Executive summary of initial internationalization efforts for the ICA Visual Communication Studies Division

*Prepared by Dr **T. J. Thomson**, International Liaison for the Division*
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OVERVIEW & CONTEXT

Approximately 94 percent of our Division's membership hails from only three continents—North America, Europe, and Asia. Additionally, in the organization's nearly 70-year history, no ICA annual conferences have ever been held in South America or Africa[1].

After gathering these statistics and achieving an understanding of the Division's internationalization progress so far, I contacted on Nov. 5, 2019, the six percent of our members who work in under-represented regions. I did so to see how our Division could best support them and what we might do to increase our presence and benefit to scholars in these regions. I posed to them the following three questions and also invited them to our Division's pre-conference, "Visual Representation and Marginality: Opening New Conversations," to be held in May 2020 at the Gold Coast, Australia:

1. How can our Division best support you? How valuable is an ICA membership to you as a scholar and what could be done to increase its value and make it more attractive to scholars in your region?
2. Can you identify for me any other scholars in your region who study or teach visual communication and who might like to learn more about our Division and our efforts to increase its internationalization?
3. Likewise, are you aware of any communication programs in your region that we should contact to see if we can establish a relationship and/or membership pipeline?

Approximately 35 percent of the scholars I contacted responded to my message. Three wrote responses via email and I chatted with one person face-to-face. Their responses are provided below in de-identified form.

SCHOLAR ONE (ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN SOUTH AMERICA:

"As a Brazilian 'new' PhD (2018), I am in the same situation as many Brazilians recently graduated: no academic job. I am surviving thanks to my 20 years working at creative

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[1] According to an analysis of the data on https://www.icahdq.org/page/PastFuture.

agencies and branding consultancies. So I can be a freelancer and also teach in MBA courses (the disciplines are short, 4 or 5 classes). Most of my colleagues are teaching as instructors, at undergrad courses, private schools: no tenure track, earning money only when they are in class, teaching every day, morning and night classes. They do not make money when they are preparing classes, nor correcting exams. Private universities don't care about research, it is all about teaching – so they can have a lot of student$$$$$. Public Universities are facing hard financial crisis, with less and less money… almost no hiring new professors nor investing in research. Because of that, my friends are not able to become an ICA member. I am a member because I asked for ICA to waive my annual contribution. It is the second year, and it will not be a third one. Everything is very very expansive if you earn in Brazilian money (Reais) but have to pay in dollars. I would suggest that ICA create a special annual membership for Latin America people, that would include the annual conference participation fee. But it has to be really 'unexpensive'. Latin America is facing deep social and economic problems, and without giving financial help, ICA will not have many LATAM members. I am sorry to give you such bad news. I would love to go to Australia in 2020 and access all the Visual Comm DIvision articles, but the cost of the air tickets is prohibitive for me, in my current situation. If you think I can be helpful in any way, please, do contact me!"

SCHOLAR TWO (ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN SOUTH AMERICA:

"I am currently interested in supporting ICA's initiatives in Latin America. I work in Colombia on issues of Visual Communication. I see that the participation of members in this area is small. How could we establish dialogues and work on comparative projects collaboratively? Let me know how I can help you."

SCHOLAR THREE (ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN OCEANIA:

(Summary of face-to-face conversation)

- Pre-conferences are good—they provide continuity of topic and the potential for relationship-building. They also allow more intimacy and the potential for connection compared to a large general conference where delegates are likely attending presentations across many divisions and aren't in one spot all day.
- Good to have an internationalization rep now so we have a face for this issue/point of contact.
- Would like to see meet ups more often than just once per year (at the annual conference). This scholar suggested member-organized events or industry-sponsored ones. For example, she was recently invited to an event at the National University of Singapore, sponsored by WhatsApp, where the platform paid delegates' travel expenses, meals, and accommodation costs. She suggested something like this sponsored by TikTok (a video sharing app) that would bring together industry and scholars.
- She identified a number of people who, while they might not identify as vis comm scholars, are doing work with visual media or visual platforms and suggested I reach

out to and make contact with them. Additionally, she recommended getting in touch with the [Visual Social Media Lab](#) (directed by Farida Vis) and seeing about the possibility of establishing a partnership or relationship.

- She said it's not enough to have pre-conferences in the Global South only attended by scholars in the Global South and that we should try to get big names from Western countries to attend conferences/pre-conferences in the Global South to attract additional audience members and encourage participation by other scholars who normally wouldn't travel outside their home continents.

Based on this last conversation, I reached out on Nov. 21, 2019, to Farida Vis with a message that read, in part:

> "As a scholar doing work on visual media/visual phenomena, I would first like to invite you to our Division's pre-conference on 'Visual Representation and Marginality' to be held on 21 May, 2020. Full details and a registration form for this free event can be found here: https://forms.gle/4eLwAaizxNodTTWr8. If you're comfortable sharing, I'd also very much welcome your thoughts on which scholarly communities you engage with and if there's anything ICA/our VCS Division can do to increase its attractiveness or benefits to academics such as yourself? Finally, in your role as director of the Visual Social Media Lab, I was wondering whether you'd be open to a conversation about the possibility of establishing some sort of relationship or partnership between the Lab and our Division. We'd be very keen to hear your thoughts and ideas about this. As examples, such a partnership might take the form of a visiting residency by a VCS member or a virtual collaborative program where VCS members can contribute to the work you and your team are doing on visual social media."

SCHOLAR FOUR (ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN SOUTH AMERICA:

> "I am an early career Ph.D. scholar. I studied my Ph.D. at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the US, and finished the program in 2016. After completing my Ph.D. in Communication, I got back to my home country, where I work as an Assistant Professor at [institution name]. My position is a tenure track position, and my research areas are Organizational Communication and Health Communication, connected to social marketing and health campaigns and persuasion. However, I have always been interested in Visual Communication. I work as a professor at the Advertising Career, within the Faculty of Communication at my University. Therefore, I am exposed to a lot of visual messages with my undergraduate students. Besides, I took some visual classes during my Ph.D. coursework, such as Visual Rhetoric with Dr. Cara Finnegan. Also, I teach at the Strategic Communication Master Programs, and I am a member of the Ph.D. in Communication program. I have also appointed some hours at the Translational Medicine Center of the Faculty of Medicine at my University. Although my BA studies are in journalism, I have got in love with advertising. Therefore, I believe this community might be an excellent chance to discover new colleagues, among those we can work together. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I did not present a paper

to this division this year, so that I won't attend ICA conference. However, I hope we can all met online sometime and chat or get into groups and get to know each other online. My interest in being part of the division relates to work needs. In particular, I am very interested in getting to know people from the division. Besides the ICA conference, I believe that building a robust online community that can collaborate through common topics or interests is a great opportunity."

Additionally, I reached out to six scholars who are not currently VCS Division members but who do work on visual media/visual phenomena and queried them about how ICA and our Division, in particular, could be more beneficial and attractive to them. Here are their responses:

SCHOLAR ONE (NON-ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN OCEANIA:

- "I attended the ICA conference in Fukuoka and it was somehow disappointing in terms of diversity (while, one year later I attended the [IAMCR](#) and the vibe was completely different). My feeling is that ICA is still too US-dominated and discipline-oriented so, good luck with your endeavour, I sincerely hope that you can bring some diversity (of geographies and ideas). I will definitely try to attend your very interesting pre-conference and I will certainly share the info. As a matter of fact, I was the founder (along with two colleagues, from Finland and Belgium) of the [Visual Cultures division at the European Communication Research and Education Association](#) (ECREA) so, I know how much work it is to sustain and expand a division. If I can be of any help, you can count on me. Farida is a good friend and her team is doing some fantastic work. Some other interesting groups could be: https://www.visualstudieslab.fi/ (lead by my colleague Asko Lehmuskallio with whom we founded the ECREA' section and edited a book about photography together). In Bristol they have an interesting group: https://vcrg.co.uk/ but then again, those are in Europe. I think you should try to contact people in the 'Global South'. The problem is that all the initiatives I know are mostly rooted in art and anthropology (and therefore the ICA is not too appealing, particularly with its high fees). There is a new initiative in Mexico called 'the observatory of photographic culture' https://observafoto.wordpress.com/ but is still too new. If I remember something else, I will let you know."

SCHOLAR TWO (NON-ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN OCEANIA:

- "I know very little about the ICA unfortunately – I am a sociologist who works in Indigenous Studies. I have worked in what could be thought of as media/communication studies but it isn't really my training! For the past 7 years I have focussed on Indigenous engagements of social media and I foresee that continuing for some time. I work with some other excellent Indigenous scholars who work in this space also – Dr Tristan Kennedy who is focussed on hate speech on social media directed at Indigenous peoples and Andrew Farrell who is a Queer scholar looking at

the LBGTQI+ community online on social media. I will share the pre-conference info with them also."

SCHOLAR THREE (NON-ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN OCEANIA:

- "I would be keen to submit to the VCS pre-conference and will consider a paper c[l]oser to the submission date. The ICA is not one of the conferences I prioritize due to poor past experiences – either of the conference being too large and overwhelming to be fruitful, or of reviews that have been very Anglo-centric and even ethnocentric in their feedback. However, a few colleagues and I who feel similar have decided to submit to the ICA this year due to the ease of accessibility from WA next year. Some of the stand-out names outside of the US are Jill Walker Rettberg in Bergen, Edgar Gomez Cruz in Sydney, Gabriele de Seta in Taipei/Bergen, Zhou Baohua in Shanghai, Liew Kai Khuin in Singapore, Katrin Tiidenberg in Tallinn, Cesar Albarran Torres in Sydney, SoJeong Park in Seoul, Mwaura Job in Johannesburg, Maria Schreiber in Vienna, and the various research centres and departments they work in. If need be, feel free to mention that I sent you their way."

SCHOLAR FOUR (NON-ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN AFRICA:

- "Thank you for reaching out and for the invitation to your divisional pre-conference. I have circulated your email to the ICA Africa – To Prof. Audrey and Prof. Lando. Hopefully the call will reach out to members of ICA in Africa. I will have a closer look at your call and see if I can send something. Although I must admit that conference funding has really dwindled in my university. I will also circulate the call to our department here at Wits University."
- As intimated, he sent the following message on to two of his contacts in Africa:
  - "I am writing to introduce you to Dr. T.J. Thomson, a lecturer of visual communications at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. Thomson is also an International Liaison for the ICA Visual Communication Studies Division (https://www.icahdq.org/group/visual). Thomson, please meet Prof. Audrey who is affiliated to ICA – Africa and works at the University of Ghana in the School of Information and Communication Studies. Thomason wrote to me with a request to introduce him to regional scholarly organizations and I thought ICA Africa can be a starting point. Thomas notes that 94 percent of their members hail from only three continents and, additionally, no ICA general conference meetings have ever been held in South America or Africa. He hopes to have a global representation of members at ICA Visual Communication Studies. Thomas would like to invite ICA Africa and other scholarly groups to their Division's pre-conference on 'Visual Representation and Marginality' to be held on 21 May, 2020, at the Gold Coast. Full details and a registration form for this free event can be found here: https://forms.gle/4eLwAaizxNodTTWr8. I know there are a number of scholars in Africa doing visual communication studies and could benefit if this information reaches them."

SCHOLAR FIVE (NON-ICA MEMBER) WORKING IN ASIA:

- "Your tweet seems to describe the situation of many academic conferences/associations, and I appreciate the effort to internationalize the ICA VCSD – although I've never been to ICA nor am I part of the division! First of all, thanks for the invitation. I'd love to participate in the ICA 2020 pre-conference, but – as for the past few years – I'm currently not affiliated to any institution, and will begin my next appointment only in February… I'll have some conference funding only next year, but I'll definitely consider attending ICA events at some point!" As for myself, I'm currently engaging with a rather restricted number of scholarly communities: the EASA Media Anthropology network, the EASA Anthropology & Art Network (ANTART), the Collaboratory for Experimental Ethnography (COLLEEX) and the Media & Nostalgia Network. My work is mostly based in East Asia, so I'm also engaged with local artistic & academic communities in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Perhaps more directly relevant, my next appointment will be with the following project at the University of Bergen: https://www.uib.no/en/machinevision. This is a European project on Machine Vision, and the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Bergen might be interested in establishing some sort of partnership or collaboration. But again, since I am not even officially there yet, you might to get in touch with Prof. Jill Walker Rettberg or other faculty there instead. In more practical terms, and as an early-career researcher mostly based in East Asia who has never attended ICA events nor has had an ICA membership, I'd suggest the usual things I found useful in other contexts: discounted membership fees for ECRs/graduates/postgraduates, the possibility to present at/attend events remotely, and some form of financial support for travel expenses. Of the twenty-something conferences and workshops I attended over the past five years, many were made possible by this sort of support, which is usually not very expensive for organizers, and extremely helpful for people who both quite distant geographically and not able to access institutional funding."

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS & POTENTIAL ACTION ITEMS

Based on these reflections with members in our Division from under-represented regions as well as those who aren't currently affiliated with ICA at all, the following recommendations and potential action items are offered, as follows:

1. **Ensure on our Division's website and other materials that we are disciplinarily agnostic, if that is the case.** Currently, we state on our Division's web page, for example, "Visual Communication Studies research touches on all other *communication* fields, investigating such areas as the interaction of the visual with public policy and law, mass communication processes, corporate image and organization, technology and human interaction, elite and popular culture, philosophy of communication, education and the social sphere." Are we open to other disciplines, such as sociology,

art, anthropology, etc. that focus on visual approaches or on visual media? If so, we should be explicit with this in word and in practice.

2. **Consider how our Division can make itself more affordable and valuable to potential members, especially those from under-represented regions.** Regarding the first point, several scholars from both developed and developing countries noted that ICA's high fees are a deterrent to attending. ICA does already subsidize membership fees, depending on which country the scholar is working in. However, the services and "extras" it offers have also ballooned in recent years. Which of these fringe benefits (e.g., childcare, yoga during conference sessions, a meditation room, a conference app, etc.) does our Division think essential and which might be culled to make way for a more economical and accessible conference experience? Regarding the second point, what can the Division do beyond its annual meeting to provide additional value to members? Can we establish relationships with research centres/institutes/labs and have a VCS exchange program where we send our members to work at it for a brief fellowship or do this virtually via technology?

3. **Consider selecting, developing, and cultivating an online platform that would allow scholars from diverse geographic localities to collaborate, receive feedback, and share their expertise across institutional and national boundaries.** We currently have a forum space provided by the ICA that's never been used, a recently developed Wordpress website (thanks Tim Highfield for this!), and a relatively modest Division Facebook page with 121 members. Several of our members in under-represented regions have expressed the desire to have an online hub where we can connect with others, collaborate on projects, and perhaps also have scheduled research methods or workshopping sessions that various members can participate in through video conferencing. Is Facebook the best platform for this or is there another (perhaps something like an institutional Blackboard/Canvas site/community) that can host this?

4. **Consider how we can ensure our Division/the overall ICA experience is less overwhelming and more suitable to intimate and productive encounters.** This might mean not co-sponsoring socials, for example, with other Divisions/IGs.

5. **Consider how we can ensure reviews do not incorporate feedback/ratings for factors other than those specified in the criteria/rubric.** E.g., preventing comments on the relevance of the research to one nationality or geographic context. Is a "reviewer policy/best practices" bit of text that we have accompany the reviewer interface sufficient or is there a better way to get at this? (E.g., reviewing reviewer comments prior to releasing them back to the author.)

6. **Ensure that our Division incorporates greater diversity in its composition and, thus, in its reviewer pool.** To do so, we could sponsor a travel award for a scholar from an under-represented region if funds allow.

7. **Explore the Division's and membership's interest in investigating the possibility of industry-funded symposia.** We would likely need buy-in and direction from the membership on which type of platforms/companies they would be interested in working with and on which topics they would be interested in discussing and helping provide expertise on.

8. **Explore the Division's/members' interest in establishing a system whereby those with accepted papers from under-represented regions can present at/attend events remotely.** Does ICA have a policy on this?
9. **Consider advocating for and promoting awareness of other research ethics review processes/standards beyond the (U.S.-developed[2]) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and ensuring that ICA-affiliated journals are inclusive in the language used regarding these.** In the past, some of our members working in non-U.S. locations have encountered trouble during an ICA-affiliated journal peer-review process by reviewers who insisted that the research had to have been reviewed by an IRB or they would not recommend publication. While ethical research behavior is of the utmost importance, not every country has its own system for regulating this or has a system that uses IRBs (or refers to them as such). Thus, reviewing our ICA-affiliated journals for their language re: ethical research review and ensuring reviewers are familiar with ethical review norms in other countries and contexts can assist with our internationalization, inclusivity, and equity efforts.
10. **Consider forming a task force to review these recommendations and work with the membership to rank and prioritize them.** The international liaison can then devote more attention to those particular priorities and provide regular updates on any progress made. If you're interested in serving on such a task force, please email tj.thomson@qut.edu.au.

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[2] The term "institutional review board" was introduced in the U.S.A. in 1974 and regulations were put in place and subsequently enforced in the '70s and '80s, according to: Grady, C. (2015). Institutional Review Boards: Purposes and Challenges, *Chest 148*(5): 1148-1155. Doi: 10.1378/chest.15-0706.

VCS MEMBER REACTIONS AND RESPONSES TO INITIAL REPORT FINDINGS

- Scholar 1: Her needs feel a bit overwhelming for just the VCS division. I suppose we could suggest a scholarship fund among us, whereby conference attendees have the option of donating like $20 each. I am not sure. But, in large this feels like an institutional concern (ICA as a whole).
- Scholar 2 mentions how to open up collaborative work. This is something where I feel we can begin to probe, especially as the online access and tools are free. I was hired as a part of a research cluster and work remotely. I have my regular duties at my institution but our research cluster also has weekly meetings and we create research / reports together. So, we trust each other and this helps, because we have met F2F several times. It might be a little different with scholars a person has not met, but over time perhaps we can sort of bridge the gap. I am not sure... right now we have a slightly inactive FB account for VCS. Would we be interested in creating something a bit more engaging? An online platform with, perhaps, monthly meetings? Each week a member could give a 20 minute presentation, then we could have open discussion for projects in progress and begin to build potential collabs between us? Or, at least help one another? FB is helpful to me. All super helpful, but it's more of a posting board rather than an operating group. If we took this route I would be happy to participate.
- Scholar 3 has great ideas. My university, for example, is building a [research field] center (I am one of the leaders in its inception) and we have money to invite scholars. Not any VCS scholar, but I could make the point of a need for a specific [research area] VCS scholar. I believe my university would pay for the entire cost. These opportunities exist, what we need is communication among us.
- Concerning the comments about the conference being overwhelming... this is where our division becomes integral. My colleague is a member of the Mass Comm division and she always says she's jealous of the closeness I feel with members of our division. So, we need to be sure to scoop up the scholars within ICA. We do have some social events, which are very important, but it might be as simple as those of us who are active to be sure to kick up conversations with new faces who are presenting in the arena of vis comm and make them feel welcome.