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**International, innovative, multi-modal, and representative?
The geographies, methods, modes, and aims present in two
visual communication journals**

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Abstract

This comparative review seeks to explore how international, innovative, multi-modal, and representative the scholarship published in two visual communication journals, *Visual Communication* and *Visual Communication Quarterly*, is over a 25-year period (from VCQ's founding in 1994 and from VC's founding in 2002 through 2019). Through examining all 544 research articles published in these journals over this timeframe, an understanding can be achieved regarding which countries and geographic regions have received attention, the methods and means used to advance the authors' arguments, the visuals under consideration, and the authors' focus and aims, which sometimes overlap with the visuals under consideration and sometimes are distinct from them. The results inform areas of potential future exploration, focus, and attention for these two journals but are grounded in an understanding that systemic conditions also influence the types and designs of research that can be published and recognised.

Keywords: visual communication, visual communication quarterly, scholarly publishing, academic journals, visual media, visual methods, visual scholarship, visual research

Introduction

For those with unimpaired sight, the visual dimensions of the world are inescapable. They pervade virtually every facet of life, from entertainment and information, to orientation and awareness. Within the communication realm, they pique public interest, rouse emotions, inform consciousness, safeguard memories, help communicate and maintain connection, and attest to experiences (Holloway and Beck, 2005). They occupy a privileged position among other senses (Hoffman, 1998; Randhawa, 1976) yet have historically occupied a subservient role in the academic and scholarly discourse (Müller, 2007). Goggin (2004), for example, notes that 'current theories of meaning and communication continue to privilege logocentric approaches and perspectives' (87) and Bredekamp (2007) goes further in arguing, 'The exclusion and devaluation, if not contempt of the visual is deeply embedded in the terminological structure of the Western world' (9). Bicket and Packer (2004) also argue:

It is worthwhile reflecting that an anti-visual bias has long dominated Western thought. Scholars such as Barbara Maria Stafford (1996) have endeavored to challenge the pro-logos bias of dialectical analysis that has dominated philosophy and cultural studies, all the way from Plato's dialogues through Adorno to Foucault and Derrida. In such cases, the role of the text is nearly always given prominence over that of the image, which is usually downgraded and subordinated as nothing more than mere shallow illustration (365).

Even though these have been long-standing claims, they are still relevant today as, while conditions have evolved over the past 30 years, the pace of change is slow and requires generational shifts to undo millennia of marginalisation. In addition to the challenges posed by logocentric approaches, another challenge, as will be detailed more fully in the literature review, is the intensely (and compared to some fields) uniquely interdisciplinary nature of visual communication (Moriarty and Barbatsis, 2005).

This research responds to a number of challenges—including related to methods, internationalization, and multimodality—previous scholars (Müller, 2007) identified and provides a detailed and in-depth examination on how two visual communication journals, *Visual Communication* and *Visual Communication Quarterly*¹ (both are quarterlies), have grappled with these challenges from their founding to the present. Some of these challenges are unique to the visual communication field, while others are more universal to academic scholarship and publishing.

Many journals publish research related to visual phenomena but some do it in only a 'nominal' fashion, 'examining a medium, activity, or phenomenon that is inherently visual without observing its visual aspects with consistency or rigor' (Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez, 2004: 626) so this study uses two of the 'allied visual journals' Barnhurst and colleagues identified and, among these, selects the two most interdisciplinary ones, as, unlike ones that are more disciplinary situated (such as *Visual Sociology* [now *Visual Studies*], *Visual Anthropology*, or the *Journal of Visual Literacy*), interdisciplinary journals have the most potential to exhibit a diversity of methods, modes, and foci.

¹ VCQ is published in the United States and VC is published in the UK though both stylize themselves as international outlets for visual communication research.

Through an examination and analysis of 544 research articles published in *VCQ* and *VC*, this study presents a picture of how these journals are responding to larger challenges within the field of visual communication in order to inform their future directions. Brief overviews of both journals will be offered and then the field's challenges will be unpacked before research questions and methods are articulated. Following this, the review's findings are presented and then synthesized to offer insights on future directions for these journals and others grappling with the same challenges.

Literature review and grounding context

Visual Communication Quarterly, the older of the two journals, began as a journal aligned to the practitioner wing of communication while *Visual Communication* occupies a position 'between the communication discipline and the arts' (Barnhurst, Vari, and Rodríguez, 2004: 627). Both journals are adjacent in the visualisation Barnhurst and colleagues proposed.

In the following section, the older of the two journals considered in this study, *Visual Communication Quarterly*, will be examined first and will be followed by historical context on its sister publication, *Visual Communication*. Then, broad evaluations of the field will be analysed to inform the study's research questions. Following this and a discussion of the methods used, the results will be compared in aggregate to get a broader sense of these journals and to inform their future directions.

Visual Communication Quarterly

Nineteen ninety-four gave rise in the Northern Hemisphere's winter to *Visual Communication Quarterly*. In the inaugural issue's call for submissions, it stylised itself as a resource for those in the 'news photography, graphics and design fields'. Initially, manuscripts were limited to no more than 2,000 words (Kenney, 1994). An editorial statement appeared in the first issue and founding editor Keith Kenney wrote in it that authors 'minimize discussion of methods and previous literature and include only what is directly related to the paper's purpose' (Kenney, 1994: 20).

The journal's focus broadened over the years. Julianne Newton, the publication's third editor, described the journal's focus in the first issue under her editorship as: 'about visual communication in all its forms' and said she welcomed 'manuscripts from every field dealing with any topic related to "the visual"' (Newton, 2002: 3). The journal's more expansive and interdisciplinary vision remains into the present. Its current aims and scope statement reads: 'We define "visual" in the broadest sense of the word—from dreams and cognitive theory through gesture and geography, as well as issues concerning visual ethics, visual ecology, representation, visual media in all forms, and visual behavior' (*Visual Communication Quarterly*, 2020).

For 11 years, from 1994-2005, the journal was affiliated with the National Press Photographers Association and was mailed to professionals along with *News Photographer* magazine. The journal has been so far guided by seven editors in chief, all of them American.

Visual Communication

In their opening editorial, published in February 2002, *Visual Communication's* founding quartet of editors (three based in the UK and one based in the USA) penned a reflection praising the interdisciplinary nature of visual communication. Their backgrounds, in fine art, design, media, sociology, semiotics, and linguistics, reflected the sentiment of the editorial. Despite the academic backgrounds of all four of the journal's founding co-editors, they also acknowledged in their opening editorial the value of not only theoretical, but also, practical, objectives for the publication (Jewitt et al., 2002).

In that piece, the editors called for three types of articles: those that were methodological, those that juxtaposed visual communication alongside other modes of communication, and those with a critical focus on representing and doing visual communication. In its closing paragraph, the editors note that visual communication is not a unified and well-institutionalised academic discipline, but, instead 'a varied group of people from a wide range of fields who share, nevertheless, a common interest in visual communication and its role in society' (8).

Like *VCQ*, *Visual Communication* defines the visual broadly, as 'still and moving images, graphic designs, visual phenomena such as fashion, professional vision, posture and interaction, the built and landscaped environment, and last, but not, least, multimodality' (7-8). This vision has remained unchanged from the journal's founding in 2002 to the present. The journal's founding four editors served for 15 years, until 2018, when they were succeeded by four new chief editors, three from Europe (including Germany, Italy, and the UK) and one from Australia (C Jewitt, personal communication, 21 October, 2020). The composition of this group changed next in 2019 when the editor from Germany was succeeded by one from Norway and then again in 2020 when *VC* moved to a two-editor-in-chief structure (with one based in the Netherlands and the other based in Australia).

Challenges facing the field

Internationalisation, language, and geography. Though visual analysis enjoys a long history dating back as far as 6th century China, visual communication as an academic field was in its infancy in the 1970s² and, by the 1990s, was more mature and organised (Josephson, Kelly, and Smith, 2020: xix) but by no means dominant (Prosser, 1998). Different research traditions have been afforded different levels of visibility due, in part, to language barriers and issues related to internationalisation, which will be discussed first and will be followed by an overview of the methods, visuals, and aims and foci dominant in the field.

Scholars such as Dissanayake (1989) and Miike (2006) have critiqued communication as a discipline that is particularly Eurocentric and scholars such as Müller (2007) have cited language barriers as an impediment to the field's development and to the establishment of impact. She argues, for example, that, 'German visual scholarship has, in the past, hardly had any impact on the international visual communication community, and much visual scholarship e.g. in Latin America and Asia remains to be "discovered" in the West' (22).

² Though the academic study of visual rhetoric is older and dates back to the 1950s (Olson, 2007).

Considering these critiques and that the locations of editors (among others) can have a role in which scholarship is published, the study's first question focusses on geography and the extent to which the scholarship published in these journals mirrors the founding editors' countries. It asks:

RQ1: How broadly does the scholarship published in *Visual Communication Quarterly* and *Visual Communication* reflect the diversity of countries available for analysis?

Organisation, structure, and methods. As previously foreshadowed, 'The issue of the poor relative status of image-based research—an issue not on the agenda of word-orientated researchers—is widely recognized and acknowledged by those who work in film, video, photographs, cartoons, signs, symbols, and drawings' (Prosser, 1998). The challenge of logocentrism is joined by the field's intensely interdisciplinary nature, which can be both blessing and bane.

Numerous scholars have acknowledged the study of visual communication as being multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional (Moriarty and Kenney, 1995). They have termed it 'rhizomatic' (Moriarty and Barbatsis, 2005) due to its organic, dynamic, and decentered nature. These authors argue that a field can be judged, in part, by whether a repertoire of research methods exist that scholars in the area find useful and continually use. Müller (2007) notes that the field's transdisciplinarity provides 'methodological as well as topical width of the scope that can be covered' (7). She identified four primary methods used within the field of visual communication: content analysis, iconography, experiments, and surveys.

Using these methods, scholars of the visual have taken a keen interest in framing approaches and these have received systematic attention, such as by Brantner, Geise, and Lobinger (2012), who sought to review how visual framing research has so far been theorised, defined, operationalised, and methodologically applied in which contexts (related to modalities and media sources) by examining 29 studies. More recently, Bock (2020) attempted a larger review, also on visual framing, by examining 165 scholarly outputs. She found that descriptive and categorical approaches dominated and subsumed those interested in exploring ideological connotations.

One of the largest in scope contributions to these efforts has been Lobinger's (2012) 20-year, German-language meta-analysis, from 1990-2009, which sought to trace the development, establishment and research activities of 'visual communication research' and show which methods have been used to produce which findings in previous research.

Looking at the field as a whole, scholars have noted that visual research could 'benefit from a better theoretical and methodological grounding and a more sophisticated analytical set of tools' (Pauwels, 2012: 6). Such existing tools and methods cited by Pauwels include content analysis, social semiotics, iconology, ethnomethodology, and rhetoric. Thus, the study's second research question is interested in the degree to which various methods are deployed in visual communication research. It asks:

RQ2: Which methods and means do the authors of scholarship published in *Visual Communication Quarterly* and *Visual Communication* use to advance their arguments and drive their enquiries?

Defining the visual. Another challenge to the field is defining what the visual is. In order to begin this discussion, this study draws on Müller's (2007) definition of the visual communication field, which she operationalises as 'an expanding subfield of communication science that uses social scientific methods to explain the production, distribution, and reception processes, but also the meanings of mass-mediated visuals in contemporary social, cultural, economic and political contexts' (7). Müller herself acknowledges that the historic focus on mass-mediated visuals is, perhaps, giving way to a greater focus on interpersonal communication, which requires a slight tweaking of this definition.

Still, the production, distribution, and reception of visuals is quite broad and some scholars have noted that certain types of visuals and technologies have received the lion's share of attention. Specifically, Elkins (2003) critiqued the field as being too narrow in its objects of study and Emmison and Smith called in 2000 for visual research to move beyond 'the image and towards the seen' (107). This was a call that was repeated by Hinthorne and Reeves in 2015, even though scholars like Pauwels (2012) claimed earlier that 'camera-based representations and techniques (both static and moving images) ... have lost the[ir] almost exclusive position' in visual communication research (254). So how have *VC* and *VCQ* responded to these challenges and to defining the visual? Have image-based approaches give way to sight and to other more diverse ways of visual communicating? In the words of Pauwels (2012), 'Advancing the field of visual research will first and foremost require a better understanding of the visual' (249). As such, the study's third research question asks:

RQ3: Which visuals are reflected in the scholarship published in *Visual Communication Quarterly* and *Visual Communication*?

Aims and foci. Sometimes a particular technology or type of visual is the focus of study and, other times, the aims or focus of an article is distinct from the technology or type of visual it studies. For example, Barnhurst and colleagues (2004) in their five-year review identified the streams of visual rhetoric, visual pragmatics, and visual semantics as dominating the visual communication literature. While not using systematic methods, scholars like Schill (2012) and Ruby (2005) have also adopted macro perspectives in trying to make sense of the visual in political communication and the visual aspects of anthropology, respectively.

At a more micro level, what aims and foci do authors publishing in *VCQ* and *VC* adopt? Do they focus on the animate or the inanimate? On individuals ? Groups? Identities and attributes? Processes? Events? The fourth and final research question seeks to find out and asks:

RQ4: In terms of focus and aims, what does the scholarship published in *Visual Communication Quarterly* and *Visual Communication* encompass?

Answering these questions and wrestling with their implications can allow these journals to prioritise future directions and approaches of research and for the authors publishing in them to advocate for institutional contexts that are supportive of and reward these ambitions.

Methods

Data collection began in May 2020 and consisted of gathering the following details for each article published in *Visual Communication Quarterly* from 1994 (the year of its founding) to the end of 2019 (a period of 25 years): publication year, publication issue, article title,

geographic focus (if one was explicitly mentioned), whether the article was empirical, the research method or methods used to advance the authors' arguments, the visual or visuals under consideration, the article's aims and focus, the academic field it most closely aligns to, and the number of views and citations accrued. This same information was then also gathered from *Visual Communication* for all the articles published from 2002 (the year of the journal's founding) to the end of 2019 (a period of 17 years). The only exception was the article view and citation information, since the publisher of *Visual Communication* only makes these data available from 2016 and so equal comparison between the two was determined not to be possible.

The study used a census-based sampling procedure in that it included and analysed each research article published in both journals over these time periods. Commentaries, editorials, book reviews, reflections on practice, portfolios/visual essays³, and other miscellany were not included in the data collection or subsequent analysis. Though *Visual Communication Quarterly* had been publishing for eight years longer than *Visual Communication*, the overall number of articles from both journals was similar (266 for *VCQ* and 276 for *VC*, with 542 articles, overall). After all 542 articles had been viewed and the above details had been gathered, the cleaning, organising, and analysing process began, which is detailed below.

First, the raw data were compiled in Excel and grouped by the categories named above. This first stage of the data analysis process involved organising and preparing the data for further analysis. It was followed by a close reading of all the variables within individual cells and then by an open coding process using a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). At this stage, categories (such as whether a study focused on a single country or more than one country and which region or regions it included) emerged from the data and were added to new columns to enable sorting and a clearer understanding of patterns and trends (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). These themes were then subjected to an axial coding process where claims by other scholars about the boundaries and attributes of the field could be empirically assessed. Lastly, the results were sorted in descending order and copied into new tables (one for *VCQ*, one for *VC*, and one for cross-journal comparisons).

Findings

Questions of geography will be addressed first in the findings and will be followed by questions of method and approach, an exploration of the visuals under consideration, and then finally an exploration of the articles' aims and foci.

³ Given certain definitions that conceptualise research broadly as the 'creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings' (Australian Research Council, 2015), it is acknowledged that portfolios and visual essays can be classified as research. However, due to the structural differences between them and traditional research articles, the low proportion of portfolios/visual essays to traditional research articles, and word count considerations, it was decided to focus for this study only on traditional research articles.

Geographic focus and context (RQ1)

Both journals published a roughly equal proportion of articles with a multi-country focus (9 and 11 percent, respectively, for *VCQ* and *VC*). However, *VCQ* published about 20 percent more articles with a single-country focus compared to *VC*. Conversely, *VC* published about 20 percent more articles than did *VCQ* where the geographic focus was not reported at all or, in about 3 percent of cases, wasn't applicable, such as is the case with certain articles focused on online environments where geographic boundaries can potentially be transcended.

That the lion's share of articles dealt with only a single country is likely a testament, in part, to the journals' relatively conservative maximum word counts. *VCQ*, for example, started out with articles of no more than 2,000 words (the current limit has since, however, increased to no more than 8,000 words) while *VC* accepts a slightly more conservative maximum of 7,000 words. Relevant, too, are workload and institutional recognition considerations where the number of research outputs and where they're published is often more valued than the nuance and depth of the research contained within them. Whether an article focus on a single or multiple countries is no indicator in and of itself of quality; however, due to the resources, broadly defined, required in synthesising data sets across multiple countries and comparing findings in disparate contexts, if the field values this comparative work, it will require a rethinking of how research is communicated (in terms of practical constraints like word counts) but also in broader, institutional terms like how research is evaluated and rewarded.

Curious, too, is the relatively high percentage (22 percent) of articles with no geographic focus specified. This makes sense for the minority of articles that dealt with online phenomena where geography isn't necessarily such an important consideration; however, for the remaining 19 percent of articles, grounding them explicitly to a specific geographic (or cultural) context would seem important.

Country-by-country findings

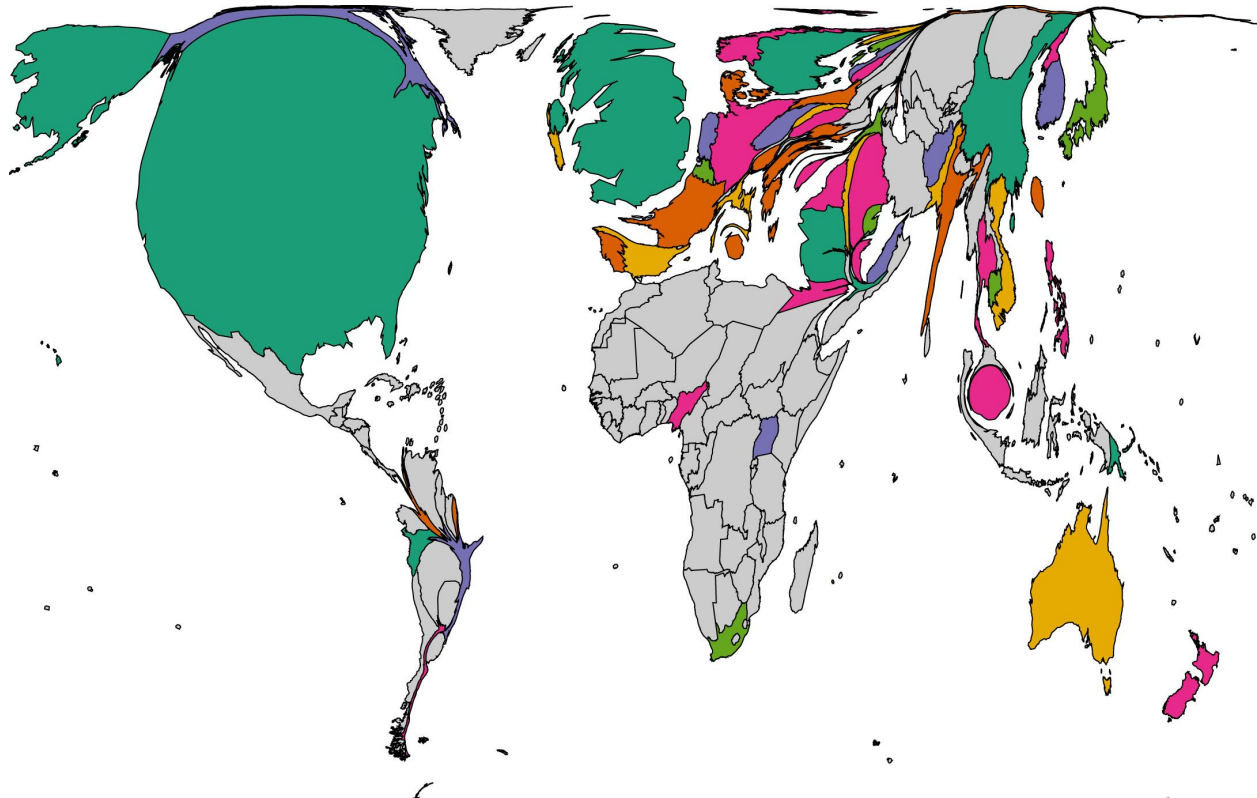
Excluding articles that failed to specify a particular geographic focus, more than two-thirds of all articles published in *VCQ* focused on the U.S., either exclusively (in 71.2 percent of cases) or as part of a multi-country study (in 5.4 percent of cases), for a total of 76.7 percent. The next most-studied country was the UK with 2.4 percent (1 percent focusing exclusively on the UK and 1.4 percent examining the UK comparatively with other countries). In all, *VCQ* published studies on 35 countries or regions.

VC published 214 articles that specified a particular geographic focus. Of these, and similarly to *VCQ*, the most focussed on countries in *VC* were also, in this order, the USA (with 19.1 percent of all countries) and the UK (with 15.4 percent of all countries). Australia came in third with 8.8 percent. In all, *VC* published studies on 58 countries or regions, about 40 percent more than did *VCQ*.

The results indicate that, despite being international in name, both journals, to varying degrees, can further diversify the scholarship they publish related to different geographic contexts. When examining in visual form the output of both journals in terms of geography (see figure 1), it becomes apparent that scholarship focussed on the global north has dominated both

publications. With the exception of Australia, the global south has received markedly less attention.

Figure 1.



Scholarship published by national focus.

When examining the geographic diversity of both journals' scholarship, it becomes apparent in this cartogram⁴ that such scholarship has historically privileged the global north and, with the exception of Australia, has largely neglected the global south. (The cartogram was made using an algorithm developed by Gastner, Seguy, and More, 2018. The algorithm renders countries without data [in this case, those that didn't receive research attention] in grey. It renders countries with data [in this case, those that did receive research attention] in colour so that every country has a colour that is different from the colours of its neighbours. It attempts to allocate colours so there is roughly the same area covered by each colour and so there is roughly the same distance between countries with the same colour. There is no other meaning behind the colours; The proportion of scholarship centred on any one country is instead illustrated by its relative size.)

⁴ The cartogram algorithm only accommodated data for individual countries so, in a minority of cases ($n=10$, 1.7 percent), articles that specified regions—including the Caribbean (with one instance), Europe (with four instances), the Persian Gulf (1 instance), Scandinavia (with two instances), Silesia (with 1 instance), and the Soviet Union (with 1 instance)—could not be represented in this visualisation.

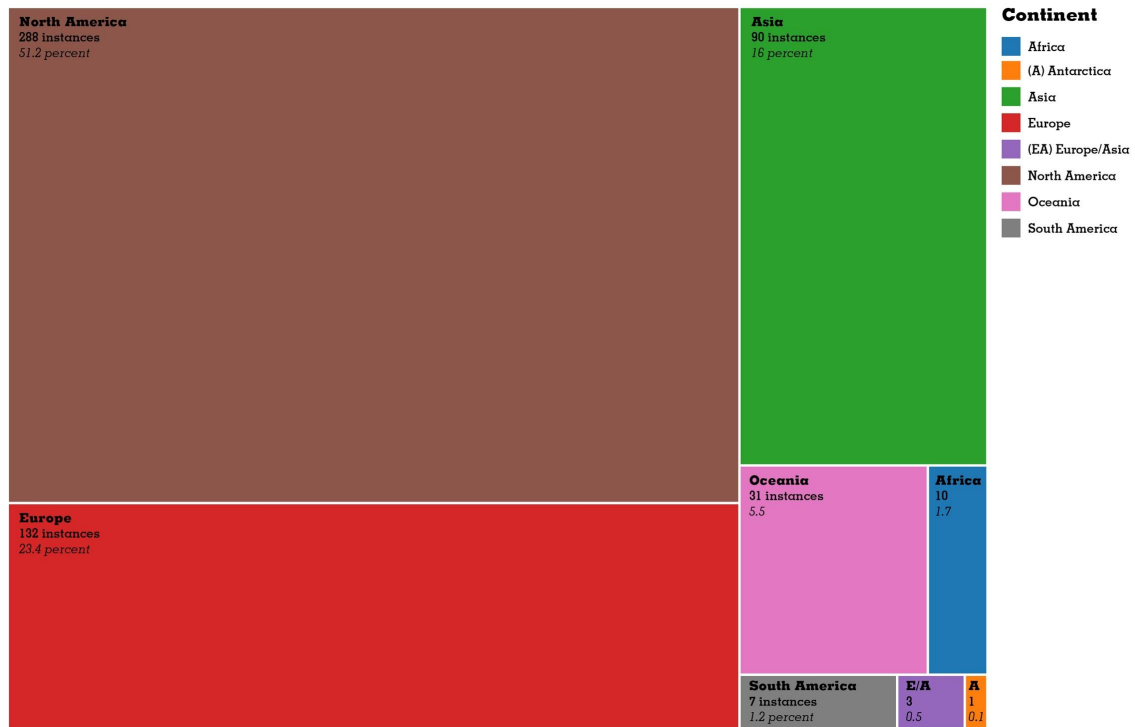
In the case of *VCQ*, that all seven of its editors-in-chief so far have been based in the States has had an impact on the geographic focus of the scholarship the journal publishes. In contrast, *VC* began with editors-in-chief in two countries and has continued that tradition, which seems to have had a positive effect on the geographical diversity of the scholarship it publishes.

Region-by-region findings

Countries were grouped into continents using the World Factbook classifications. This bias for scholarship focussed on the USA and the UK continued at the macro, continent/region level, too. About 52 percent of all scholarship published in *VCQ* and *VC* focused on North America, 23.4 percent focused on Europe, 16 percent focused on Asia, 5.5 percent focused on Oceania, 1.7 percent focused on Africa, 1.2 percent focused on South America, .5 percent focused on countries located in both Europe and Asia, and .1 percent focused on Antarctica. Raw totals along with these percentages can be found in Figure 2. Thus, Müller's (2007) claim that scholarship in South America has been largely invisible is sadly, still true. The same can be said for Africa though the rising percentage of scholarship focussed on Asian contexts is promising.

It is neither ideal nor sufficient to stock-take once every 25 years. By standardising innovations from some journals' submission interfaces more widely, relevant details about the geographic nature of the field's scholarship can be collected and publicised to promote accountability and guide the field's future development.

Figure 2.



Scholarship distribution by geographic region (combined totals for VCQ and VC).

Methods and means (RQ2)

Exploring the diversity of methods in the visual communication studies field holds merit, as does ascertaining the degree to which those in the discipline rely on certain methods and which ones are more likely to stand alone versus be used in combination with others.

Results from VCQ.

Regarding VCQ, scholars published in it 266 articles using 13 separate methods, either alone ($n=234$, 87.9%) or as part of multi-method studies ($n=32$, 11.6 percent). These 13 methods had been used a total of 304 times among the 266 articles. Complete information about frequency and diversity of methods can be found in table one.

Most popular among the approaches used by those publishing in VCQ was the essay with 72 instances (23.6 percent of the sample). These articles lacked a defined methodology and mused about their topics in a non-empirical fashion. The remaining 76.4 percent of the sample was empirical and featured, in descending order, content analyses (15.4 percent of the sample), textual analyses (13.8 percent of the sample), interviews (13.1 percent of the sample), surveys (11.1 percent of the sample), experiments (10.8 percent of the sample), discourse analyses (3.2 percent of the sample), observations (3.2 percent of the sample), historical

methods (2.9 percent of the sample), articles that proposed the development of a new or altered research method (0.6 percent of the sample), meta-analyses (0.6 percent of the sample), Q-Methodology (0.6 percent of the sample), and structural equation modeling (0.09 percent of the sample). Interestingly, observations were the only non-standalone method; they were always paired with one or more other methods as part of a multi-method approach, in contrast to the other 12 approaches which either stood alone or were used in concert with other methods.

Of the articles that used empirical methods, 61.8 percent were used to study media texts, broadly defined, and these included the content analyses, textual analyses, discourse analyses, historical methods, meta-analyses, and the structural equation modeling study. The remaining 38.2 percent collected data from people and included the interviews, surveys, experiments, observations, and the Q-Method studies. Of the articles published in VCQ that used empirical methods, 62.61 used qualitative approaches and the remaining 37.39 percent of them used quantitative approaches.

Results for VC.

Regarding VC, scholars published in it 276 articles VC using 23 separate methods, either alone ($n=253$, 91.6%) or as part of multi-method studies ($n=23$, 8.3 percent). These 23 methods had been used a total of 301 times among the 276 articles. About 89 percent of these were empirical and about 11 percent were non-empirical.

Most popular among the approaches used by those publishing in VC was discourse analyses and its variants, such as multimodal discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, with 96 instances (31.8 percent of the sample). The remaining 68.2 percent of the sample featured, in descending order, textual analyses (17.6 percent of the sample); non-empirical essays (10.9 percent of the sample); interviews (7.9 percent of the sample); articles focused on proposing a new or altered research methodology (6.9 percent); experiments (4.9 percent); content analyses (3.3 percent); observations⁵ (3.3 percent); historical approaches (2.3 percent); case studies (1.9 percent); surveys (1.6 percent); autoethnographic approaches (1.6 percent); photo voice approaches (1.3 percent); conversation analyses (.6 percent); and articles that proposed an industry focused, applied methodology (.6 percent). The remaining eight methods were each used once each and each occupied .03 percent of the sample. They are, in alphabetical order, corpus linguistic methodology, ethnomethodology, focus groups, fractal-concept analysis, meta-analysis, nexus analysis, participatory methods (mapping and 3D model building), and the Q-Method.

Of the articles that used empirical methods, 65.15 percent were used to study media texts, broadly defined, and these included, among others, the discourse analyses, textual analyses; content analyses, historical approaches, and case studies. The remaining 34.85 percent collected data from people and included the interviews, experiments, observations, surveys, autoethnographic approaches, photo voice approaches, participatory methods, and the focus group and Q-Method. Of the articles published in VC that used empirical methods, 89.51 used qualitative approaches and the remaining 10.49 percent of them used quantitative approaches.

⁵ Here, too, like with VCQ, observations were the only methods not used in a stand-alone fashion.

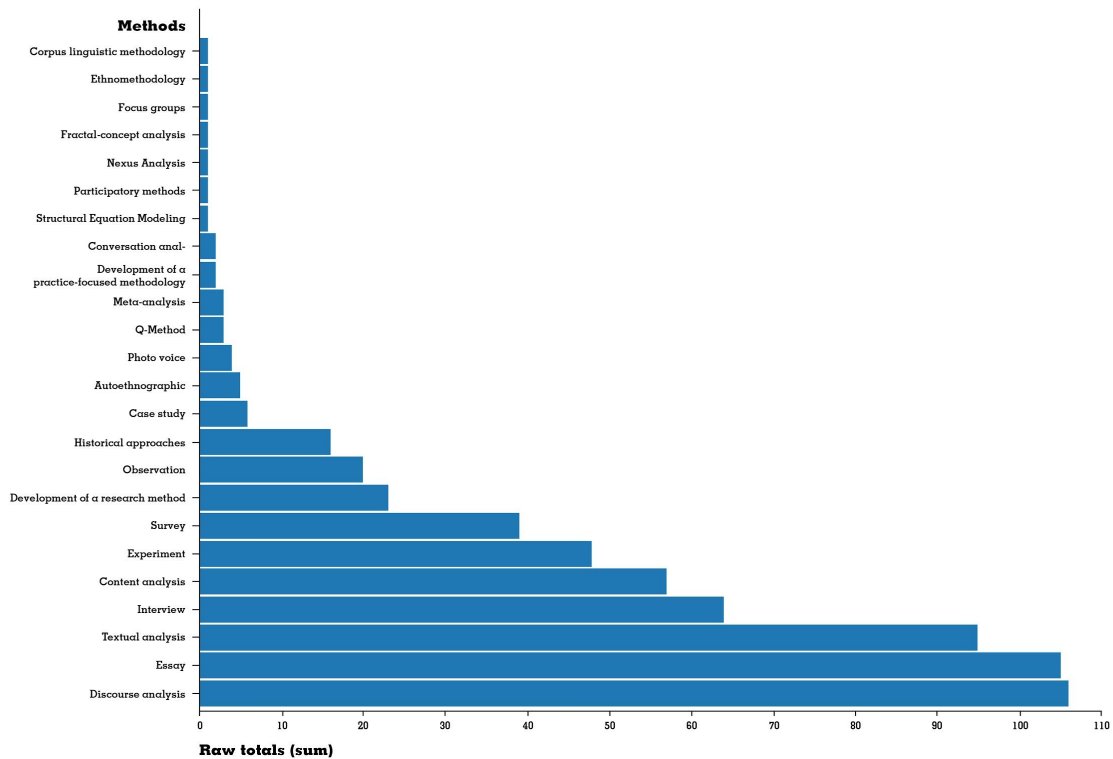
While, in theory, a single-method study can lend rich insight into a topic and a multi-method study can provide only shallow insight about various facets of the same topic, arguably if the same phenomenon is examined from different perspectives (ie, with different approaches) one's findings and understandings will be different and potentially richer. Those who study and publish in the field of visual communication might rightly ponder, however, whether the additional work, resources, skills, and time required to conduct multi-method analyses is worth it when institutions weight those equally to single-method studies.

Likewise, they might wonder if the extra effort, messiness, and complexity of collecting data from people as opposed to merely studying media texts is worthwhile. However, when we consider that the media texts are the product of a wide-ranging set of variables that include everything from the environment to the attributes of the creator and more, it hopefully becomes clear that not only outputs (media texts) but also the production process and the social actors involved in that process must also be examined and analysed in order to work toward a fuller understanding of visual communication and to enrich the scholarly pursuit of its study.

Cross-journal results

When looking across both journals (see figure 3), discourse analysis was the most popular empirical method with 17.5 percent of all published research. This was followed by, in descending order, textual analysis (15.7 percent), content analysis (9.4 percent), experiments (7.9 percent), surveys (6.4 percent), articles proposing new or altered research methods (3.8 percent), observations (3.3 percent), and historical approaches (2.6 percent). The remaining 14 methods had fewer than 10 instances each and comprised fewer than 1 percent of the sample.

Figure 3.



Cross-journal scholarship distribution by method.

For the articles that combined methods together, the most popular combination was interviews and textual/content/discourse analysis with nearly a third (30.4 percent) of all instances. In descending order of popularity was combining observations and interviews (17.3 percent of the sample); combining observations, interviews, and textual/content/discourse analyses (13 percent of the sample); combining textual/content/discourse analysis and surveys (8.6 percent of the sample); combining observations and textual/content/discourse analysis (6.5 percent of the sample); combining interviews and surveys (4.3 percent of the sample); combining experiments and surveys (4.3 percent of the sample); combining eye tracking and interviews (4.3 percent of the sample); combining surveys, textual/content/discourse analyses, and interviews (2.1 percent of the sample); combining Q-Methods and interviews (2.1 percent of the sample); combining eye tracking and surveys (2.1 percent of the sample); combining eye tracking and textual/content/discourse analyses (2.1 percent of the sample); and combining Q-Method, interviews, and textual/content/discourse analyses (2.1 percent of the sample).

Relatively few of the articles attempted to measure the dynamics of audience reception processes through psychophysiological approaches. Eleven articles (about 2 percent) used eye-tracking approaches (n=6 for VC and n=5 for VCQ). One of these articles also used data from a past study that included psychophysiological reaction measurement through facial electromyography, heart rate, and electrodermal activity measurement.

Overall, less than half of the scholarship published in *VCQ* and *VC* examined production processes or social actors involved in such processes. Roughly one-third (32.1 percent) did so. In contrast, more dominant were studies that examined outputs only without consideration of forces that shaped their production or influenced their reception. Such studies occupied the remaining 67.9 percent of the results.

Thus, Müller's (2007) claim that content analysis, experiments, and surveys dominated the research methods within the visual communication field holds true to these two journals, although a growing number of methods are being used or proposed, albeit at low levels, which is a sign of the field's evolution.

Visual under consideration (RQ3)

As explicitly acknowledged by both publications, visual communication can manifest itself in a dizzying array of forms, modes, and contexts. While, in theory, visual communication can span the gamut from the physical to the intangible, from the permanent to the ephemeral, to the static to the dynamic, and from the commercial to the educational and beyond, in practice, certain forms, modes, and purposes have been studied in greater detail than others. The following two sections explore which visual or visuals scholars who publish in visual communication journals have considered in their articles and the aims and foci of those articles. Findings from *VCQ* will be presented first and will be followed by findings from *VC* and aggregate, cross-journal findings.

Results from *VCQ*.

About 9 percent ($n=24$) of the articles published in *VCQ* examined multiple types of visual communication, such as one study that explored American depictions of China through examining photographs, maps, and editorial cartoons in news magazines. The remaining 91 percent ($n=242$) of articles examined only one type of visual communication, such as one that explored photo lineups of crime suspects or another that examined videos produced by CNN.

A bit more than half ($n=155$, 51.3 percent) of all articles published in *VCQ* selected photography as the visual under consideration. Coming in a distant second with 6.6 percent of the sample was television, and was followed by film (with 4.9 percent), graphs and graphics (3.9 percent), advertisements (with 3.3 percent), editorial cartoons (with 2.9 percent), newspaper design (with 2.9 percent), illustrations (with 2.3 percent), logos and symbols (with 1.9 percent), websites and blogs (with 1.9 percent), other print publications (with 1.6 percent), non-cinema video (with 1.6 percent), typography (with 1.3 percent), performance (with 0.9 percent), posters and placards (with 0.9 percent), sight/seeing (with 0.9 percent), higher education curriculum related to visual communication (0.6 percent), design (with 0.6 percent), exhibitions (with 0.6 percent), headlines (with 0.6 percent), maps (with 0.6 percent), and 20 other visuals with only one instance each. These included: architecture, newspaper digital photo archives, billboards, body image, cave art, costumes, graffiti, memes, a mobile app (Yelp's 'Monocle' one), a monument, newsreel cartoons, newsreels, orphan works, paintings, profile images on Facebook, a quilt, digital screens of various sizes, sculptures, stencil images, and the visual

representation of three-dimensional, trademarked objects. Full information on the visuals under consideration aspect can be found in table two.

Results from VC.

About 9 percent ($n=25$) of the articles published in VC examined multiple types of visual communication, such as one study that explored architecture, film, and photography related to the Berlin Wall. The remaining 91 percent ($n=251$) of articles examined only one type of visual communication, such as one that explored the formatting of CVs.

Like VCQ, the most popular visual under consideration was photographs; however, the percentage allocated to this medium was considerably lower at 17.4 ($n=54$). In second place was video (with 9.3 percent), and was followed by drawings and illustrations (with 7.4 percent), places, such as a concert hall, a gym, and a garden (with 4.5 percent), advertisements (with 4.2 percent), television (with 4.2 percent), graphic and interior design (with 3.8 percent), books (with 3.5 percent), cartoons and comics (with 3.5 percent), websites (with 3.5 percent), films (with 3.2 percent), artworks and exhibitions (with 2.5 percent), documents (with 2.5 percent), computer-generated images, including GIFs, image macros, and renderings and simulations (with 2.9 percent), animations (with 1.9 percent), objects (with 1.9 percent), posters (with 1.9 percent), paintings (with 1.6 percent), bodies, including the body itself, tattoos, and hairstyles (with 1.2 percent), wearable devices (with 1.2 percent), diagrams and charts (with 1.2 percent), magazines (with 1.2 percent), screens (with 1.2 percent), sculpture and statuary (with 1.2 percent), software (with 1.2 percent), graffiti (with 0.9 percent), maps (with 0.9 percent), packaging (with 0.9 percent), signs (with 0.9 percent), architecture (with 0.6 percent), clothing and fabric (with 0.6 percent), logos (with 0.6 percent), newspapers (with 0.6 percent), profile pictures and avatars (with 0.6 percent), and typography (with 0.6 percent). The remaining 8 visuals, with one instance each, included an event, flags, interaction among five boys, song lyrics, gestures, a theatre performance, restaurant reviews, and robots.

Cross-journal results.

Even when the results from VCQ and VC were merged and when the data were examined in aggregate (see figure 4), photography still was king with about a third (34.2 percent) of the studies focusing on it. Full results can be seen in Table 4; however, the top five visuals were photographs (34.2 percent), non-cinema video (5.5 percent), television (5.4 percent), drawings and illustrations (5 percent), and film (4.2 percent). Even if all the moving image categories (animation, film, television, and non-cinema/TV video) were combined, they would still total less than half (16.2 percent) of the still photography's 34.2 percent.

Figure 4. Visuals under consideration



The top 18 visuals under consideration for scholarship published in VCQ and VC. This visualisation only includes visuals with 1 percent or greater share.

These findings question past claims that ‘camera-based representations and techniques (both static and moving images) ... have lost the[ir] almost exclusive position’ in visual communication research (Pauwels, 2012), at least within these two journals.

Focus and aims (RQ4)

This study has so far examined the internationalization, methods, and visuals present in 25 years of VCQ articles and 17 years of VC ones. However, the visuals that are considered in each article might not necessarily also be the focus of the article itself. For example, one of the articles in the sample, ‘A Picture’s worth 8,500,000 people: American News Pictures As Symbols of China’ uses photographs (published in *Time* and *Newsweek*) to explore American representations of China. Here, the representation of China is at the heart of the article’s purpose but such a purpose isn’t revealed by merely looking at the visuals (in this case, photos) that informed the analysis. As such, it’s also necessary not only to examine the visuals considered but also to examine the aim or focus of the article (which might be closely aligned to the visual[s] used to support the argument or might be significantly different).

Beyond the word 'visual' in the graphic's core, the words 'news' and 'images' follow in secondary importance. This journalism- and photo-centric perspective is perhaps not surprising since, for its first 11 years, *VCQ* was affiliated with a professional visual journalism association and was distributed to these professionals alongside its academic membership. In addition, five of the journal's seven editors-in-chief so far were former journalists or photojournalists themselves, which seems to have had an effect on the types of articles that were submitted and/or accepted for publication.

In examining *VCQ*'s word cloud (see Figure 5) further, it becomes apparent that fewer than a dozen people-related words are present. These include 1) president, 2) photojournalists', 3) body, 4) editor, 5) public, 6) women, 7) readers, 8) press, 9) professional, and 10) self. Only three references to cultures and places (American, Chinese, and world) appear in *VCQ*'s word cloud. Nineteen communication channels, including cartoons, graphics, pages, pictures, television, etc., also appear in *VCQ*'s word cloud.

The manual analysis revealed that people-focussed articles were the most published within *VCQ* with 134 instances (50.3 percent of the sample). Within this umbrella category were articles that focused on people with a specific occupation (such as web designers, photographers, and professors) in 54 instances; students with 31 instances; ordinary individuals without any specific inclusion criteria with 20 instances; specific, named individuals (eg, Richard Avedon or Dickey Chapelle) with 18 instances; and people with non-occupation-related inclusion criteria, such as survivors of a natural disaster, with 11 instances.

Relevant to note here is that 31 of the 134 articles (23.1 percent) that focussed on people used a convenience sample of students. Additionally, two-thirds ($n=22$) of all experiments published in *VCQ* ($n=33$) were also accomplished through a convenience student sample. This was true even when the student demographic wasn't specifically being targeted. For example, multiple articles that were positioned in the audience studies field and tried to explore phenomena like reader recall, viewer evaluation, emotional response, and memory, used a convenience student sample and inappropriately tried to generalize these back to a broader audience or population.

Following on from people-focussed articles were, in second place, articles that explored media texts. These accounted for 38.3 percent of the sample. An indication of which types of media texts can be obtained by viewing Table two, which provides in more detail an overview of the visuals under consideration. Next, in a three-way tie, were the categories of event, organisation, and process, each with nine instances (3.3 percent each or 9.9 percent, overall). Sixth and final were articles (1.1 percent) that dealt with non-media objects. Full results for article aims and foci can be found in Table three.

texts can be obtained by viewing Table Four, which provides in more detail an overview of the visuals under consideration. The media text category included the study of attributes, such as colour, within mediated depictions, such as in advertisements, in addition to studies that focused on the media text in a more holistic fashion.

Following on from media text-focused articles were, in second place, articles that explored people. These accounted for 17 percent of the sample. Within this umbrella category were articles ($n=16$) that focused on people with non-occupation-related inclusion criteria (eg, people above a certain age, people who played video games, people with a criminal history, people who are homeowners, etc); students ($n=15$); people with a specific occupation ($n=11$), such as NGO employees, painters, designers, etc); and ordinary individuals without any specific inclusion criteria ($n=5$). Unlike VCQ, which focused on specific, named individuals in 13.4 percent of its people-centered articles, VC did not study any solitary individuals and instead relegated itself to the study of people groups.

Like was done with VCQ, the proportion of the articles published in VC that relied on a convenience student sample was also noted. Here, 31.9 percent of the people-focused articles used students as the participants and, of these, 80 percent used convenience samples of students when the article's focus wasn't specifically on education or students, in particular.

Next, in third place were articles ($n=20$) that focused on objects. This was followed by articles ($n=16$) that focused on processes, articles ($n=14$) that focused on places, and an article that focused on an event.

overstating of claims when one theorizes one type of image as representing images, more broadly, as a category.

The manual analysis revealed that, while the two journals are almost exactly similar in terms of name, the focus of their scholarship published did meaningfully differ in terms of its analytical focus. While *VCQ* was dominated by people-focussed articles (50.3 percent) and, to a lesser extent, media-text-focussed ones (38.3 percent), with *VC*, it was the opposite. Media texts-focussed research occupied the lion's share of the scholarship (64.4 percent) while people-focussed scholarship came in at a distant second with 17 percent of the articles.

When looked at in the aggregate, media texts were the most popular object of inquiry, overall, between both journals, with 51.6 percent of all articles centred on them. Coming in at second place were articles focused on people (with 33.3 percent of the sample), processes⁶ (with 4.6 percent of the sample), objects (with 4.2 percent of the sample), places (with 2.5 percent of the sample), events (with 1.8 percent of the sample), and organisations (with 1.6 percent of the sample). Research on the reception of visuals was low, overall. Only about 10.5 percent of articles published in *VCQ* and *VC* focused on this topic. This can indicate a preference among scholars publishing in these journals to privilege the development of conceptual or theoretical research, potentially at the expense of applied or industry focussed research.

Conclusions and implications

This study provides an in-depth examination of geographic diversity, diversity of methods, and diversity in how visuals are conceptualised within two journals over a 25-year period. It also explores who or what was the focus of the articles by exploring article titles, initially, and then manually examining the full-text versions of the articles. Examining these variables is important to ensure that scholarship is equitable across geographic boundaries, to assess the health and maturity of a field by using as a proxy the diversity of methods present in these two journals over an extended period, and to evaluate how the visual has historically been conceptualised in these journals.

The study's ability to evaluate what each journal has contributed to scholarship and the influence they have had on the field is limited. Future studies could more specifically focus on aspects of significance and quality, such as citations⁷ and the disciplinary fields and traditions these journals contribute to, in order to highlight these aspects.

When looking across the breadth and depth of geographies, methods, visuals, and aims that *VCQ* and *VC* consider, several aspects become apparent. These will be discussed in terms of recommendations and suggestions for where these journals can further evolve in the next 25 years and beyond.

⁶ The 'processes' category included articles that mapped the progression of a phenomenon by time, style, or development. One such example from *VC* is a 2014 study by Ariel Chen and David Machin that traced how a Chinese women's magazine visually evolved over a 17-year period. Another from *VCQ* is a 2009 piece by Ann Marie Barry that focusses on mirror neurons and 'how we are affected by visual culture, why and how we imitate media, and ultimately, how we become what we see' (79).

⁷ As mentioned in the methods section, views and citation figures were collected for all *VCQ* articles; however, a cross-journal comparison was not possible since the publisher of *VC* only made these data available from 2016.

Geographical implications and considerations

Like many international organisations, *VCQ* and *VC* risk being international in name only if the scholarship they publish continues to focus only on a few privileged geographies. That more than half of all scholarship published in these journals focuses on a single continent (North America) and, collectively, the top two continents (North American and Europe) together account for 75 percent of all published scholarship, is troubling, as the remaining quarter of the scholarship is split unevenly among an additional five continents.

Diversifying editorial boards is a start but can only go so far in improving the geographical distribution of a journal's scholarship. Appointing editors working in different countries seems to be more successful, as *VC*, with its editors-in-chief spread across multiple countries, did publish a more geographically diverse range of scholarship compared to its sister publication, *VCQ*, which has only ever had editors-in-chief from one country.

Being able to track and publicise the proportion of scholarship focussed on certain geographies should also become a routine component of the submission and publication progress. For example, the peer-reviewed submission process could easily be updated to include additional details about the research itself beyond the data collected about the author(s). Such data could include geographic focus (if relevant) and could also be regularly reported (if not displayed live in an auto-updating counter) for accountability and transparency purposes. In this way, the editors and authors alike would be able to take stock of where the journal has been in terms of geographic focus, historically, and where further attention is needed in the future.

Necessary, too, is a discussion of language barriers and their influence on a journal's internationalisation ambitions. Peer reviewers are subject matter experts but not necessarily cross-culturally trained or sensitive. As such, journals could develop a set of reviewer best practices that include, among other aspects, guidance on how to assess submissions from non-native English speakers. Another, though admittedly resource-intensive and logistically challenging option, is to introduce a system whereby quality scholarship in languages other than English and that are relevant to a journal's aims could be translated and subsequently published.

Other tools and approaches that could further increase these journals' geographic diversity include special issues dedicated to particular regions or, even more ambitiously, one or more new journals that are explicitly tied to an under-represented region. An example of such a journal is *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, which aims to publish research 'that contribute[s] to journalism theory development and offer[s] innovative ideas in improving the standard and currency of media reportage, teaching and training specific to the Asia Pacific region'. Establishing another journal like *APME* for visual communication in an under-represented region signals to that region and to the field, at large, that geographic diversity is important and can provide a space for the growth and development of the field in that area, which can have a flow-on effect to the diversity of members in international organisations, like ICA or AEJMC, which can improve those organisations as a whole. Establishing journals in under-represented regions can likely also contribute to the development and adoption of new methods and approaches for studying visual phenomena that haven't evolved in the tradition of Western thought. This is explored more fully in the next section.

Methods

Authors publishing in these two journals, overall, relied on a relatively narrow and traditional band of social scientific methods. Close to half (47 percent) of the research published in *VCQ* and *VC* has used methods that allow an exploration of content (whether it be spoken or written discourse, photographic images, or other media texts). Additionally, a relatively high percentage (17.3) of articles were not empirical. There can be utility gained from non-empirical work but, since other venues, both within the journals and beyond them, exist for this, that this percentage was so high is surprising (recalling that only articles labeled as 'research' were analysed and that commentaries, reflections on practice, and other miscellany were not).

Those in the field conducting research—as well as those reviewing it and deciding whether it's worthy of publication—must take care to not over-rely on and to avoid, if possible, convenience samples, in general, and those afforded by academics' ready access to students, in particular. The issue arises when an article presents an explicit aim like trying to explore 'How audiences perceive press photography' but, in actuality, doesn't deliver on exploring audiences writ large (as generalizable entities) but, rather, how 29 undergraduate students enrolled at a specific institution do. While there can be definite value obtained by looking at a particular cross-section of society, such as people attending university, this focus needs to be made explicit throughout the article and researchers should be careful of overgeneralizing their results through generic references to broad categories (ie, audiences in the above example).

If authors publishing in these journals desire to raise the proportion of articles (3.8 percent) that progress the development of research methods⁸, we might well be served by having an exclusive category dedicated to the submission, review, and publication of such works. This visibility signals that research method development is a priority for the journal (as well as the field) and also is an indicator of a field's health, growth, and maturity. If we broaden the ways we approach visual communication research, it can allow us to broaden how we define and understand the visual itself, fulfilling the call by scholars such as Pauwels (2019) to interrogate the boundaries and frontiers of visual research.

Visuals and aims

Because authors publishing in these journals relied on a relatively narrow set of research methods, the ability to conceptualize visual communication in diverse ways and to explore its nuances is also limited. This has led, for example, to photographs dominating the study of the visual, with more than a third of all research published in *VCQ* and *VC* focussed on this medium. No other medium has, on its own, more than 5.5 percent of the market share.

It has also meant that the study of media texts has dominated these journals' scholarship and the more messy but no-less-important aspects focussed on people have lagged. In addition to this, attention to places/environments, objects, and organisations is also

⁸ One example of a study with innovative methods comes from *VC* in 2015 by Hinhorne and Reeves. The pair argues for visual research that looks beyond images and uses as a case study purpose-built objects as a research tool. Specifically, the pair designed participatory methods that allowed participants to map and build 3D models to 'facilitate discussion of "sustainable development" with farmers in rural Papua New Guinea' (156).

critical if we are to work toward a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the visual world.

Concluding thoughts

The challenges facing VC and VCQ are formidable and chiefly centre around the homogeneity of methods, media, and geographies that are reflected in published scholarship. Yet these challenges aren't insurmountable.

At a basic level, manuscript submission interfaces can be easily configured to collect upon submission data from authors about the methods, media, and geographies, as relevant, that are featured in their manuscripts. These can then be reported live or at publicised intervals to ensure transparency and accountability and to pre-empt manual analyses, such as this one, that seek to map how specific journals are responding to challenges. Similarly, explicitly having dedicated submission categories for innovative theory- or method-building submissions can serve the discipline well as this visibility can signal the field's values and can encourage submissions aligned to these specific goals.

Forming an entirely new journal is no small undertaking yet we can look once more to the past to inform the present. VCQ, for example, formed as the result of an academic association (the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) and the already mentioned *Asia Pacific Media Educator* journal formed as a result of sponsorship by an academic institution (the University of Wollongong in Australia). So can either academic associations, such as the International Communication Association's Visual Communication Studies Division or the International Association for Media and Communication Research's Visual Culture Working Group—both entities without an affiliated journal—or another university in an under-represented part of the world take charge of this opportunity to further diversify the scholarly field as well as their memberships, as well?

If the less ambitious but still meaningful option of dedicating special issues to under-represented regions, methods, or media, is selected, journals will need to ensure that they are online-first so that the pace of scholarship isn't slowed by the backlog that such special issues can otherwise create. Sadly, not all journals are online-first and, as such, the online versions of the scholarship published in them are bottlenecked until the print version is published.

Additionally, and concerning the challenges encountered by traditionally dominant logocentric approaches, some journals are ill-equipped to handle certain types of visual expression, such as 3D models and emoji, and instead of allowing these to be published within the text as interactive elements, require these elements to be rendered into two-dimensional screenshots and relegated to figures that exist outside, rather than within, the narrative flow.

Concerning internationalization, some journals have had success with designing a geographically diverse editorial team structure, which seems to positively affect the geographic diversity of scholarship published in those journals. And academics at individual institutions can collectively lobby for organisational change regarding a more holistic evaluation of what should be valued and rewarded in research outputs and scholarly pursuits. By adopting this institution-by-institution approach, one day, the entire sector can slowly but surely evolve.

The issues of homogenous methods, media, and geographies are multi-faceted but, with collective action, vision, and persistence, they can be addressed in order to work towards a future field that is international, innovative, multi-modal, and representative.

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