

In Spring 2008, Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp brought Sociological Images to contexts.org. Sociological Images was a perfect match for our brand new Contexts Blogs, and over the past year and a half, its audience has grown to nearly a half-million visitors each month. The blog is a smash hit for a number of reasons. Sociologists, particularly instructors, discover the blog is a great resource on media and culture. Activists find insightful media criticism and a passionate community discussing each post in the blog's comments section. And all visitors find Sociological Images entertaining. Its content begs to be shared—whether it's insightful, clever, outrageous, or just plain funny—with friends and colleagues.

To bring a bit of the Sociological Images magic to the pages of Contexts, Wade and Sharp will be authoring a new feature each issue. To help celebrate their inaugural essay and give a glimpse behind the scenes at Sociological Images, Contexts revisited our fall 2009 podcast interview with Wade and Sharp.

Contexts: How did Sociological Images get started?

Lisa Wade: I started with the intention of it just being for sociology professors and instructors. I thought that being able to trade really useful images and videos would be a really nice thing to do with my friends, essentially. But as soon as I started it, it started attracting the attention of lots and lots of people that were not sociologists at all.

I had invited Gwen on to co-blog with me, and Gwen was such an excellent member that she became a co-editor of the blog almost immediately.

It became quite clear with all the interest in thinking sociologically that this was not going to be just a blog for professors, and the rest is history I guess.

C: Why do you think you've been so successful?

LW: We're not too heavy on text. We usually try to have a post be 50/50 text to images, or less. This means it's easy to absorb. It doesn't take a lot of brainpower. You can do it quickly if you're tired after work.

Another reason is that the content varies tremendously. There's a lot of blogs out there that focus on certain substantive topics, like gender or race. But at Soc Images, you never know what you're going to see. On the front page we might have something about young college graduates and how employers are relating to them. We could have something about kids and gender. Something about refugees. Something about the One Laptop Per Child program.

Sociology reveals the absurdity of the world. It asks us to stop taking things for granted. I think that's the beauty of sociology. So I think that's part of why we're popular. There just isn't a lot of sociology on the Internet, or in our culture at all.

Gwen Sharp: We try to keep it from being too academic. We'll often suggest a particular theory or researcher, but we try to present it in a way that a person who's not a professional sociologist can still think, "Wow, that's an interesting point."

Although, I also think at least a small proportion of our audience looks at the blog and thinks, "These ideas are insane. There's no sexism or racism left." But they keep looking just to be a little bit outraged.

C: What kinds of audiences are you drawing in?

LW: There are activists—people actively doing stuff or thinking about race and class and gender. And then there are people who are just intellectually curious. We get quite a bit of bouncing into the blog from other blogs like Boing Boing, which is a giant blog for weird stuff on the Internet.

GS: Overall, I've been very impressed at the quality of the comments as well. Some of them are clearly academics, but also people who don't clearly have a background in academia still really engage in debate with one another in a way that has really surprised me. If you look at a lot of blogs, you see many comments that just clearly aren't thought out, or you just see people ranting. We get a little bit of that.

LW: We do get the trolls, the really mean people that come on and say horrible things. But I want to defend their usefulness. It's very useful when somebody says something nasty in a comments thread. For example, once Gwen put up a whole bunch of images of "burqua porn": women in burqas, or burqua-like things, who were revealing their bodies. So it was this weird counterposing of this very sexually conservative thing with exposure of women's bodies. One of the commenters said, "Actually, I think the woman in the first image is really

beautiful and the women in the second image are ugly.” It revealed really nicely how people feel entitled to judge women’s bodies. As if anybody should care what this one person thinks about these women’s bodies, like this was a valuable contribution to this blog! It illustrated that in a really awesome way. Similarly when we put up something that points out sexism or racism, we occasionally get...

GS: ...that we’re just ugly and bitter and unhappy and that’s why we think there’s sexism in the world...

LW: Yeah, which goes to show that everything goes along just fine until you point out the sexism, and that’s when you get called a lesbian. That’s when the backlash happens. So I think pedagogically, of course, the images themselves are useful, but I think the comments are also often very useful. Especially when they’re mean and nasty.

C: How do you decide which images to blog about?

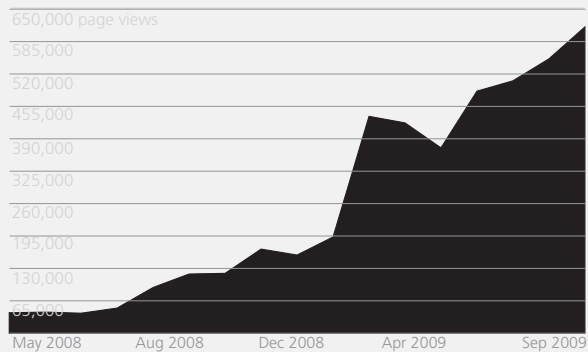
GS: What strikes us as interesting, or compelling, or absurd. Whenever we think, “I would enjoy writing a post about this.” Blog posts look like something you just put up quickly, but it can take quite awhile to write a post.

People send us stuff, and we draw from that. Also, if I’m teaching a class and we’re talking about refugees, then I’ll post several things about that because that’s what I happen to be looking for at the time.

People have sometimes commented if they felt the blog was getting too focused on one particular area. If we were putting up a lot of gender posts, for example. So we do try to make sure we’re putting up a range of images about different topics.

LW: And we have to stay sociological. Lots of images are bizarre. For example, somebody sent us a video game where you strap something around your waist and pretend you’re trying to pee into a toilet. Ok, well that’s really weird, but is it sociological? It never went up on the blog because we just couldn’t quite think of the sociological spin. Similarly, people are always sending us really horrible sexist stuff. But can we make it sociological?

Page views at Sociological Images



C: Do you think of this in any way as a research project? Do you apply sociological research methods in any way?

LW: This is wildly different from what I do as an academic. When we write to other academics, the substantive material isn’t just interesting in itself: we have to position it as offering a new perspective on theory. But for the public, it’s what the theory can actually tell us about the substantive issue. So it’s almost the entire reverse: what’s useful in public sociology is the reverse of what’s useful in academic sociology.

Sociology reveals the absurdity of the world. It asks us to stop taking things for granted.

It’s like physics: people want to drive their car, and they may want to have some understanding of how their car works, but they don’t want to know all the physics. That’s not really interesting to them.

GS: I do try to verify what I post. Especially if someone sends in something that is too good to be true. Like we’ll see horribly sexist ads from the 1950s and some of them turn out to be hoaxes that never ran. So I make sure that I feel comfortable, as a sociologist, putting this out there.

But it is very different from a research project. People sometimes get upset, saying “This is just one ad out of a lot.” Well, that’s true, and we think we’re pointing out patterns you can see more generally. But, no, we don’t have any way to say what percentage of alcohol ads have naked women in them, or something of that sort. So we do try to present as much context, or data to back up, what we post.

C: What would you like the average person to take away from your site?

LW: I would like the average person to have more of a sociological imagination. By that I mean the ability to think about culture and social structure, and both the causes and effects of individual choices. Because in America today, we see psychological and biological thinking modeled all the time.

Even though most psychologists would be horrified by Dr. Phil, his basic principles are about what’s going on in your brain. The basic idea of psychology is there. The same with biology. We’re constantly reading about how our hormones or our genetics have these effects on our lives. But thinking about culture and social structures is really unusual in our society.

We don’t really like to think about culture as affecting us at all. We think, “Maybe other people are affected by ads, but they don’t affect me.” We think that people’s lives are a product of their choices, but we don’t like to think about how different people’s choices are constrained differently. So my goal is for people to just learn to gain a sociological imagination, so that becomes a more common way of thinking about the world.

consuming oppression

by gwen sharp and lisa wade

In the U.S. today, women's bodies, more often than men's, are used as symbols of sex. Women's bodies are used to sexualize a space (for instance, go-go dancers at a night club), make a product seem sexy (e.g., in many ad campaigns for hard liquor), or simply incite sexual desire (as in pornography). It should be no surprise, then, that sex is used to sell food and that, when it is, it typically involves both sexualizing and gendering the food product. We see this in at least three ways.

First, food is marketed alongside women's bodies. This screenshot from a Carl's Jr. commercial featuring Paris Hilton links her sexual appeal to their hamburger (it's tongue-in-cheek, but it makes the connection even as it mocks it).



Second, more than simply showing food alongside women's bodies, in many advertisements women's body parts are conflated with the food or food source itself. This Arby's ad, for example, strategically places hamburgers so as to make them appear to be a woman's breasts (something to "really drool over").





A third way that food is gendered and sexualized involve anthropomorphizing food or a food source as a sexy woman. For example, in this Manny's ad, turkeys are Rockettes-like showgirls (both have "Great Legs").

Similarly, the mascot for Berkeley, California's Desi Dog is a hot woman who is also a hot dog. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1991) and *The Pornography of Meat* (2004), Carol Adams argues that this conflation of women with food encourages the objectification and (literal or figurative) "consumption" of both. In other words, women are treated like "pieces of meat." Thus, women are shown as passive products to be consumed.

Indeed, some ads take this step, showing women as food, like in this illustration for Grind Burger Bar and Lounge in which a naked woman's body is divided up into its different meats.



Photo by Jason Schultz.



For Adams, this ubiquitous conflation reinforces both the oppression of women and the oppression of animals. If we accept that the exploitation of animals is natural, when we conflate them with women, we naturalize the exploitation of women. Likewise, in a society that routinely presents women as sexual objects, their conflation with animals reinforces our belief that animals are objects for our consumption. These processes reinforce the subordinate status and exploitability of both.

Lisa Wade is in the sociology department at Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA, and **Gwen Sharp** is in the department of liberal arts and sciences at Nevada State College. They write about visual representations and sociology on the Contexts.org blog Sociological Images.