The role of everyday visuals in ‘knowing humans’ during Covid-19
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The human condition during Covid-19 has been communicated through a barrage of news stories about the pandemic, and much of that news has been visual. There have never been so many line charts and bar charts occupying the news, as data visualisations became key to communicating vital information about the coronavirus pandemic to the public. Likewise, photographs are also used to represent the virus and illustrate the aspects of everyday lives most affected by the pandemic, like working, going to school or socialising at the pub. Writing in 2020, Julia Sonnevend argued that visual representations of Covid-19 ‘are entry points for public discussion and social contestation’ (202: 452) and as such, they would play an important role in persuading people to act responsibly. ‘Without the ability to see and relate to this crisis’, she wrote, ‘people will be unlikely to follow strict guidelines that interfere with their usual daily lives’ (2020: 452). It is because of these claims and the related ubiquity of these everyday news visuals that they are the focus of this chapter. We discuss three visuals which have become iconic of the pandemic – namely, images of the virus itself, the flatten the curve line graph, and the face mask. Then, unlike Sonnevend and other writers who prioritise iconic images like these, we propose that it is also important to attend to the more generic everyday visuals of Covid-19 that circulate.

Amongst those visuals that have become representative of the pandemic is the ubiquitous, computer-generated image of the virus itself, shown in Figure 1 below. In January 2020, journalists, editors, scientists and politicians needed an image that would convey Covid-19’s serious nature. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US realised how serious Covid-19 would become, one of their first public relations moves was to ask medical illustrator Dan Higgins to give the disease a ‘visual identity’. The ensuing 3D image was based on scientific data, but artistic licence was also involved: the colours red, orange and yellow were chosen to alarm the public and shadows were added to make it seem more real (Fairs 2020). Released on 31st January 2020, the image circulated around the world. It was and continues to be used in news and on social media, sometimes with tweaks to avoid copyright issues, although there were in fact none, as the CDC wanted the image to spread. By the end of the year, the image had come to visually signify the Covid-19 crisis. Sonnevend (2020) describes this ubiquitous image of the coronavirus molecule is an aesthetically pleasing ‘close-up’ that synthesizes key information about the virus while also being versatile, thanks to its economy of detail and three-dimensional form. Indeed, it has been widely adapted, in abstract, Art Deco, cartoon, and other forms, in montages and stock photography, and as symbols in data visualisations. It represents the disease and as such has become iconic, yet its wide circulation undermines its original intent of causing alarm.
The ‘flatten the curve’ infographic is another ubiquitous Covid-19 image. It is a line chart with two lines: the first, sharp curve represents the pandemic outbreak without intervention, and the second is a curve flattened by intervention measures such as social distancing and lockdowns. It is based on a model from earlier epidemics and pandemics like the Influenza of 1918 and SARS in 2002, widely used in epidemiological circles.\(^1\) A digital version had been used by scientists in 2007, for example, to demonstrate various scenarios in relation to pandemic strategic planning for the future.\(^2\) Data visualizer Rosamund Pearce based her original Covid-19 flatten the curve visual for an article in *The Economist* on this existing model.\(^3\) Like the original, Pearce’s model was not based on actual data. Rather, it aimed to illustrate the overall problem and solution. Population Health Professor Drew Harris was later inspired to alter the visual by adding a horizontal line showing ‘healthcare capacity.’ This was a ‘fully theoretical invention’ which intended to communicate the message that interventions were needed to avoid health care systems breaking down.\(^4\) The image went viral and variations abounded, so much so that data visualizer Andy Kirk joked on Twitter that we need to ‘flatten the curve of new versions of

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the flatten the curve chart’

![Image of flatten the curve chart](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/learning/whats-going-on-in-this-graph-flatten-the-curve.html)

Figure 2: Flatten the curve infographic, Drew Harris,
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/learning/whats-going-on-in-this-graph-flatten-the-curve.html (not sure what reproduction rights are)

The face mask is a third image that has come to visually represent the pandemic. Images of people wearing face masks have been ubiquitous during Covid-19, their role shifting over time, from a garment associated with medical professionals, to a protective measure in East Asia, to their everyday usage around the world. Images of mask-wearers underpinned mainstream political advice in most parts of the world to wear masks for protection. In contrast, images of non-mask-wearers showed rule-breakers, like those who broke into the US Senate in January 2021 or anti-lockdown protesters around the world. Some photos of mask wearers came from stock photography suppliers like Getty Images, whereas some accompanied specific, human interest stories, such as 90 year old Freda France from Sheffield, depicted on a BBC Yorkshire webpage wearing a tiara and encouraging people to get vaccinated. In addition, the mask has frequently been used as an illustration of measures that the public was required to adopt to reduce the spread of the virus, for example in the UK government’s ‘hands – face – space’ campaign in the middle of the pandemic. Thus the meaning of the mask image changed frequently, yet it continued to look the same, whether in a photographic or as an illustration.
These visual representations of the pandemic – the virus molecule, the flatten the curve graphic, and images of face masks – have become iconic. Iconic images demand attention and invite recollection. They stand out as visual representations in their own right and they are simultaneously recognizable and memorable (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). The face mask, for example, became an icon of the modification of people’s appearance and everyday lives during the pandemic.

And yet, arguably, these visuals are not only iconic. Through their widespread circulation and re-use, they have become what we describe as ‘generic visuals’ – that is, images which have standardized formats and appearances, which perform particular design functions and which circulate with increasing frequency in the news media. Generic visuals include stock photos, simple data visualisations and other image types. All three of the visuals discussed above have become pervasive “[v]isual commonplaces” (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007, p. 2) of the Covid crisis that fit with our definition of generic visuals: standardised in appearance, performing particular design functions, and widely circulated.

But generic visuals extend far beyond the images we have discussed so far in this chapter. They include the many photos of nameless mask wearers and of public spaces left empty by the pandemic, the myriad of daily bar charts, line charts and coloured maps of infection rates,
vaccination rates, and changing disease control measures, and other image types, some of which combine visual elements from both photos and graphs. Generic visuals increasingly populate journalism and other information sources, online and off, on mobile apps and other digital platforms. They are what Frosh (2003) calls the visual ‘wallpaper’ of our lives, wallpaper which we may have come to consider them as meaningless decoration. They are also the visual wallpaper of the Covid-19 crisis. Generic visuals are much more ubiquitous than iconic images, yet surprisingly, research on news visuals – which is not commonplace – tends to examine iconic images, such as arresting photographs or award-winning data visualisations. Despite our increasing exposure to generic visuals, we know very little about the role they play.

We are filling this gap with our research project Generic Visuals in the News (https://genericvisuals.leeds.ac.uk/). The project explores the role that generic visuals play in bringing groups of people together around shared interests and concerns, activating citizens to care (or not) about particular issues, making possible (or not) various forms of engagement, including democratic decision-making. In short, we are investigating empirically Sonnevend’s assertion that seeing and acting are intricately related. Doing this involves going beyond a focus on generic visuals alone – it also means engaging with processes of image production, selection, circulation and consumption. We explore all of these on Generic Visuals in the News.

Researching the myriad of everyday, generic images of Covid-19 also makes it possible to reflect on what is not represented in news visuals of the pandemic. Visualising Covid-19 offers a way of grasping a fast-evolving event and making it knowable. And yet, centred as they are on visual conventions that stylise, abstract or decontextualise, generic visuals cloud important aspects of the pandemic, such as its bodily and material impacts, or, put more brutally, illness and death. In a New York Times opinion piece, Sarah Lewis (REF) asks: where are the photos of the people dying of Covid? She argues that ‘we’re not seeing this crisis with our own eyes’ and that this has consequences in terms of not mobilising people to act. She goes on to say that ‘Statistics alone, however clear, are not historically how we have communicated calamity on this scale.’ In her view, a particular type of image, photographs, are needed to move people to act.

Data visualiser Mona Chalabi has a different view on the problematic absences in visual representations of the pandemic. Early in the crisis, she highlighted the absence of visual representations of the inequalities that Covid-19 exacerbates (REF). In response, she attempted to address this gap through her own work, visualising, amongst other things, who has the privilege of being able to work from home, and the ways in which the virus disproportionately affects black Americans. Chalabi’s work points to the fact that choices are made about what to represent visually, what not to visualise, and how to visualise, all of which tell us something about the human condition during the pandemic, and the politics thereof.

This is another reason why it is important to attend to the role of everyday visuals in ‘knowing humans’ during the pandemic. The forms and affordances of photos, data visualisations and other image types combine to communicate a sense of facticity or objectivity, and yet tricky material is missing, like death and inequality. Everyday visuals of Covid-19 do different things. As we argue elsewhere (REF IJCS paper), they convey a sense of nationalism, but also of
localism and cosmopolitanism. Steep curves and scary molecules may shock at first, but their ubiquity means they have both iconic and generic characteristics – they are arresting and memorable, yet they are standardized and circulate with frequency. Photos of vaccinations and charts of vaccination rates may reassure, and all of these image types may be seen as meaningless visual wallpaper, or they may assemble publics and mobilise them to act (REF US). These possibilities, and the slippage between the iconic and the generic, are further reasons to focus in on the role that generic visuals play in communicating Covid-19. In other words, and to conclude, we might make a better, more human future by understanding the role that generic visuals play in knowing humans, in the context of Covid-19 and more broadly.