

PHOTOJOURNALISM OR AI GENERATED IMAGES WHEN WE WANT TO ILLUSTRATE SOCIAL ISSUES? EXPLORING THE MATTER THROUGH ISRAEL - GAZA ARMED CONFLICT

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Abstract: *In the present article we plan on talking about the implications of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated images when reporting on social issues and the implications of that. For our refrain analysis we will look at the events occurring from the Israel -Gaza armed conflict and the echoes of this in social media. Our main focus will be on how AI generated images (one in particular) was used to talk about the situation there. Moreover, we plan on analyzing the stated reasons for using AI generated images instead of real ones and of course the effect and implications of that decision. In our article we plan on explaining a few principles. First is to describe briefly what an AI generated image is, how one can get such a result. Second, we plan on discussing and finding the reasoning behind using such an image to talk about a social crisis like the one in Gaza. Furthermore, we will try to answer the question of how the public reacted to this image/trend and why? Lastly, we are interested in seeing the implications of this decision. Was it a wise decision, did it do more good than harm to the cause?*

Keywords: *AI, photography, images, social media, photojournalism*

So, what is it actually an AI generated image? Is it an image that Artificial Intelligence creates from scratch? Is that image a copy of another one?

Nowadays we have a great array of AI generators to choose from. These are basically software designed to intake a text describing a situation or a scene and then produce an image close to what the text is saying. Among the best known are Midjourney, DALL-E 2, Gemeni, Adobe Firefly, Generative AI by Getty, Stable Diffusion and also a tool from Canva.

In simpler terms, to get to an image generated by an AI system a series of actions need to take place beforehand. Not so new to all of us is the term machine learning. In this stage the computers are given instructions on how to recognize an image (Zewe, 2023).

In order to produce an image the system must firstly understand what it is. The process of analyzing an image is called, as Nvidia explains,

„diffusion”. After huge quantities of data are processed, the software reaches a state in which it can pick pixels apart, deconstruct an image to its basic components. After this process is repeated enough, the machine has “learned” the ingredients of an image so it can move forward to the process of staking the pixels up again to form an image.

The providing company Hypotenuse AI says that this processes also help the machine learn how different objects should look like, pixel wise, so now we are at the point where were “if you ask them [the machines] to generate an image of a dog, they won't just find an image of a dog and then add some details to it. They'll create the image of a dog from scratch, based on their understanding of what a dog is”.

Of course, an ethical (Bendel, 2023) and legal discussion (Ungureanu&Amironesei, 2023, pp .45-75) must take place, but in this paper we focus on other issues of this matter.

Now that we have seen what an AI generated image is, we consider it is necessary to discuss the use of such technology. One of the selling points of using generated images is that of having at one's disposal a language that is almost universal.

Most of the modern citizens can see an image and understand what it is about, especially if the subject it addresses is now or it was fairly recently in the news cycle. In this context, almost any communicator can generate an image and “illustrate” an event that he wasn't a part of and thus communicate about it with its audience. Briefly, we consider this strategy to be more harmful to storytelling, journalism and furthermore the public than helpful.

What could be, still, the reasoning behind using such images when reporting or telling a story, especially a social oriented one?

Those that are using AI solutions to illustrate this type of story use several reasons to justify their choice. One of the apparent reasons is the subject of dignity. Meaning that the authors would try to protect the dignity and image of those suffering. Another reason is, especially in the case that we are analyzing, that of wanting to reach a broader audience with less visually violent images that highlight a tragic event or wrongdoing. This goal cannot be reached if the systems/guardrails put in place by the social media platforms (such as terms and conditions from Instagram for example) limit the signal of images that are visually violent.

This seems to be the case also in the “all eyes on Rafa” AI image that circulated on social media, especially on Instagram stories.

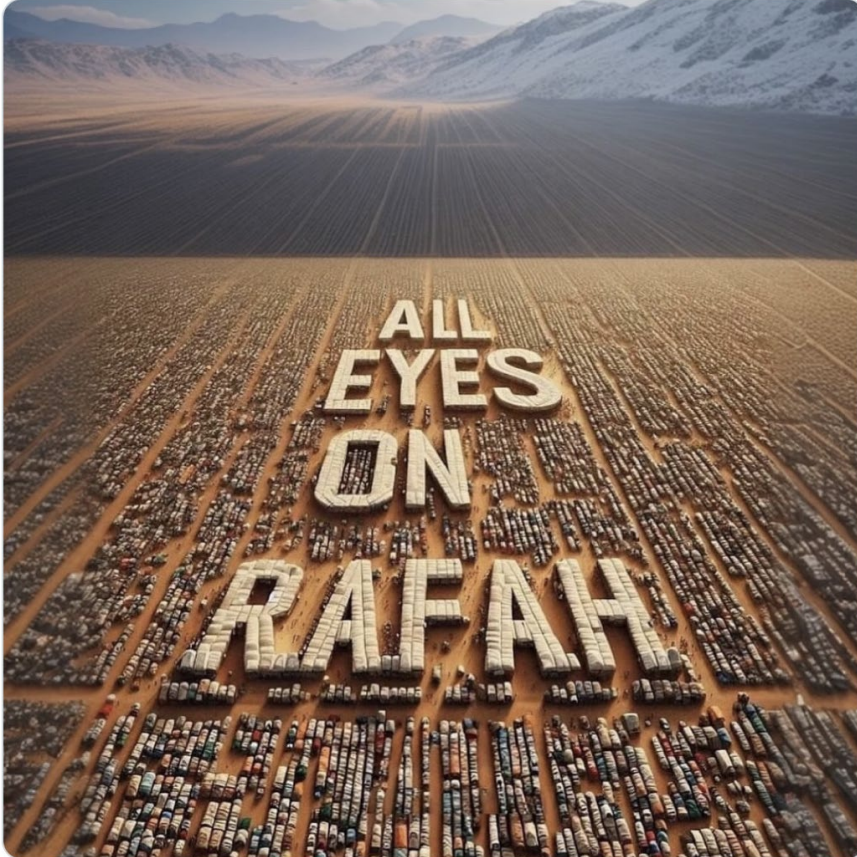


Fig. 1, AI generated image believed to be created by Instagram user @shahv4012

Case study

The image that the present article is analyzing is said to be created by a Malaysian Instagram user, according to BBC. The image produced a lot of debate starting with the basic question of what does it show and even more importantly why was it thought like that?

Almost all the international publications had a piece regarding the image, analyzed it, analyzed its meaning and impact, good or bad. Before going into the semiotic analysis it is important to have a description of what we see.

The image seems to show a desert surrounded by snowy mountains and blue sky with some visually pleasing clouds as a scene setter for a huge number of rectangular shaped objects of different sizes and colors.

The prominent part of this image is the all capital letter phrase „All eyes on Rafa” made up of almost the same rectangular objects, the only difference being that they are all white and the one that seems closer to the viewer tends to have a shape similar to aid pages.

Why is this image important to us? As communicators we believe it's important to understand how social trends work, how one thing gets popular, why masses of users decide to identify with a cause, phrase, image or anything of that sort and nonetheless, how does all of this affect the greater picture about a cause for both those directly implicated and the bystanders.

According to Aljazeera the image in our focus was published approximately two days after an Israeli attack on an refugee camp previously declared a safe zone. The airstrike resulted in multiple casualties and some horrific scenes of what was mostly a tent camp.

Even if we could not establish with exact certainty the day and hour of the initial post, the Instagram story image reached a whopping 46.6 million reposts in a time frame of approximately three days, according to the same source. All this engagement is counted only for Instagram. Other sources, like the the BBC and Wired.com indicate that the AI generated image was shared on Instagram alone by more then 47 million people and other millions shared the image on other social media platforms like X and Tik-Tok. It is therefore called a viral post (Tiago et al, 2019, pp. 574-582).

Once we've established the context of this image being published and the public's reaction to it, we are interested in finding answers to the following two questions:

1. Why did it become so viral?
2. What's the impact of such a response from social media users, on the ruth cause?

When trying to answer the question of „why this image became so famous so fast” we consider it's important to look at the visual content, the persons endorsing/sharing the image and nonetheless the context/the platforms in which the image was shared.

A closer analysis leads us to the conclusion that the visual content of this AI generated image and the platform onto which it became viral are closely linked. Why could that be? To start with we are looking at a visually pleasing image showing some geometrical figures that seem to resemble tents in a beautifully lit, nice warm color temperature, desert surrounded by snowy mountains and a visually pleasing sky with fluffy clouds. If we strip away the meaning of this image, all we got is a pleasing visual.

When it comes to the platform factor, we've shown earlier that the community standard prohibits, most of the time, display of visual violence.

After a closer look at how these types of images are treated by the algorithms, it's almost certain that images depicting some scenes of cruel reality would not be allowed to circulate freely on Instagram.

Sarah Jackson, an associate professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, in an interview for Time Magazine, published on May 29th 2024, talks about how social media has changed the communication context and the new reality that journalists, especially those covering conflict zones, must face: “Many of the images that are coming from the ground are really graphic and gruesome,” she says. “It has been harder and harder for people to actually document what's happening...and when compelling images are documented, they are often censored at the platform level...it makes sense that folks would turn to AI.”

Not to imply any shadow of censorship, it is commonly known that images that depict visual violence are oftentimes published on Instagram, especially from conflict zones, but more often than not they are quickly hidden behind a banner warning the viewer that the image they're about to see may be distressing. It is just how social media works, these safeguards have many roles among which is that of protecting the mental health of the platform users.

Sarah Jackson goes on and explains: “Many social media activists may have been struggling to share images from Gaza due to algorithmic guidelines that hide graphic content. Instagram says that while it understands why people share this sort of content in certain instances, it encourages people to caption the photo with warnings about graphic violence, per its community guidelines”.

We consider that having a visually pleasing image helps the post get past the guardrails and of course once the algorithm learns that this post is of interest, they start showing the image to more and more people.

Dr. Paul Reilly, a senior lecturer in Communications, Media and Democracy at the University of Glasgow, explained for BBC the following phenomenon: “But while the image depicts a somewhat “sanitized” version of what is going on in Rafah, Dr Reilly says that could be an advantage from a digital activist's perspective in terms of its share-ability. He explains that this is because the image does not contain graphic content that could lead to its removal from Instagram for infringing its terms of use guidelines, while also increasing awareness of the issue that activists seek to bring attention to”.

Once the relationship between the visual contents and the platform is established, we consider it important to talk about the importance of

influencers sharing this image. The capacity of such individuals to change and influence social trends and social behaviors really is known in the communications context and well studied by communications experts. Our goal in the present article is not to establish whether or not influencers have an important role in society, but rather talk about who are some of them that got behind this trend and made it reach such impressive numbers.

The image we are talking about was shared by millions of users including public figures. Famous activists, actors, models are just a couple of examples.

In order to have a comprehensive article we believe that it is important to talk about the implications of using such images when talking about social issues. While we understand the reasoning for trying to avoid sharing or consuming visually graphic images, having to comply with the regulations of social media platforms and also taking care of our mental health, we consider that resorting to AI generated images to talk about social causes it's a dangerous precedent.

Our concerns are not with the use of AI to generate visual art in general, but with the use of it to “illustrate” social injustice, consequences of war or any kind of such activity. Part of the problem is stated in the beginning of the article. Due to the fact that visual communication is considered an almost universal language, not having the capability to tell the world the ugly, unpleasant, unedited truth can lead, in our opinion, to a desensitization of the public. A public that does not see the reality as it is, may find it harder and harder to care about a social cause, a social issue that is not affecting it in a direct form.

The same opinion, that the AI generated image in discussion, may be more damaging than helpful to the cause is shared by a spectrum of specialists, among which is Dr. Paul Reilly mentioned above, that says in the same BBC piece “that some activists will feel concerned that the image does not show the true extent of what's really happening on the ground, pointing to material posted on social media by journalists in Gaza which has not gained such viral prominence”. Others see the AI generated image as a direct affront to the journalists on the ground that are risking their lives to report the aftermath of military actions and end up not reaching such numbers of viewers and levels of public awareness to their cause.

What should we keep in mind?

Firstly we consider it necessary that a brother discussion must take place on the topic of how social media is impacting the real world.

Especially now that we are entering a new era of communication in which visuals can be created almost from scratch and made to look realistic and even make some users believe they are seeing reality.

In the present article we have touched bases with the process behind an AI generated image. We have seen how machines have been taught to reduce an image to its composing pixels so it would understand what “the ingredients” of most images of an object are. After this step, we have seen that the machine can move forward and construct an image, on demand, by reversing the first process. Of course, one important aspect of this process is the need for huge quantities of data, images in this specific case, that need to be used by the machine. We have stated that an ethical discussion must take place on this matter, but this is not the focus of this article.

Furthermore, we have seen that one important reason for using AI generated images to talk about social causes on social media platforms is to avoid restrictions that come with posting or sharing of visually violent content. Even though social media users were able to consume some real content from the ground, from Gaza, the fact that most of it was depicting visually violent, death or gruesome content, restricted the publication or direct access for the viewers. We found in our analysis that social media platforms, Instagram in our case, have a clear policy that restricts, sometimes even bans, posting or sharing of such content. According to the policy from the Terms and Conditions, these restrictions are put in place to protect users.

Lastly, our article talked about the ethical and moral implications of using such images when talking about social injustice. Even though we see that AI generated images can go a long way within social media platforms, being shared millions of times without violating any terms, there is a concern that the message is not fully transmitted. Communications experts and journalists talk about the fact that even if the “All eyes on Rafah” AI generated image got millions of shares, the impact was rather marginal on the underlying cause, some experts voicing concerns that the life risking job done by on site journalist, was obturated or even covered by the use of such visually pleasing visuals that in fact where not showing the harsh reality.

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