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Visual Representations of Autonomous Weapons: Patterns, Impacts, Alternatives

Created by Midjourney, October 7th

Autonomous weapons: what do we see?

Despite the complexity of AI and autonomous weapon systems, it's surprising that we always see the same visuals—robot dogs, matrix-like fields, or even the Terminator.

While this might seem amusing, these images have real consequences. They shape our perception of autonomous weapons and influence public opinion and behavior.

Presenting a more diverse range of imagery is both a democratic value and a journalistic responsibility.

This field is relatively young, and the dominant images are not yet firmly established. There is plenty of room for creativity!

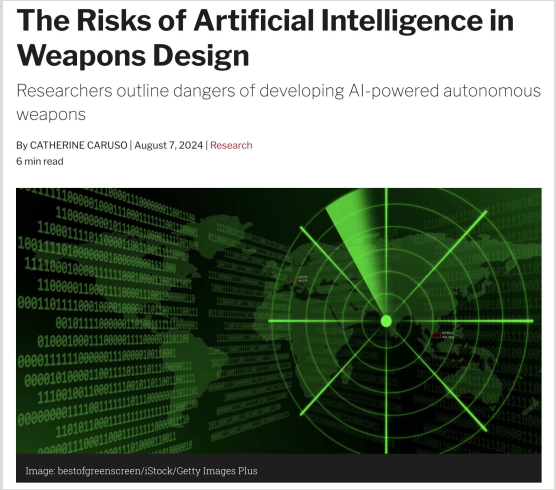
What kind of images dominate

- **Futuristic Look:** A common theme in all depictions.
- **Robots:** Often human-like or mechanical.
- **Weapon Systems:** Typically shown as robot dogs or swarms of drones.
- **Matrix Style:** Numbers falling or calculations appearing in images and videos.

We know these images. They suggest that autonomous weapons represent a dystopian future, that everything is incomprehensibly complex, and that humans are barely involved. In the following, we will address some of these myths and suggest alternative ways of visualizing autonomous weapons.

THE MYTH

“Autonomous weapons are too complex for the average person to understand.”



Google screenshot

Ordinary people cannot presume to understand the complex calculations of autonomous weapons.

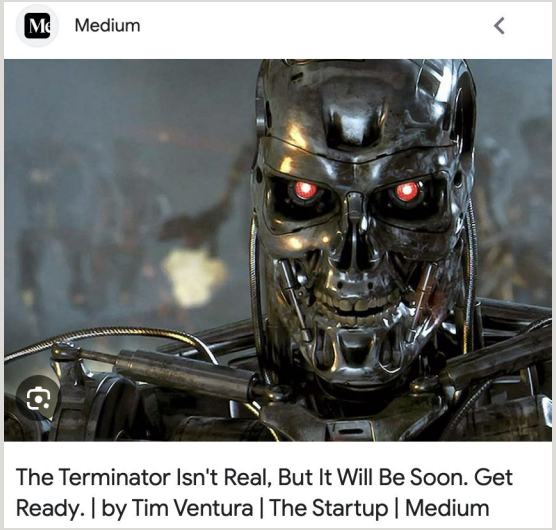
THE REALITY

©Friends Committee On National Legislation

Without meaningful human control, machines decide life or death, similar to landmines that explode when stepped on.

THE MYTH

“AI/Autonomous weapons are human-like.”



Google Screenshot

Ordinary people cannot presume to understand the complex calculations of autonomous weapons.

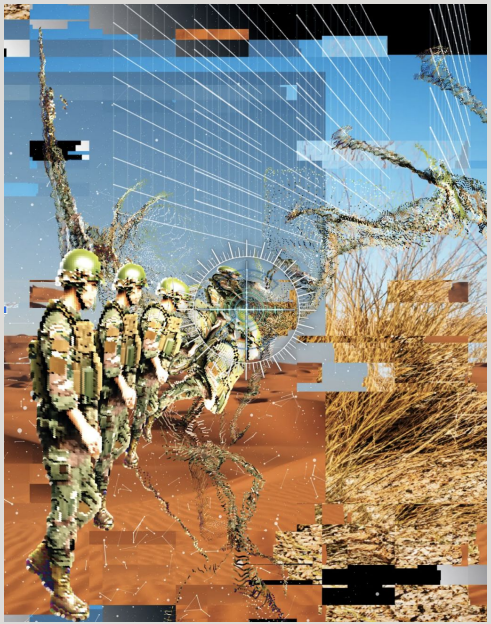
THE REALITY

©Friends Committee On National Legislation

It’s human beings who develop, produce, store and use autonomous weapons.

THE MYTH

“Autonomous weapons operate without error.”



©copynote

Representations of target identification are depicted with thousands of matrix calculations as a symbol of their awareness of what they are doing.

THE REALITY

Adversarial Turtle? AI Image Recognition Flaw Is Troubling

News By Zak Islam published November 3, 2017

Comments (8)

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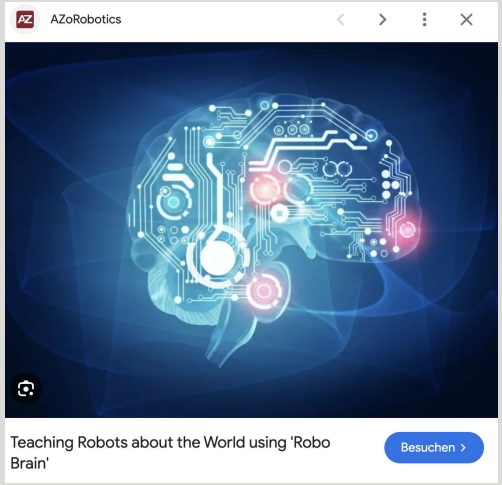
classified as turtle classified as rifle classified as other

Screenshot

Numerous reports highlight flaws in AI, especially dangerous in life-and-death situations.

THE MYTH

“Every complex analysis can be done by a computer”



Google screenshot

Brain images, often in blue, suggest that AI can find the correct answers to every question.

THE REALITY

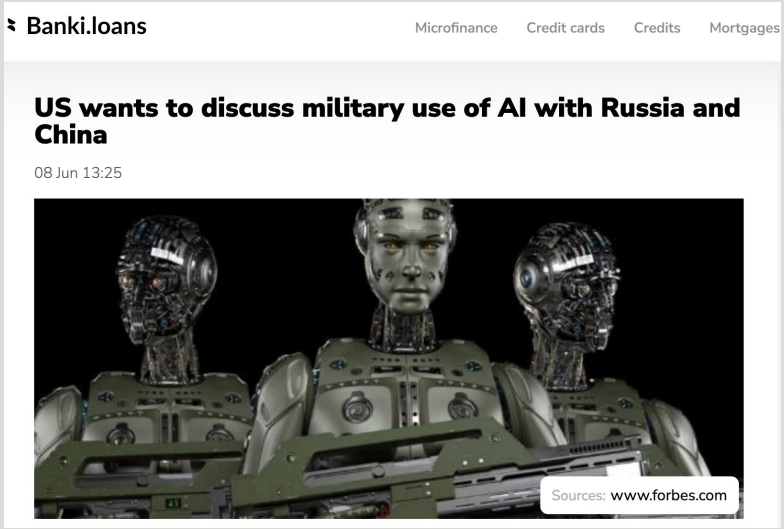
©Screenshot from the film «Immoral Code».

People discuss the questions surrounding autonomous weapons, and it is evident that these discussions depend heavily on individuals' perspectives, contexts, and moral opinions.

As difficult as these discussions are to have, coding them might be impossible.

THE MYTH

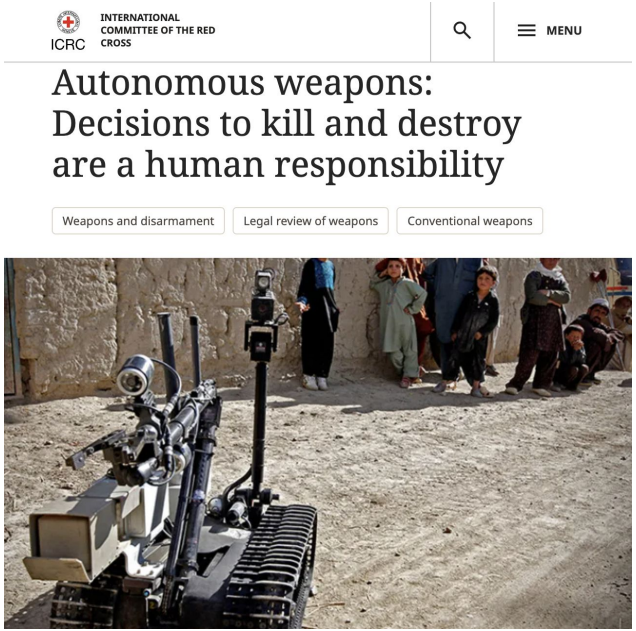
“Machines make rational and fair choices.”



Screenshot https://banki.loans/

Autonomous weapons are portrayed as super-intelligent and impartial.

THE REALITY



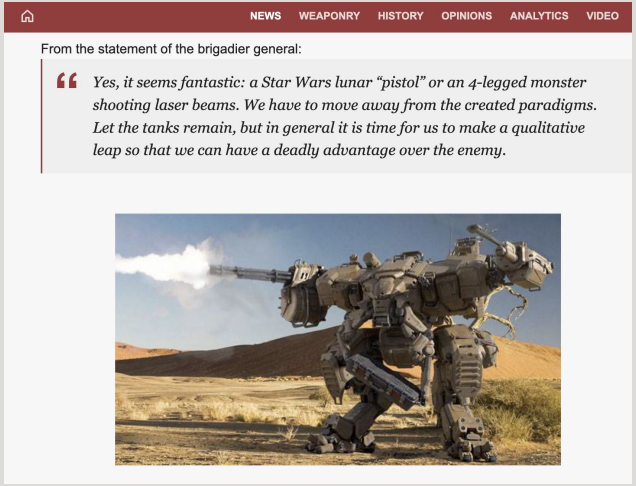
Screenshot https://www.icrc.org/en/document/statement-icrc-lethal-autonomous-weapons-systems

All around the world, people are confronted with the possibility of becoming a target because data perpetuates structural injustice.

fairpicture This is my learning for today.

THE MYTH

“Autonomous Weapons are used in a different world.”



Screenshot https://en.topwar.ru/

Autonomous weapons are depicted so abstractly and out of context that they almost seem surreal.

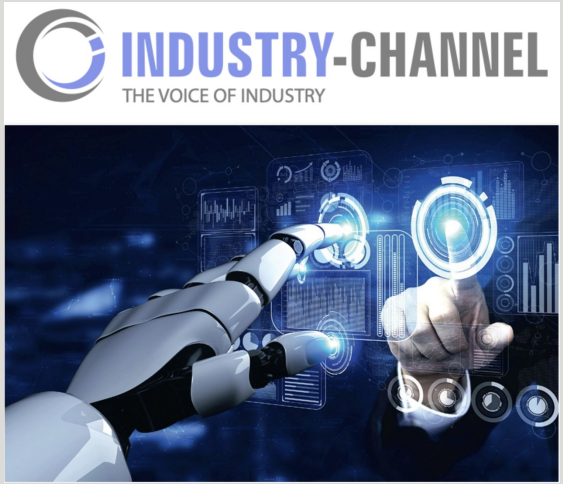
THE REALITY

©Ashraf Amra—Anadolu/Getty Images; Destruciton in Gaza.
Screenshot from sg.news.yahoo.com

Autonomous weapons are being deployed and have very real consequences – they kill and destroy actual people and cities.

THE MYTH

“Autonomous weapons are a rational counterpart.”



©Screenshot industry-channel.com

Humanoid representations create the impression that we are actively interacting with each other.

THE REALITY

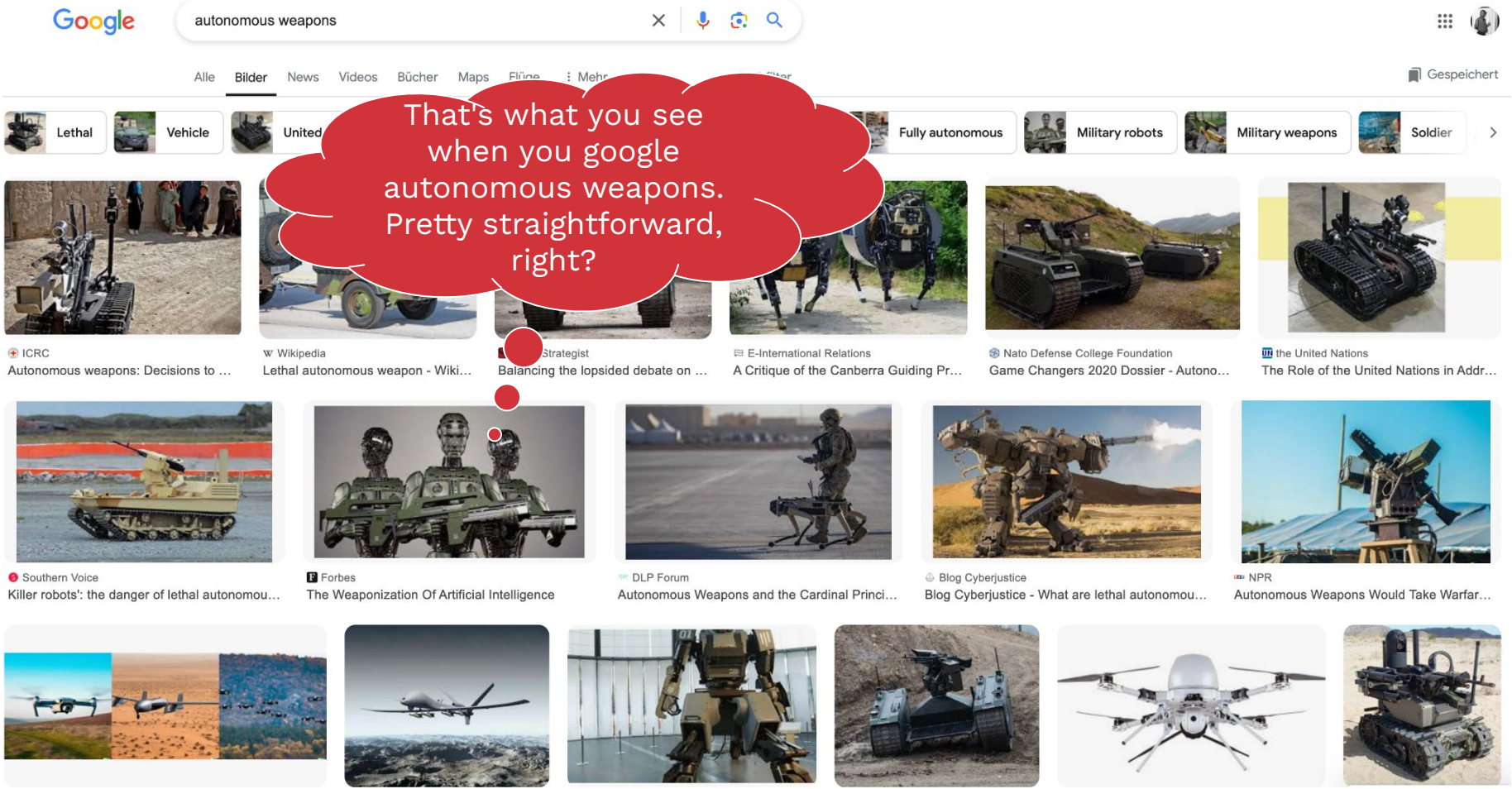
RUBEN BOLLING / 1:08 AM TUE, MAY 16, 2023

Amazing video of Russian soldier surrendering to drone in Ukraine

According to a Ukranian official, this dramatic video from a drone shows a Russian soldier in a trench in Bakhmut, Ukraine, surrendering to the drone, and then being led by… Read the rest

©Screenshot boingboing.net

The use of autonomous weapons highlights the issue that we are not interacting with empathetic humans.


Google
autonomous weapons
Alle
Bilder
News
Videos
Bücher
Maps
Mehr
Gespeichert
Lethal
Vehicle
United
Fully autonomous
Military robots
Military weapons
Soldier
That's what you see when you google autonomous weapons. Pretty straightforward, right?
ICRC
Autonomous weapons: Decisions to …
Wikipedia
Lethal autonomous weapon - Wiki…
Strategist
Balancing the lopsided debate on …
E-International Relations
A Critique of the Canberra Guiding Pr…
Nato Defense College Foundation
Game Changers 2020 Dossier - Autono…
the United Nations
The Role of the United Nations in Addr…
Southern Voice
Killer robots': the danger of lethal autonomou…
Forbes
The Weaponization Of Artificial Intelligence
DLP Forum
Autonomous Weapons and the Cardinal Princi…
Blog Cyberjustice
Blog Cyberjustice - What are lethal autonomou…
NPR
Autonomous Weapons Would Take Warfar…

We see a mostly uniform picture that helps a few dominant actors.

Made invisible

What we don’t see

- **Generally No Humans:** Lack of human presence in visualizations, creating emotional detachment.
- **Automation Bias:** Over-reliance on automated systems, highlighting critical military risks.
- **Social Injustices:** AI's bias affecting marginalized groups, with unequal global access.
- **Ecological Impact:** The environmental cost of autonomous systems from production to deployment.
- **Human Impact:** Real stories of AI usage (and failures) affecting individuals in both civilian and military contexts.
- **Power Imbalance:** Corporate/government control over AI development vs. public exclusion.
- **Public Engagement:** Citizens shaping AI policy through protests and regulation.
- **AI as Tools, Not Beings:** Clarify AI as algorithms, not sentient or magical forces.

Whom does this narrative serve?

Why do we struggle so much to **show the broader picture and people in general** when we talk about autonomous weapons?
This leads the public to feelings of:

- **Lack of public agency**
- **Lack of solutions / fatalism**
- **Powerlessness**

This benefits those who profit from these weapons—industry, the military, and powerful actors—by reinforcing the deterrence narrative, which supports their interests and obscures the need for public involvement and ethical considerations.

Appeal for journalistic balance

The role of independent journalists

Showing different sides of the debate surrounding autonomous weapons not only challenges the limited imagery we currently see—images that often have little to do with reality—but is also an **ethical responsibility in visual and journalistic representation**.

Whether or not we agree with the few existing depictions, there are many other stories that must be told to present a more complete and accurate picture. The **principle of impartiality** suggests that all perspectives on autonomous weapons should be shown, including those from policymakers, technologists, military officials, activists, and the communities affected by these technologies, to provide a comprehensive view.

Only when the entire picture is made visible—including the people and realities currently left out—can we ensure sincere and thorough information reaches broader society.

What this means for picture editors

Images shape the perception of the world. You are in a powerful position that influences public opinion. In the following, we suggest a few simple strategies that will already make a big difference. When you show images, ask yourself if the picture you select...

... shows actual people
... deepens historical awareness and contemporary knowledge
... seeks balance (in relation with other images):
between people, objects and issues; between regions and spaces; between acting and being acted upon...
... invites for connections with other human beings
... shows the unexpected & (formerly) unseen

Broadening the picture

Humanize:

Show people affected by AI and autonomous weapons.

Politicize:

Reveal the power structures behind these technologies.

Irritate:

Use unexpected visuals to disrupt conventional narratives.

Include diverse stories from different regions and backgrounds.
Challenge viewers' expectations with thought-provoking images.

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Picture generated with Midjourney, October 7th 2024

Not enough yet?
Here are a few more arguments.

This dominant narrative significantly influences public perception. By omitting depictions of people and creating a detached, abstract representation, there's a **disconnection from the real human impact and stories**.

These portrayals often tend to **reinforce racist, sexist, and postcolonial narratives** by marginalizing, ignoring or stigmatizing certain groups.

By using the same images repeatedly, we contribute to discrimination and actively hinder discourse, fostering a climate of fear.

The case for alternative images

Storytelling relies on **framing**, which includes visuals:

- Consciously selected imagery can foreground frames of the nuclear sphere that generate momentum and **increase the perceived relevance of an issue** (i.e. a social justice framing, a public accountability framing, etc.)

Images are not fed to viewers:

- Audiences make sense of images in **interaction with their existing knowledge and their experiences**. You can rely on **existing discourses** to frame nuclear-related imagery and link it with other topics that catalyse societal pressure (such as recently issues of racism and societal diversity or the pandemic).

Certain images increase the audiences' **will to act**. Other images make audiences **realize the importance** of an issue. We know from visual research in the context of climate change that these images are not necessarily identical. It is thus important to **vary and adapt imagery** and f**ollow different strategies at the same time**.

Let’s get to it then!

First step:
just show more of what is out there!

- **Show regular people** who are affected by and involved with nuclear weapons. Show the faces of those who profit, the ones who suffer, the ones who fight, the many who just work in the sector!
- Highlight diverse **successes and collaborative efforts**.
- Challenge traditional power structures, **showcasing expertise beyond state leaders**. People advocating against nuclear weapons need to be taken serious.
- Depict hopeful solutions towards a **world without nuclear weapons**.
- **Illustrate diverse activism**, including research, advocacy, and community building.

With that, you're simply doing justice to the complexity, fulfilling a basic journalistic duty. You're just showing **more parts of reality** - and yet you're contributing to people being better informed, building connections, and fostering empathy.

Accountability and Integrity: Question those who profit

You’re right, the first step is not enough.

The narrative is there because some people profit from it. They have a great interest in not having their actions scrutinized: however, that's precisely what public discourse requires. Make them visible to make them accountable!

- Challenge the association of nuclear warfare and dominant masculinity by exposing it’s logic and by presenting counter-expertise.
- Explain the connections and dependencies in local contexts.

Public opinion formation: Create personal relevance

Invite your audiences to deconstruct the seeming disconnection of the issue from their lives.

If you feel that nuclear war is far away (in space and time), think again: Do you know where potential targets are? Do you know that a local blast has global consequences?

There are people affected today and there have been people affected since decades.

Allow your audiences to get to know people and communities and how they are affected by the nuclear industry!

Aren't these stories scarcely available?

That's the core of the problem. Access to stories and information isn't easy. Often, it's guarded by the military and reproduction is controlled by powerful actors who are dependent on the pictures we all know. Also because the narrative of nuclear deterrence needs to be continuously fed to stay alive.

However, those who seek will find the stories and voices - especially by accessing alternative narratives. It's crucial who gets to tell stories and have access to an audience. There are many local storytellers who can share stories that the world should hear.

The dominant voices aren't louder; they're just amplified more. Let's do a mic change.

Time for a lens and mic change

Where to get adequate images

If you have the opportunity, **commission stories**. This allows for breaking out of the broad visual discourse and equipping often overlooked stories with the appropriate images and videos (such as stories of survivors, communities impacted by nuclear testing and waste disposal, and environmental impacts).

We want to hear more diverse voices telling these complex stories. Make use of companies such as fairpicture.org, which can organize assignments with local creators who are familiar with the contexts and the history of nuclear impacts in their region and speak the local languages. Context and ethical storytelling practices are key in the ambition to create a more holistic image.

AI and Cartoons

The use of AI for image generation (and cartoons) offers the possibility to quickly come up with **unexpected, creative, and compelling counter-images**. These tools can help create thought-provoking visuals and find new avenues in communication. However, it is crucial that the individuals generating these images are **sensitive and reflective about the power dynamics of the nuclear weapons discourse** to avoid reinforcing problematic mainstream narratives. Additionally, we must be aware that AI, by design, will reproduce stereotypes and concretely reinforce discrimination and inequality.

Experiment with these tools, but remain critical!

Use of existing networks

There are numerous sources for existing images related to the discussed aspects, found within various organizations and archives. For example, nonprofit organizations focused on nuclear disarmament, environmental issues, and public health often have resources, reports, and images available for public use.

Looking for these resources will not only make the discourse more diverse but will also help establish links between these organizations. We need to know who holds which images and make use of them: This is also a good foundation for strategic image procurement.

Building ground for differentiated imagery

The development and dissemination of alternative perspectives on nuclear bombs take time - and journalism and communicating organizations have the power to portray this visual world in a more diverse and nuanced way than the current tenor.

By changing your visual narrative and adding to a growing pool of diverse imagery, you help establishing a more differentiated image.

What will we achieve with more diverse/non-stereotypical images?

Alternative imagery focusing on people involved in nuclear processes has **transformative potential**. By **humanizing the topic**, diversifying narratives, and increasing accessibility, this approach fosters empathy, engagement, and a more nuanced understanding among viewers.

Similar shifts in perception have driven action on issues like climate change, where increased understanding, connection, and empathy have empowered individuals to take meaningful action. We speak of ‘climate justice’ nowadays - because it foregrounds how people are affected!