



Editorial Decision-Making on Images Through a Science Fiction Simulation

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Abstract

In a fictional scenario, an asteroid is on a collision course with Earth. Meanwhile, humans are establishing a colony on Mars, aiming to preserve experiences for future generations. However, the storage capacity for human knowledge is limited. Students step into the role of collective memory editors, tasked with selecting just five photos from a particular year to be safeguarded. This exercise has been executed individually and in group settings within a visual literacy course, enabling students to hone their argumentation, editorial decision-making, and media literacy skills. The exercise encourages students to develop arguments that prompt reflection on the issue of representation and the broader narrative constructed by the news media when choosing the best photos of the year in the context of image overload.

Introduction

Since the widespread adoption of smartphones in 2007, starting with the introduction of the iPhone, a multi-screen content consumption environment and a wide array of platforms on each of these screens have enhanced visual language. This transformation is evident in the increasing emphasis on audiovisual content across social media platforms, including some services specializing in videos and images like TikTok, Twitch, and Instagram.

Audiovisual platforms are experiencing a global surge in their usage for consuming news (Newman *et al.*, 2023), particularly among young individuals aged 18 to 24, a demographic that stands out with a 27% preference for obtaining news via videos on TikTok, in contrast to the 10% reported by those over 35.

The 18 to 24 age group coincides with the demographic of university students training to become

image creators in communication, media, and journalism schools. Consequently, it is a generation with imagery as a natural and primary form of relating to the news. This implies that visual education in critical image consumption is a foundational literacy for their professional development.

Journalism and media professionals are up against an industry that demands they create, produce, and distribute images in an environment where informational consumption is overloaded with images (Macmillan, 2016). A constant surge in graphic and audiovisual content marks this. This implies that the potential of an image to capture a user's attention is in perpetual competition with other visual content.

Images can become etched in the collective memory as a synthesis of an event (Zelizer, 2004). In the context of image overload, this capability involves considering ethical criteria and weighing the impact

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of an image against its informational and cultural value. Furthermore, disseminating these images depends on algorithms, meaning their engagement potential is considered alongside the story's relevance. This poses a temptation to prioritize sensationalism as an ongoing ethical challenge. Additionally, publications are reaching global audiences on social media, making it imperative to consider various communities' visual representation and underrepresentation. The described scenario necessitates selecting and publishing journalistic images on social platforms based on editorial criteria considering these factors.

The assignment presented in this article applies a science fiction simulation as a learning method to enhance argumentation skills by incorporating concepts and evidence regarding the role of images in the media. This considers the impact of images in the context of image overload and the ability of photojournalism to represent an event for the collective memory.

An extreme fictional simulation of image scarcity is suggested to contemplate the value of each image and establish the need to deliberate based on what that image will mean for human history. The logic behind the exercise is that when the abundance of images is no longer normalized, and these images serve a purpose beyond engagement, their informative function and role as documentation of events is highlighted.

The exercise has been applied in a visual literacy undergraduate course, *Images and Messages*, over two semesters. The activity has been implemented in two ways: as an individual written assignment and as group work in the classroom. In the latter, students engage in discussions and reach agreements through their decision-making process, ultimately presenting their arguments to the class.

Description of the simulation

An asteroid is approaching Earth, and the consequences will be devastating. A colony of humans has already settled on Mars, preparing for the arrival of those still on Earth. The settlers must take with them as much human experience as possible: films, images, literature, music, etc. However, the hard disks and servers to preserve human experience are limited. The Saving Memory Project (SAMEP) decides what will be saved and forever forgotten. SAMEP recruits the students as editors of collective memory to keep only five images of the best photojournalism from the previous year. Students are asked to place themselves in an extreme scenario, knowing beforehand that there



Figure 1: The simulation uses visual aids, such as the fictional organization SAMEP logo, to make the experience more immersive for the students.

is no perfect selection but strong argumentation. They apply theoretical concepts from course readings and lectures to build their arguments.

Students receive lists of best photos of the past year, such as the ones published by CNN, NPR, *The New York Times*, the *Seattle Times*, and World Press Photo. The outlets may vary between semesters, depending on news events. In the written version of the assignment, after reviewing each list, students create a document with the five photos, writing an explanation about their overall selection, what these images represented that year for humankind, and their criteria for excluding other images. They also explain their reasoning behind each image they have chosen to save. Finally, students write about the challenges of making their decisions and their learning about the process of acting as editors. In the classroom version of the assignment, the decision-making process is thought through and executed in groups. Students present their selection to the class and explain how they agreed on their decisions.

Learning objectives of the exercise

- Practice editorial decision-making, reflecting on the relevance of a public record for collective memory. How will editorial decisions impact the overall narrative of our times?
- Articulate solid arguments using theoretical concepts: collective memory, compassion fatigue, image overload, and images producing shock, reinforcing stereotypes or clichés. All were previously introduced to the class through readings and lectures.
- Develop media literacy skills by assessing the news media's work in their selection. Students recognize the challenges of publishing for a global audience and reflect on representation, diversity, and identity.
- Acknowledge the value of images to synthesize events and practice ethical decisions considering that power.
- Engage critically with some of the best photojournalism produced during the previous year.

Assessment

The assessment of the exercise focuses primarily on two aspects: the quality of the argumentation and the student's original reflection on the process, outlining how they arrived at the arguments that led to their decisions. The quality of the argumentation is evaluated based on three aspects: first, the establishment of an explicit criterion for the inclusion and exclusion of images, considering a global audience and the value these images will have for collective memory; second, the consistent application of this criterion throughout the arguments explaining the inclusion of each photo; and third, ensuring that the definition of the criterion and the support for the arguments are anchored in the readings and concepts covered in the course.

Outcomes

In their submissions, one of the most common strategies students employed to establish criteria for inclusion was to define a theme that would unify their selection, such as hope or human connection. Those examples were recurring in the individual format of the exercise. Therefore, while not neglecting essential issues such as the pandemic or the war in Ukraine, the students observed these topics through an optimistic frame, arguing that those values are more worthy of preserving for the future. This illustrates the potential of considering an editorial approach where conflict is not prioritized as a predominant newsworthy value, aligning with research indicating that news values, being arbitrary, can incorporate positive approaches (Parks, 2021, 2023). As media consumers, students considered that perspective the best for the audience.

A smaller group of students in both semesters tended to base their inclusion criteria on the image's emotional resonance. In these cases, the results varied in terms of the quality of the arguments. While some students could justify their image selection, considering why an image might spark an emotional reaction from the perspective of image overload, others struggled to provide strong arguments regarding the relevance of the events depicted in the images and relied on their perception of the photos. This served as an invitation to discuss how subjective judgments coexist with the need to establish editorial criteria, reinforcing the notion of an audience.

In the final reflections, students acknowledged the challenges of the exercise and the responsibility

they felt while practicing it. One recurring theme in these reflections was the importance of giving relevance to issues outside the United States. This insight is valuable from the perspective of developing critical media consumption skills and training future editors who will be able to assess the importance of including stories that go beyond their immediate surroundings.

The written version of the assignment provided a more precise observation of the student's critical thinking and ability to articulate complex arguments. While the group version sacrifices such detail, it provides evidence of collective deliberation. However, not all students felt represented by the decisions of their peers. This situation raised the opportunity to discuss how decisions are made and consensus is reached in editorial settings. Therefore, the group version contributes to preparing for the exercise carried out in a newsroom, making it an exercise that makes sense for courses primarily composed of journalism students. In contrast, the written version is fruitful for courses with students from different majors.

When providing general feedback, the group format was an opportunity to compare the selection of images in a discussion with the entire class, identifying recurring images and themes across groups. In the written version, this process relies more on the instructors' judgment in synthesizing and sharing the outcomes from individual submissions with the class.

In both formats, the assignment effectively encouraged students to express their perspectives. Even when they did not apply class concepts, the exercise compelled them to cultivate original critical thinking. Each decision had to be supported by an argument, which prompted the students to reflect on their role as viewers and consider how editorial choices influence an audience.

These insights triggered two thoughts in the instructor, which can also be considered at an industry level. Firstly, when collective memory was pressing in content selection, it implied an ethical approach to what would serve the greater public good in the future. Therefore, it could be an approach that could benefit newsrooms when deciding their news agenda. Secondly, when viewed through the lens of image overload, the students avoided shock and sensationalism by opting for positive frames, aligning with what they deemed worthy of attention in their media consumption.

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