images using the three classifications. For banners that could not be classified into the three categories, usually because there was no image to code or no salient police-related content, a fourth category was applied (no police culture classified). Of the 201 banner images, the police cultures were classified with 31% communitarian images, 32% guardian images, 33% no classification images, and 3% warrior images. To further understand the police culture classifications, we crossed the police culture coding categories with organizational assets and the curated message type (see Table 7). Different patterns of curation are reflected across the different police culture classifications, but differences across the asset groupings are not. For examples of these coding categories, please see Appendix I.

We also categorized content within the images to analyze patterns across people and objects within the dataset to unpack the specific image parts that are salient in each police culture classification. For organizations with the communitarian perspective (n=63), most Facebook images contain people, either police officers (62%, n=39) and/or people who are not officers (73%, n=46). Comparatively, in organizations with the guardian (n=64) or warrior perspectives (n=7), most Facebook images do not contain people, instead containing objects such as elements of a uniform, police vehicles, or badges (55%, n=35 and 71%, n=5, respectively). The types of objects coded in each organization type varies. Organizations with the communitarian perspective contain objects that are directly related to people, such as uniforms (43%, n=27), while organizations with the guardian or warrior perspectives contain inanimate object, such as police vehicles (33%, n=21 and 57%, n=4, respectively), flags (23%, n=15 and 14%, n=1, respectively), or weapons (8%, n=5 and 29%, n=2, respectively).

Representing Events

Lastly, our coding involved classifying the representations of activities and national memories within the Facebook images. In both areas, we see differences between the organizations by the policing perspective. In organizations with the communitarian perspective, an unsurprising majority of images include activity representations of community events (60%, n=38) and fundraising for police officers or other similar causes (13%, n=8). Organizations with the guardian perspective include activity representations of 'traditional' police activities, such as driving fast on a highway, (30%, n=19) and national memory representations of the

Table 7. Police Foundations by Message Type, Police Culture Classification, and Net Assets

Police Culture Classification & Message Type	Organizational Net Assets						Grand Total (n=201)
	\$0– \$100,000 (n=56)	\$100,001– \$250,000 (n=26)	\$250,001– \$500,000 (n=15)	\$500,000 and up (n=21)	Less than \$0 (n=1)	No data (n=82)	
<i>Communitarians (n=63)</i>	29%	19%	40%	33%	0%	35%	31%
Clear Message about Police	7%	0%	7%	19%	0%	13%	10%
Clear Message about Organization Mission	21%	15%	27%	14%	0%	18%	19%
No Clear Message/No Image	0%	4%	7%	0%	0%	4%	2%
<i>Guardians (n=64)</i>	32%	31%	27%	38%	0%	32%	32%
Clear Message about Police	27%	27%	13%	24%	0%	24%	24%
Clear Message about Organization Mission	5%	4%	13%	14%	0%	5%	6%
No Clear Message/No Image	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%
<i>Warriors (n=7)</i>	2%	12%	7%	5%	0%	1%	3%
Clear Message about Police	2%	8%	7%	5%	0%	1%	3%
Clear Message about Organization Mission	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
No Clear Message/No Image	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>No Police Culture Classified (n=67)</i>	38%	38%	27%	24%	100%	32%	33%
Clear Message about Police	11%	12%	20%	10%	100%	9%	11%
Clear Message about Organization Mission	16%	8%	7%	10%	0%	11%	11%
No Clear Message/No Image	11%	19%	0%	5%	0%	12%	11%
<i>Grand Total (n=201)</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

drama of service (36%, n=23). Important to note, 39% (n=25) of organizations with the guardian perspective did not include any representation of activity. Additionally, organizations with the warrior perspective include activity representations of staged photos of police officers (29%, n=2) and national memory representations of the drama of service (86%, n=6).

Discussion

Nonprofit police foundations operate in a space between a public entity—the police department—and the public. These nonprofits, therefore, play an important role in brokering interactions between the police departments and external stakeholders. The mediating role of police foundations involves not just budgetary or program support, but also the messages they convey. These messages include actions in social media spaces, such as Facebook images, and can send messages about the public service value of the police foundation itself, or it can pass on information about the local police department or police in general. The question a public service organization should ask when selecting images is what they want the stakeholders to do when engaging with these images. For example, in the case of a nonprofit police foundation seeking to garner support, including donations or volunteering, when an external stakeholder first encounters the social media page, if the impression that is given is about the police foundation itself, that could be an important determinant in how much further the stakeholder explores or engages with the organization. If the impression is about the local police department or about policing in general, the stakeholder may move on and not engage or connect with the organization further. More research could be done to see what leads people to engage further, including experimental designs that vary the image on a page and determine what leads stakeholders to explore further.

We found that nearly half of Facebook banners contained images related to the police in general (48%, n=97) and fewer contained an image related to the mission of the organization (37%, n=75). A surprising number of banner images contained no clear message to the research team at all (14%, n=29). In reflecting on what we as researchers and observers experienced coding these images, we argue attention to image curation processes for public service organizations is an important area for future research. No clear image or one that was very generic led to questions about the capacity of the nonprofit and how it operated. In those instances, we wondered: Who oversees curating the images of the organization's social media pages? How much discussion occurs as an organization about what message should be conveyed by these pages? What is the frequency of change of these images, and how does that reflect organizational priorities and values? When public service organizations actively enter the internet or social media arena, where messages last beyond the initial transmission, they must be prepared to maintain that presence. Starting and neglecting a website or social media platform with high traffic could be detrimental to an organization's image in the eyes of stakeholders. As seen in the findings, a fair number of nonprofits either did not have any image or did not seem to have carefully selected an image that would convey a precise meaning about their organization. Whether on their website or social media platforms, public service organizations need to select the images they use for outward-facing communications carefully. Government and nonprofits are given a special place in relation to the community in terms of the nature of interactions and the resources and power these institutions hold. Therefore, communication and its effectiveness represent more than simply choices about images; it shapes how stakeholders, including citizens, clients, and funders, understand public service and the meaning they attach to it. Therefore, we propose the following:

P1: Public service organizations should adopt strategic communication plans (including web-based and social media communications) that prioritize image curation.

P2: Communication plans that articulate values and goals for message transmission will lead to curated images with clear and intended messages to the desired stakeholders.

P3: Public service organizations that assign clear responsibility for maintaining outward-facing communication channels will successfully deliver the intended messages through these channels.

The nonprofits at the focus of this research exist to support the police, but how police foundations convey support to others in a social media space may impact the organization in terms of how outside stakeholders understand its mission and work. For these nonprofits, we explored representations of police culture through the categories of communitarians, guardians, and warriors. Many images strongly conveyed a message of police culture; for example, images with people were often coded communitarians, and images with police cars were often coded as guardians. Organizations need to consider the impact of the messages communicated by these images and how these messages may land with recipients. The recipients could have different reactions depending on the content, context, and temporal moment in time—an image designed to convey a guardian message could be interpreted as either a warrior message or negative/aggressive in communities with challenging relationships with the police. It is not enough for the police foundation to consider the intention behind choosing an image; careful consideration should be given to the impact that the image will have on the community and how the image is received. In the nonprofit space, police foundations should consider how the image will impact donations—their main mission and primary way of supporting local police departments. Still, there is also the critical importance of understanding the impact that image selection has on the perception of the police in that community. Like other ‘friends of’ organizations in the nonprofit sector, police foundations operate as de facto extensions of the government agency they support, and particular attention is needed to carefully construct messages that do not undermine or counter the messaging from the government agency. Therefore, we propose the following:

P4: The images selected by public service organizations are not neutral; stakeholders will have a quick and immediate reaction to those images.

P5: Public service organizations must discuss how they want various stakeholders to understand their organizations—their missions and their services—and filter visual images appropriately to foster that understanding.

One of the ways that scholars could further explore these interactions is through research into how stakeholders experience these images. For example, future research could utilize actual nonprofits’ (or government agencies’) social media pages and query the response of those stakeholders along with many crucial public value dimensions that align with promoting trust in government (such as expertise, pluralism, reliability). In addition, as suggested above, future research could also utilize experimental design with hypothetical pictures for this type of nonprofit organization, the ‘friends of’ nonprofit, selected to test what responses or reactions are provoked in different stakeholders and consider what that means for the public-facing dimension of the organization and its effectiveness. Such research could mirror research conducted for cultivating donations but relate instead to cultivating trust in government and could explore what practices best support building relationships with government.

Another way of conceptualizing this research is to explore the micro-encounters created between social media images of public service organizations and the public using social media. Framing Facebook banner images, or other social media images, as an encounter of integrative governance using the work of Stout and Love (2017) and Zavattaro and Brainard (2019), changes the role of these images from a uni-directional form of communication to a bi-directional form of communication. If public service organizations view images as distributing information, the result is, at best, isolation or alienation, or worse, absorption or bondage (Stout & Love, 2017, p. 142). Instead, we push for public administration to explore social media images as the frontier of a new kind of coproduction in a post-2020 world.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that images are pervasive and powerful tools of communication. In public administration, the realm of online interactions between the public service organizations and the public plays a critically important role in contemporary society. Therefore, we assert that now more than ever, images are a powerful tool that connects public service organizations to the individual they serve. Our inquiry into the curation of images by police foundations is a starting place for future research about the role of visual images to communicate the public value generated by the public service organizations for the public they serve.

This work compiled a collection of images from Facebook for our visual analysis, but other social media and online spaces also warrant exploration. The banner images on Facebook are still images on the account homepage for the organization. However, many organizations create content daily, weekly, or monthly for their stakeholders, involving still images and videos that could reveal entirely different curation patterns. The content created over time could be influenced by local or regional events, trends, and culture. Further, we did not explore webpage content hosted off social media channels, which follow different design rules (i.e., they are not standardized by social media companies) and offer rich opportunities for further archaeological visual analysis. Future research is needed to explore patterns in curation that account for various contexts, whether region, type of media used, and the role of time and events of significance.

In undertaking this work, we hope to have highlighted a much-needed area of research in public administration. While other disciplines, such as anthropology and business management, have embraced exploring the meaning and impact of images, public administration has lagged in attending to this line of inquiry. The role of images in government and the nonprofit sector is paramount. Imagery, when carefully selected, may construct positive meaning about public service organizations for stakeholders and perpetuate public trust through cooperative, integrative exchanges. A lack of curation can have the opposite effect, perpetuating information distribution and shutting down opportunities for collaboration. While this work reveals that public service organizations must pursue care in image curation, additional visual analysis research should explore the interactions between public service organizations and stakeholders.

Notes

1. In this article we use three terms to describe organizations within the field of public administration: public organization, nonprofit organizations, and public service organizations. The latter refers to public and nonprofit organizations together.
2. The Baltimore City Department of Public Health has an amazing Twitter campaign on this topic: see @BMore_Healthy
3. In 2019, GuideStar and the Foundation Center merged to become Candid. The GuideStar database was still readily searchable at the conclusion of this data collection process.
4. As discussed in Walby et al. (2020), there is no one single source for police foundations. Using GuideStar and the NCCS data, they found 251 police foundations. They also found similar patterns of establishment to our research, with many of their identified foundations established between 2014–2016. As stated, we eliminated some specific types within the broader definition of police foundation, but that our numbers are like this previous published article suggests, with a recognition of the limitations of our search strategy, we have found and identified many of the existing foundations. However, we do acknowledge that some police foundations may not have been picked up by the search engines if they are called something distinctly different from a police foundation.

5. NTEE is the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities, a system of classification used by both the Internal Revenue Service and the National Center for Charitable Statistics to classify nonprofits by purpose and activities. See <https://nccs.urban.org/project/national-taxonomy-exempt-entities-ntee-codes>

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Appendix I

The following images serve as illustrative examples of our coding categories. While our research relied on publicly available images from public Facebook organization pages, the research team does not maintain the legal rights to the images. Therefore, we cannot provide them in our manuscript due to copyrights. Instead, we have obtained these images that are licensed with Creative Commons and fit our coding scheme. We select images that resonated with the most commonly occurring images in each coding category. However, limitations exist because we cannot verify the purpose of these images and the curation choices. Images were obtained using the search feature of Creative Commons (see <https://search.creativecommons.org/>), and an accompanying citation is provided for each image in our reference list.

Figure 1. Illustrative Example #1: Clear Message about Police (Inventorchris, 2012)



Figure 2. Illustrative Example #2: Clear Message about Organization Mission (U.S. Marshals Service, 2016)



Figure 3. Illustrative Example #3: Police as Communitarians (North Charleston, 2013)



Figure 4. Illustrative Example #4: Police as Guardians (Shankbone, 2011)



Figure 5. Illustrative Example #5: Police as Warriors (West Midlands Police, 2012)

