Misinformation through visuals

Out of context and off-topic: the stereotypes conveyed by images in Belgian media

Sometimes a picture is worth a long speech

A single photograph can have a much greater impact than words alone. If a picture is worth a thousand words, the trick is to find the right one. The media use a great amount of images to illustrate news and headlines, and vulgarise scientific contents. It is widely known that visual materials strongly impact the reception of messages and affect our opinion. The power of images and photographs enhances the impact and readability of news, conveying specific content and symbols by suggestion.

However, if photography can be useful for framing information, its emotional potential makes it more prone to interpretation based on confirmation bias. Not only are images chosen through the bias of editors and journalists, but they are also seen through the bias of readers, who prioritize information consistent with their preconceived values and ideas and ignore any divergent information. This is why inaccurate and generic visuals, especially in the case of already stigmatized minorities, can end up reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes. Since the public perception of migrants and Muslim women is largely based on clichés, and since images frequently have more power than the accompanying text, it is important to be aware of how images can transform the news and its reception by readers.

The danger of out of context and off-topic images

Generic images appear both regularly and on various occasions in most newspapers as elements of daily news. These photos can either be extracted from archives or purchased from press or photo agencies. The image archive contains both sequences and images that journalists frequently use to make reports, articles and editorials credible.

However, the origin and content of an image has the potential to mislead the reader, precisely when they come from archives that are not sufficiently diverse and inclusive in their way of representing the population. The majority of visual misinformation involves very simple and imperceptible, even unconscious, forms of manipulation. A common technique is to recycle old and generic photographs and present them as evidence of recent events. However, of course, some photographs are designed to be more or less obvious and explicit, and can therefore be decontextualized and readapted to several contexts. However, when images are taken out of their context and linked to other events, and when they are generic and inaccurate, they can convey false and biased information and reinforce stereotypes. It is therefore very important to ensure a large choice of picture archives in order to help journalists and editors to better select their images and avoid misinformation.

As part of the "Get the Trolls out" project, ENORB strives to detect any intolerance and discrimination based on religious grounds in the French-speaking Belgian media. During the Belgian media monitoring, we reported the use of photographs out of context and off-topic resulting in stereotyping or even discriminatory content.

Migrants' and religious minorities' image in Belgian media. What to improve?

While the practice of using decontextualized images is always questionable, it is even more so when it comes to reporting on sensitive news such as migration or religious minorities.

In the context of the recent migratory flow at the Greek-Turkish border in early 2020, *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Vif*, French-speaking Belgian daily newspapers, chose to use images taken from contexts of conflict and violence involving migrants. *La Libre Belgique* chose the image on the left in association with the title *Turkey opens its borders: Greece announces that it has blocked the entry of 10,000 migrants in 24 hours*.[1] The article critically presents the situation at the border, reports figures, and an appeal from the United Nations asking States not to use excessive force against migrants. However, the article does not mention any violence or tensions, and even less at the hands of migrants. The information conveyed by the body has thus no link with the image chosen.

Instead, *La Libre Belgique* could have shown an image like the one on the right, since the migrants are described as "walking across fields [...] in single file at the edge of a road, bag on their back or on their head"

Similarly, in March 2020 *Le Vif* published an article titled *New nocturnal incidents at the Greek-Turkish border*,[2] this time dealing with tensions and violence at the border. The article only refers to State violence: "The Greek police used powerful fans to repel the clouds of gas and smoke towards Turkish territory", "Turkish side, tear-gas grenades and stones were thrown".

So why choosing to depict migrants only? Although the image used does not show migrants using violence but rather defending themselves from water cannons, the choice to visually focus the

[1] « La Turquie ouvre ses frontières: la Grèce annonce avoir bloqué l'entrée de 10.000 migrants en 24 heures », Le Vif, 1/03/2020, https://www.lalibre.be/international/europe/nouvel-afflux-de-migrants-a-la-frontiere-grecque-apres-que-la-turquie-a-ouvert-ses-frontieres-5e5b72439978e23106a0bef1?fbclid=IwAR00TewHcSk5rq9JnDHgcGBP9d0cuyiewTZ6kXlIXAqcT1F6mxH6577RoqM

[2] « Nouveaux incidents nocturnes à la frontière gréco-turque », Le Vif, 18/03/2020, https://www.levif.be/actualite/international/nouveaux-incidents-nocturnes-a-la-frontiere-greco-turque/article-news-1266213.html?utm_medium=social_vif&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR1tiIHleBnBtTBkeJb68yap2b6UE_aspUlJQJu-ugjAoRtCDTFMZAytYvQ#Echobox=1584537527

attention on migrants alone in a conflictual context may imply their participation in violence. The choice of this photo is in addition to the subtle anti-migrant language of the article, depicting migrants as the cause of the outbreak of conflicts,[3] while presenting their accommodation in a camp as a moment of stabilization and end of conflicts.[4] While conflicts are attributable to the mismanagement of the migratory flow, as well as to the violence by state actors, this style of reporting and the iconography used might fuel hostility towards migrants.

Images depicting the real actors in border violence, namely the Greek and Turkish security forces, would have given a much clearer and more truthful picture of the events covered in the article of *Le Vif.*

The two images chosen by the newspapers, instead, present a different reality from the one described by journalists, leaving room for personal and biased interpretation. What is more, the lack of caption prevents the communication of vital information about who does what, when, where, and why. Without captions, readers draw their own conclusions, which are often incorrect. If editors were careful to add a caption to all photos, this would not only avoid interpretation problems on the part of the readers, but also lead to a more careful and accurate choice of images.

In a social climate largely characterised by misinformation or even trumped-up stories - and when images are too often associated with violence and destabilisation allegedly attributed to foreign populations and in particular migrants from the South – one must be very cautious when choosing pictures.

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[3] « Nouveaux incidents ont éclaté […] à la frontière gréco-turque où quelque 500 migrants - jeunes pour la plupart - ont tenté de franchir le poste-frontière de Kastanies/Pazarkule », « Nouveaux incidents nocturnes à la frontière gréco-turque », Le Vif, 18/03/2020.
[4] « Les migrants ont été ramenés dans un camp d'accueil provisoire à Pazarkule vers 04h00 du matin. Le calme est revenu depuis lors », « Nouveaux incidents nocturnes à la frontière gréco-turque », Le Vif, 18/03/2020.

Even if the choice of inaccurate images might only be the result of an oversight, its implications can be very serious and dangerous. In this case, these articles fuelled hate speech and even incitement to murder against migrants on the social networks where they were shared.

Another subject that is likely to be involved in visual generalisations is Muslim women. On two occasions, the Belgian daily newspaper *La Dernier Heure* was questioned by ENORB for choosing pictures out of context and not representative of the subject of the article. After our solicitation, the photos were modified, as shown below.

The article in question, *Belgium is one of the most hostile countries to the wearing of the veil: 28% of Belgians are opposed to it*,[5] focuses on the debate on the wearing of the veil in public space highlighting how a veiled woman was asked to remove her headscarf by an elected representative of the group Rassamblement National.

Figure 1. Image before solicitation

The term "veil" is generally used to indicate the hijab (*Figures 2 and 4*), a scarf that leaves the face uncovered. On the other hand, the niqab is a different religious symbol, a type of veil that leaves only the area around the eyes uncovered.
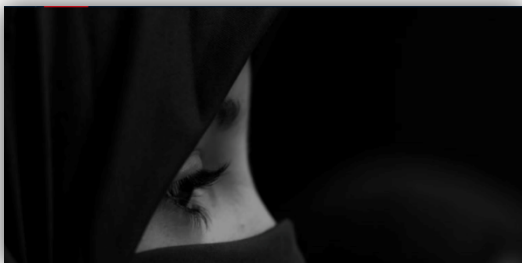

Figure 2. Image after solicitation

The second article mainly deals with the decision to ban the wearing of the veil in two schools in Maasmechelen (Limburg), GO! Maxwell and the Nikola Tesla School.[6]

The first image (*Figure 3*) shows a person wearing a niqab and not a hijab, again inconsistent with the content of the article about women wearing a hijab.

*Figure 3. Image before **sollicitation***

The choice of representing veiled women in niqab, which is a very different type of garment, reveals a certain degree of ignorance and misinformation. Also, such a choice might very well feed into a media context that stigmatises Muslim women, where the collective perception is built on prejudice. On the other hand, the pictures introduced after the

*Figure 4. Image after **sollicitation***

[5] « La Belgique est l'un des pays les plus hostiles au port du voile: 28% des Belges y sont opposés », *L'Echo,* 16/10/2019, https://www.dhnet.be/actu/societe/la-belgique-est-l-un-des-pays-les-plus-hostiles-au-port-du-voile-28-des-belges-y-sont-opposes-5da5f3d09978e218e33bba87

[6] « Le port du voile interdit dans deux écoles d'Anvers: Ben Weyts (N-VA) salue la décision de la justice », *L'Echo*, 24/12/2019, https://www.dhnet.be/actu/belgique/le-port-du-voile-interdit-dans-deux-ecoles-d-anvers-par-la-cour-d-appel-5e022210f20d5a0c4620c08e

solicitation, although still generic and decontextualized, are undoubtedly more representative of the "veiled woman" mentioned in the article.

ENORB supports the right to self-determination of every woman, including the choice of dressing or undressing according to personal preferences. However, we notice how depicting a veiled woman in niqab in an inconsistent way here reinforces the Western political rhetoric of veiled Muslim women as a symbol of oppression, the patriarchy of the Islamic world and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. In the Western collective perception, the integral veil or niqab refers to a manifestation of so-called radical Islam, or even to terrorism and the mistreatment of women. Of course, the text of the article does not say that. Nonetheless, the image is bound to suggest these prejudices in a context where the niqab and the hijab provoked hostile reactions in Europe, based on a discriminatory belief of the incompatibility of Islam with the values of democracy. For years, these hostilities towards the niqab and the hijab and the dehumanization of those who wear it have led to numerous bans by European States, in both the public and private spheres. These hostilities also resulted in an explosion of hate crimes against Muslim minorities, disproportionately affecting Muslim women who wear a religious symbol like the veil. Therefore, these choices of pictures play a role and have a responsibility in shaping public policies towards minorities, even endangering their physical and moral integrity.

Eventually, not only do these generic, decontextualized, and anonymized images build stereotypes but, in so doing, they iconize and legitimize them, thus acquiring the status of conventional visual icons of journalistic themes of "immigration" or "Muslim women".

The media play a powerful role in daily life and in maintaining democratic and inclusive values. As part of the five principles of ethical journalism established by the *Ethical Journalism Network*, in accordance with the criteria of Accuracy and Fairness, the use of truthful information is the cardinal principle of journalism: all relevant facts should be provided and their accuracy should be checked;[7] stories should be balanced and add context. Under the principle of Humanity, journalists should do no harm; they should be aware of the possible impact of their words and images on the lives of others.[8]

[7] Ethical Journalism Network, 5 principles of ethical journalism, available at: http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism [last accessed 31/03/2020].
[8] Ethical Journalism Network, 5-point guide for migration reporting, 2016, available at: http://ethicaljournalismnetwork. org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Migration-infographic_final-1.pdf [last accessed 31/03/2020].

This is why enlarging and diversifying the images of archives and sensitizing the editors to add a caption are two important elements to help journalists in choosing their visual material and thus avoid misinformation through visuals.

If the media can help citizens to deconstruct biased clichés against already stigmatized minorities, some of them contribute to their construction. When the media focus on the fear and threat of diversity, misrepresenting the participation of migrants and religious minorities in the society, this risks fostering a climate of division that fuels racism and intolerance. If, on the contrary, the media faithfully and coherently represent minorities and their diversity, bearing in mind the humanitarian and social circumstances, they can do much to promote integration and mutual understanding, as well as tolerance, diversity, and finally social inclusion.