The Impact of Level of News Photo Graphicness on Reader's Emotions, Perception of News Credibility and News Worthiness

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Theoretical framework

Previous longitudinal research has shown that photographs play an increasingly prevalent role in as well Flemish as Dutch newspapers (De Cock, 2007; Hauttekeete, 2005; Schaap & Pleijter, 2012). More and bigger pictures are included as time evolves while the textual contribution is shrinking, leading to photo dominance (Hauttekeete, 2005; MacArthur, 1992). Media market logic, technological changes and fierce competition have their part in explaining this visual evolution (Vettehen, Nuijten & Beentjes, 2005). Especially sensational and thus graphic pictures are fit for attracting readership (Goldstein, 2012). Research by Garcia and Stark (1991) already demonstrated that pictures and graphics serve as main entry points to draw readers into news stories. Following eye-tracking studies have confirmed that pictures grab readers' attention while they are scanning pages and screens (Brantner, Lobinger & Wetzstein, 2011; Holsanova, Holmqvist & Rahm, 2006, Leckner, 2012).

Studying this growing importance of visuals becomes especially relevant in the case of explicit and vivid images, often referred to as graphicness. Recent tragic events as the Manchester Arena bombing, the Paris terrorist attacks, the Brussels airport bombing, and attacks in Berlin, London and Stockholm have led to intensive and detailed visual news reporting. Although photo news desk research shows that editors debate about the appropriateness of violent and shocking pictures at length (de Smaele, Geenen & De Cock, 2017), graphic visuals have become a regular part of the news offer and their repeated use can leave an indelible impression on readers (Fahmy, 2005; Mallette, 1976; McEntee, 2016; McKinley & Fahmy, 2011). Pfau and colleagues (2006) already revealed that news stories with visuals evoke stronger emotional reactions among the public than stories without pictures. In addition, pictures increase news credibility as seeing is believing (Brantner et al., 2011) and pictures, especially dramatic ones, can raise the perception of newsworthiness (Zillman, Knobloch & Yu, 2001).

Most studies lack a clear definition of graphicness and only refer briefly to the article of Potter and Smith (2000, p. 302) were they only discuss graphicness in a television portrayal format. We define graphicness as a detailed visual representation of a striking, touching and compelling event focusing both on physical and emotional pain. This imaging elicits negative emotions as feelings of disturbance, disgust, unpleasantness, sadness and horror.

Based on the literature review, we formulate the following hypotheses: News stories accompanied by a highly graphic picture are significantly more likely to:

(H1) result in stronger negative emotional reactions among readers

(H2) result in higher news credibility responses among readers

(H3) being perceived as more newsworthy by readers

than stories without a picture and stories accompanied by a low graphic picture.

Method

We pre-tested the graphicness of the news pictures used as stimuli by a 12 item scale loading on one single factor and showing a very high internal consistency (Cronbach's alfa .975). This resulted in pictures indicated by the audience as significantly more graphic than others. During the following experimental online survey, we included thee conditions: a no news picture condition 1 (mere news text), a low graphicness news picture condition plus text (2), and finally, a high graphicness news picture condition plus text (3). Pictures were related to the Sousse attack and a criminal delict in Flanders in 2015. The between subject experiment ran during the spring of 2016. 252 participants were randomly assigned to a condition, resulting in three conditions comparable on gender and age distribution. Participants were on average 34 years old (range: 17-73).

Results and conclusion

Although the pre-test clearly indicated that the manipulation of the set-up was successful (different level of graphicness) our results reveal that we have to decline the three hypotheses. There was no significant difference between the high, low and no picture condition when the strength of negative emotional reactions was measured ($F_{(2,251)} = .472$, $p > .05$). Also the link between the level of graphicness and credibility of the news event had to be rejected ($F_{(2, 251)} = .589$, $p > .05$) and an additional anova test comparing the scores of newsworthiness between the three conditions demonstrated that more graphic news pictures do not lead to higher perceptions of newsworthiness among the public.

In contrast to expectations, our results do not support a direct impact of level of news picture graphicness on readers' news worthiness evaluation, nor their emotional responses or news credibility. This may have implications for the actual selection and publishing motives of highly graphic pictures in news rooms. Further research will have to focus on impact on readers' perceived severity of events.

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