

Has new media desensitized consumers to graphic images?

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Because younger news consumers are exposed to graphic images online and through other new media, concerns journalists have about presenting highly graphic images of war to readers/viewers may be unfounded, finds a new University of Arizona study.

At a time when journalists are still trying to closely monitor the amount and type of [graphic images](#) seen on traditional [media](#) such as [television](#) and film, young audiences or the "YouTube" generation in particular, might receive graphic visual images in a far different way.

If this is the case, there might be serious implications for the media.

In a study published in the recent issue of *Visual Communication Quarterly*, UA associate professor Shahira Fahmy examined whether the level of "graphicness" depicted in photos of conflict influenced viewers' perceptions.

Fahmy and Christopher McKinley, a doctoral graduate from the UA department of communication and an assistant professor in the department of communication studies at Montclair University, conducted an experiment to examine whether the manipulation of the graphicness of visual images of war impacted policy beliefs, attitudes and moods of individuals.

They found no significant differences in higher compared to lower levels of graphicness in perceived severity of war or stronger policy

perceptions. There also were no differences in mood across graphicness conditions.

This lack of differences indicates that many of the concerns journalists have about presenting highly graphic images of war to readers/viewers may be unfounded.

"The dilemma that photo-editors face of whether a graphic photo would be too shocking to view gathered around the breakfast table might no longer hold true in the current media environment," Fahmy said.

"In recent years, the number of people who began to rely on the Web as a regular and main information source has rapidly increased. Numerous individuals have become heavily subjected to online news, such as YouTube, online forums and international online news that show graphic photos and videos of war and conflict, rendering them less sensitive and perhaps even desensitized to such types of visuals," she said.

In the Post-9/11 era and the U.S. involvement in wars in the Middle East, it is possible that individuals have a need to see more graphic visuals to communicate to them the ugliness of war and help them understand the nature and consequences of these conflicts.

"Perhaps it is time that the media should not visually downplay the events of war and start running graphic visuals depicting conflicts as a terrible alternative to peaceful negotiations," Fahmy said.

"While journalistic concerns about the so-called traditional 'Breakfast Test' might no longer be appropriate in the current new media environment, there are still unique ethical codes applied by different media organizations that restrict the level of graphicness in images shown to the public," she said.

"In other words, while this study found viewers can handle more shocking images, ethical guidelines of different media might ultimately prevent graphic content from being shown to the public. In my opinion, journalists should start amending these ethical codes to allow for more graphic content that is already made available to the public through different media platforms."

Fahmy is a leading scholar in examining how [journalists](#) portray war and terrorism, particularly through visuals. She teaches research methods and other courses in the UA School of Journalism.

More information: McKinley, C. & Fahmy, S. (2011). Passing the 'Breakfast Test': Exploring the Effects of Varying Degrees of Graphicness of War Photography. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 18 (2), 70-83.

Provided by University of Arizona

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