Thompson Reuters Visual Verification Workshop

Tokyo, Japan

TaiwanPlus Attendees: Eric Tsai, Jeremy Olivier

Report Written by Eric Tsai

Introduction

TaiwanPlus News sent Eric Tsai and Jeremy Olivier to attend Thompson Reuters' Visual Verification Workshop. Eric is the News Departments Digital Content Lead and assisted with the News Department's Generative AI Guidelines. His team often needs to cut videos using social media content, so being able to check the validity of that content is extremely important. Jeremy is an assignment editor and copy editor. He is trained in fact-checking and having an eye out for detail. After coming back to Taiwan, Eric led a workshop with newsroom staff about what he and Jeremy had learned, along with a quick summary of the lessons. The workshop was conducted entirely in the Reuters Tokyo office and was attended by around 20 people, mainly Japanese media professionals.

About Thompson Reuters Visual Verification Team

The workshop was led by George Sargent, whose official title is Reuters Global Visual Verification and Newsgathering Editor. He started at Reuters in 2013, answering customer requests. He then founded the user-generated content team, whose focus was getting social media images and videos onto the Reuters platform. This was later rebranded as the Visual Verification Team. His team currently consists of 15 people based around the world, working to verify footage related to breaking news stories. Their main objective is to find relevant visual materials footage, check their validity, contact the source for further verification and use permission, and finally to distribute the video on Reuters' newswire platform.

Importance of Visual Verification

Sargent said that in the past, Reuters' "social media person" would often be treated as an afterthought. Now, however, the visual verification team is prominent and often works alongside the intake editor. Sargent noted the importance of visual verification by sharing the first time a doctored video had fooled numerous newsrooms. The video, titled "Snowboarder Girl Chased By Bear" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT_PNKg3v7s), looks realistic with a first glance by the naked eye.

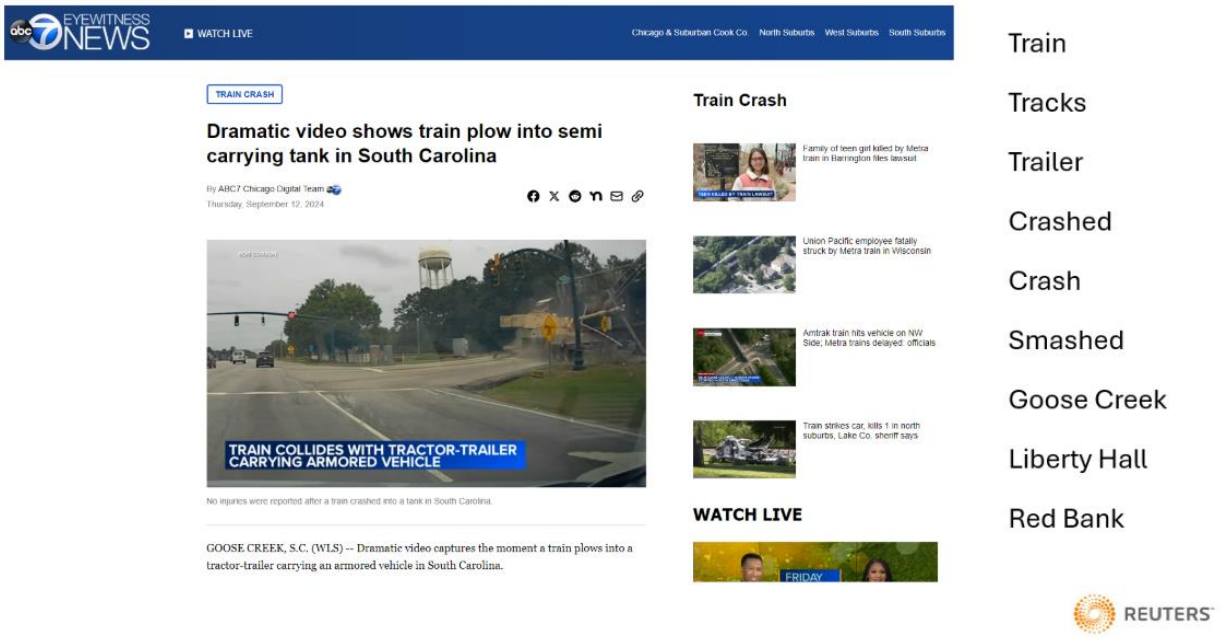
But on closer inspection, Sargent pointed out, there are some obvious issues with the video, including overly clear picture and consistent sound from the bear (whereas it should fade in and out due to the directional mic).

Finding User Generated Content

Sargent advised that when searching for user-generated content, always go with the local language and wording used by locals to refer to events/incidents/places. For example, in the U.S., "hurricane" is typically used to describe the type of weather event known in Taiwan as "typhoon," or 颱風 in Chinese. Machine translation tools like Google Translate are a good option for this, though checking with local sources or people who understand the culture is best. Teams can then check wire services, online articles, or live blogs to harvest keywords such

as street names, location, or names of subjects. They can search these keywords on social media to find content.

As an example, this video (https://abcnews.go.com/US/video/train-slams-18-wheeler-carrying-military-vehicle-south-113645101) was used for this exercise:



X

Certain filters can be used on X to find original video such as “filter: native_video” or “filter: media”.

Instagram

Using keywords such as Goose Creek for location, Instagram also has a function to search for location.

YouTube

MW Geofind is also a good tool for any YouTube video that has location enabled. Since each culture has preferred social media platforms, it’s important to determine which one is used most by the country or area your searching in. For example, in Africa, Facebook is the preferred platform, while Japan prioritizes X, Facebook and YouTube.

For user-generated content, it is essential to find the original source that posted the content, not to use content reposted by news aggregators or content farms. One way to determine whether a post is made by the original source is to look at the account’s upload history. For example, if the account has posted mainly news from the U.S. in the past, then suddenly posts

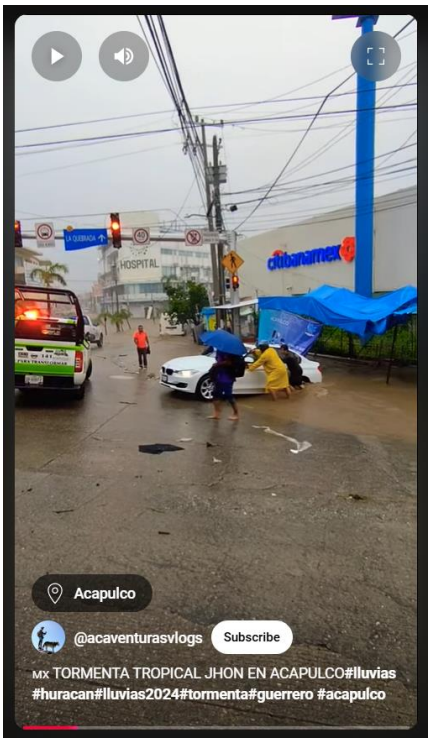
visual content from Japan, it's likely they are not the content's originator. Likewise, if it posts content showing multiple angles of an event, it is more likely to be a content farm.

Live Practice

Sargent used www.windy.com to search for any disaster and found asked us to find user-generated content of Hurricane John. Following the class, the first step was to search for #huracan (hurricane in Spanish.)

I started on Facebook and found Patricio Cortes

I determined the footage was likely first hand post due to the page having family and personal photos and videos. Next, I used YouTube, I found a trove of videos from Acaventuras Vlogs. It seems this is a person that is out looking for footage.



This could a good source and possible to contact him to use as a stringer for additional footage.

Digging Deeper on Sources

To try to develop more sources, it is needed to find more information on specific characters. Sargent did a search for Ryan Routh, Trump's attempted assassin. Searching through tweets to and from Routh, Sargent was able to find Routh's housing project in Hawaii.

We then did an exercise to search for more information on Cristiana Barsony-Arcidiacono, a person of interest in the Lebanon pager bombs incident.

We utilized Google Advanced Search to find her resume, then using it to find her consulting firm BAC. Since the website is down, we used the Wayback Machine to find additional information.

Since I knew BAC was a path that many people would go down, I also found that she had published papers at UNESCO and found her co-authors that we could potentially contact to get more background on Barsony-Arcidiacono.

Process of Acquiring Footage

Once a video is confirmed, the next steps are to reach out to the uploader. The first question is always "did you film this?" If yes, then there will be questions on whether it can be published, how they would be credited and then asking for the original file.

Additional checks could be done once the video is received. Most phones now shoot in 1080p so if there's ever a video in 480, this is likely it was compressed by apps such as WhatsApp. Also checking the metadata to ensure the video shot time and the event aligns. Other metadata such as device type, camera lens, model and GPS coordinates also provide more information on the validity of the video. After the unofficial confirmation, a contract is sent over.

Live Practice

We then went through a series of videos where we had to mark out three distinct markers. Exercises included a Reuters video of a protest at the University of Southern California (we needed to figure out exactly where it is on campus), the Lebanon pager bombs (we needed to find the exact supermarket where one of the pagers exploded), a shelling in Ukraine (needed to find the exact location of the footage) and lastly an airstrike in Crimea.

Generative AI Media

Sargent noted that while Reuters is working on detection tools, there is no tool that can accurately detect generative AI media 100% of the time. Because the technology is so new, any identifiers now may be useless quite quickly. Currently, there are signs such as indecipherable text, blurry faces, skin that is too smooth, weird proportions of appendages or asymmetrical items.

Working with Graphic Content

Sargent ended the workshop by discussing how we can limit our exposure to graphic content. He said to think of it as radioactive, that too much exposure can have serious negative effects. Sargent gave us some tips on how to keep the amount we view to a minimum, including watching it in a small window, watching it on mute, covering clearly graphic parts with our hands, and taking a break after dealing with it.