

# Images are not always worth a thousand words

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A powerful image can evoke a strong emotional response. But can it also influence and change an individual's political opinion? Not on its own, according to communication scientist Tom Powell, who will be obtaining his PhD from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) on 21 September. Instead, as Powell's research shows, news images can trigger acts of compassion but text can have a greater influence in shaping political views.

Whether it's through traditional or social media, print or television, most of us are exposed to powerful news [images](#) on a daily basis. Many of these arouse an [emotional response](#) and are believed to directly or indirectly frame how we view contemporary issues. Recent prominent examples include the dramatic images of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean or the horrors of the Syrian civil war. The graphic nature of such images often lead media commentators to suggest that they are an effective medium for shaping political perceptions.

## Worth a thousand words?

For his dissertation, Powell decided to investigate if and to what extent images in print and digital news influence the way people think about politics. He did this through several experiments in which news viewers were exposed to high-impact stories on emotive topics such as the European [refugee](#) crisis and military intervention in foreign conflicts. Participants were shown various combinations of image and text in both

article and [video format](#) and later asked to indicate their opinions and behaviours towards these topics.

What he discovered was that images are particularly good at evoking emotions – sympathy for refugees, for example – and, in turn, triggering behaviours such as donating money or signing a petition. However, images do not appear to change opinions in the longer-term. Instead, says Powell, his experiments show that text is better at changing opinions, probably because it requires more engagement on the part of the reader, and in turn, gets them involved in the issue. "We also discovered that viewing news about, say, the refugee crisis in a news article encouraged people to help refugees more than seeing it in video format. Again, our findings suggest that, in general, when people read the news they become more involved in it than if they watch it."

## **Words and images both matter**

Powell's findings are surprising, as they go against the common view that images alone can sway political decision-making. "I wanted to gain a multimodal understanding of how images and text work together in shaping or changing political opinions," says Powell. Such a multimodal approach has long been lacking, with previous research tending to focus either on words or images on their own. This one-sided focus has in helped reinforce the idea that emotional images are decisive in shaping public [opinion](#). Powell: "My research shows that "powerful" images can draw people into the [news](#), but citizens will not be completely won over by them – it is how images combine with words, and with the prior knowledge of the audience, that matters."

**More information:** T.E. Powell: Multimodal News Framing Effects.  
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Provided by University of Amsterdam

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