

Visual messaging of the coronavirus news story: Learning resources

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Purpose and intended use of this resource

Project Information Literacy’s 2020 study, “[Covid-19: The first 100 days of news coverage](#),” offers a wide variety of information literacy and news literacy lessons. In this guide, we provide ideas for class and personal exercises using the research findings from the second report in the two-part series, “[Visual messaging of the coronavirus news story](#).”

The ideas and prompts below were designed to build visual news literacy and strengthen information agency using the PIL report as a platform for discussions, activities and assignments. They can be adapted to work across a variety of online or in-person synchronous or asynchronous learning situations. In addition, with Barbara Fister, PIL’s former Scholar in Residence and an information literacy expert in her own right, we have developed a set of Learning Activity slides with full instructions that are ready to integrate into online materials.

Reminder: Many faculty, staff and students are likely to have been adversely impacted by Covid-19, and may not wish to engage with the topic for academic work. The learning ideas can easily be adapted to other topics.

1. Context: Using Figure 1



Context

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

Before reading or assigning the PIL report, consider the following questions:

- What news images come to mind when you think of the pandemic?
- What images did you see on social media? Which ones were shared a lot?
- Which do you remember most: photos, illustrations, or videos about Covid-19?
- How are the images you're seeing now different from ones at the start of 2020?

GOING DEEPER

- Who is represented in the images you've seen about the Covid-19 story, and who is missing?
- What settings are common in the images you've seen? Why? Which are missing?
- What images would help you understand the crisis better?

USING FIGURE 1

- What surprises you about the data in [Figure 1](#), and the coding results for "emotion" and "setting"?
- How do changes over time in the results for "emotion" reflect collective feelings during the pandemic?
- How do changes over time in the results for "setting" reflect life in the pandemic (e.g. "medical setting" did not increase until later in March)?

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: CONTEXT

2. Inspect: Using images from the report



Inspect

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

Choose a photo from the report's [15 images](#) illustrating the visual themes of fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief to describe in detail:

- What is the focus of this photo?
- Who is in the photo?
- What are they doing?
- Where is the photo set, in terms of both geography and type of place?
- If there are people in the photo, can you see their faces?
- How is light used in the picture:
 - Is it bright? Dark? A mix?
 - Which areas and objects are in shadow and which are well-lit?
 - Does the photo use high contrast?
- How is space used in the photo:
 - Is the photo a tightly framed close-up?
 - A distant wide shot?
 - An aerial photograph?
- How do these details contribute to the story the photograph tells?

GOING DEEPER

Choose a photo from the report's [15 images](#) about the visual themes of fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief:

- What do you need to know to interpret the visual messaging of the image (e.g. local knowledge, knowledge of what is 'normal', knowledge of medical settings, etc.)?
- How might a viewer's personal experience change the meaning of the image?
- How well does the image illustrate the news article that it accompanies (i.e., is it of the same place/people/situation described in the story or is it only vaguely related)?
- How does the framing (the physical composition, angle, and subjects included in the pictures) impact the visual storytelling of this image?

ACTIVITIES

Investigate the impact of framing (composition, angle, content) in a photograph:

- Choose a photo from the report's [15 images](#) about the visual themes of fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief. Copy the photo into a Google doc or Microsoft Word and experiment with cropping it differently. What information is lost or emphasized by different sizing and layout decisions?
- Read D. L. Cade (May 04, 2020), "[These photos show how easy it is to create 'fake news' with photography,](#)" *PetaPixel*. Experiment with the techniques described to create similar photos. What are the ethical implications of the choices made around framing?

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: INSPECT

3. Affect: Using the narrative



Affect

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

Choose a photo from the report's 15 images about the visual themes of fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief:

- How does this picture make you feel?:
 - Safe/unsafe?
 - Optimistic/pessimistic?
 - Strong/weak?
 - Comfortable/uncomfortable?
- Does the feeling match the story illustrated by the photo?
- Does the code assigned to the photo match how it makes you feel?
- How does the emotion evoked by the photo match with the emotion visible in the people in it?
- Who might feel differently about the image and why?

Choose two photos from Fiona Sinclair Scott (April 3, 2020), "[How can photographers capture human connection in the age of coronavirus?](#)" *CNN*.

- What emotions do they evoke?
- How would you code them using the categories in the report?

GOING DEEPER

- How do photos affect how people are expected to feel about an event?
- How can photos and the emotions they evoke make people feel included or excluded?
- How do photos shape our understanding of the world and how we feel about particular events?
- How do the headlines and captions shape our interpretation of the photos?

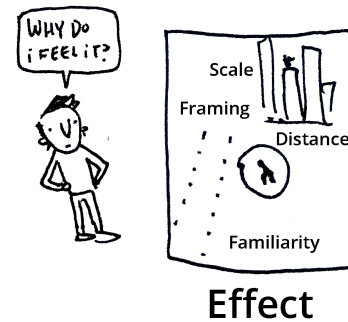
ACTIVITIES

Compare photos of the same event from two different news organizations.

- How did the editor's choices reflect their audience's potential view of a story? For example: [A \\$2 Trillion Lifeline Will Help, but More May Be Needed](#) and [Lawmakers have negotiated a \\$2-trillion coronavirus stimulus package. What happens next?](#)
- To see how the headlines reinforce or contradict the impression of the photos, experiment with mixing the headlines and images from these examples or from other pairs of stories.
- Create a headline/photo matching quiz.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: AFFECT

4. Effect: Examining visual techniques



DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- Compare the visual techniques used in one set of the [images in the report](#), for example, the theme of grief (Figure 6) or theme of hope (Figure 3):
 - How do the visual techniques contribute to emotional impression?
 - Which techniques do you notice first?
 - Which techniques have the most impact on how you interpret the photos?
 - Which techniques have you used in taking photos?
- Compare two images from two different emotion categories:
 - Which visual techniques are common to the images?
 - Which visual techniques reinforce the differences in the emotions evoked by the photographs?

GOING DEEPER

Use the "[Table of coded visual techniques](#)" to consider how the images in the report evoke emotional responses:

- Which techniques are used most frequently?
- How can the same technique contribute to evoking different emotional responses?
- What combinations of techniques evoke more intense responses?

ACTIVITIES

Make a copy of the [visual techniques coding table template](#) and use it to code a set of images:

- Find five images relating to Covid-19 or a theme of your choice from news sites on the Web
- Code these images for “visual techniques” by checking the appropriate boxes
- Note the emotions evoked by the photos that you coded
- Compare the pattern of techniques and emotions in your coding with the “Table of coded visual techniques” and the images in the report. Do similar techniques evoke similar emotional responses?
- Share your codes with others in your class to compare data across a wider set of images

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: EFFECT

5. Investigate: Using Tineye to verify images



Investigate

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- View the image and read the story Noah Manskar (March 17, 2020), “Grocers tweak hours to protect older shoppers from coronavirus,” *The New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2020/03/17/grocers-tweak-hours-to-protect-older-shoppers-from-coronavirus/>:
 - What does the photo show?
 - Why did the editor choose it to illustrate the article?
 - Copy the link to the photo into tineye.com to find the original use of the photo
 - How does [the original story](#) affect your interpretation of the image?
- Choose one of the report’s [15 images](#) about the visual themes of fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief:
 - What clues are there to the time and place of the image (including the caption)?
 - Describe what’s going on in the photo in a sentence, including when and where it takes place.
 - Copy the link to the photo into <https://tineye.com> to find out when it was originally published and where else it has been used.
 - How does this new information add to or affect the meaning of the photo?

GOING DEEPER

- What are the public's expectations of news photographs?
 - What assumptions do we make about the images we see in the news?
 - Have our expectations changed over time, if so, why?
- What kinds of news photos do you trust and which kinds of photos are you more skeptical about?
- How have changes and challenges in the business of news affected the images we see in the news about Covid-19?

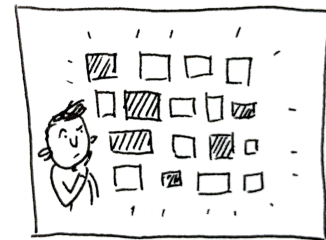
ACTIVITIES

Choose two photos from the report and evaluate them based on the [National Press Photographers Association Code of Ethics](#).

- Are there any violations of the ethics code in these photos?
- What aspects of the ethics code leave room for interpretation?
- How well does the ethics code reflect current public expectations of photojournalism?

LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: INVESTIGATE

6. Reflect: Using the Report



Reflect

DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

- Choose one image from the report that had the most impact on you and respond to the following questions:
 - Why did it have a strong impact on you?
 - What visual techniques are used to draw viewers' attention to certain photos?
 - How do these factors impact which stories you read, share, and follow up?
- How does the authority of the press elicit and reinforce certain reactions to news photos from the viewers?

GOING DEEPER

- Consider aspects of representation in the photos in the report:
 - Are the people like you/not like you?
 - Are there patterns in who is in the photographs and the stories they accompany?
 - How does it impact the public perception of Covid-19 seriousness to have so few pictures of patients in American health care settings, or to primarily show elderly as the American victims?
 - How does it impact students to see so few images of people in their age bracket in the news?
- Review the images at this site developed by a photojournalism instructor and students she taught: Robin Hoecker (2020), [Student reflections of a world in crisis: Teaching photojournalism in spring of 2020 and the need for trauma-informed teaching](#)
 - How do these images taken and selected by students differ from those in the mainstream media?
 - Who is represented in the photos? What emotions are predominant in the photos?
 - What stories do these photos tell that are missing from mainstream coverage?
 - Whose stories are missing from this collection?
- Compare these curated collections of images for the [coronavirus pandemic](#) and the [1918 influenza epidemic](#):
 - What themes and patterns did the author illustrate with their choices?
 - What aspects were similar and where were there differences?
 - How do the choices the author made reflect their priorities?
 - How would your choices be different?

ACTIVITIES

Curate a small collection of images that represents your experience of Covid-19; the photos can be ones you have taken or ones you find.

- Describe the intended purpose and audience for the collection (e.g. explaining how you feel to their parents, helping your children understand what it was like). How would you describe the theme of this set of images?
- For each image, describe the story it tells, the techniques it uses, how it connects to you and/or your theme, and other reasons you chose it.

 **LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: REFLECT**
 **LEARNING ACTIVITY SLIDES: CREATE**