

Institute bans use of Playboy test image in engineering journals

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Cropped from the shoulders up, the Playboy centrefold of Swedish model Lena Forsén looking back at the photographer is an unlikely candidate for one of the most reproduced images ever. Shortly after it was printed in the November 1972 issue of the magazine, the photograph was digitised by Alexander Sawchuk, an assistant professor at the University of Southern California, using a scanner designed for press agencies. Sawchuk and his engineering colleagues needed new images to test their processing algorithms. Bored with TV test images, they turned to the centrefold, defending its choice by noting that it featured a face and a mixture of light and dark colours. Fortunately, the limits of the scanner meant that only the top five inches were scanned, with just Forsén's bare shoulder hinting at the nature of the original picture. From that beginning, the photo became a standard reference image, used countless times over the 50-plus years since to demonstrate advances in image compression technology, test new hardware and software, and to explain image editing techniques. Now, though, Lena's days may be numbered. The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), a large global professional association, has issued a notice to its members warning against the continued use of the photo in academic articles. "Starting 1 April, new manuscript submissions will no longer be allowed to include the Lena image," wrote Terry Benzel, vice-president of the IEEE Computer Society's technical and conference wing. Benzel cited a motion passed by the group's publishing board, which reads: "IEEE's diversity statement and supporting policies such as the IEEE code of ethics speak to IEEE's commitment to promoting an inclusive and equitable culture that welcomes all. In alignment with this culture and with respect to the wishes of the subject of the image, Lena Forsén, IEEE will no longer accept submitted papers which include the 'Lena image'." The IEEE isn't the first organisation to call time on the photo. In 2018, the scientific journal *Nature* issued its own edict, blocking the image in all its research journals. "We believe that the history of the Lena image clashes with the extensive efforts to promote women undertaking higher education in science and engineering and therefore have decided to adopt this policy," the publisher wrote in an unsigned editorial. Plenty of reasons have been given for the image's durability, including its "dynamic range", the centrality of a human face, the fine detail on Lena's hair and the feather in the hat she is wearing. But as far back as 1996, the outgoing editor in chief of one IEEE journal said, by way of explaining why he hadn't taken action against the picture, that "the Lena image is a picture of an attractive woman". He added: "It is not surprising that the [mostly male] image processing research community gravitated toward an image that they found attractive." One organisation that could have put an end to the spread of Lena's image in an instant, but never did, was Playboy itself. In 1992, the magazine wrote to one academic journal threatening action, but never pushed the

matter. A few years later, the company changed its mind. “We decided we should exploit this, because it is a phenomenon,” Playboy’s vice-president of new media said in 1997. Forsén herself has also suggested that the photo should be retired. In 2019, she said she was “really proud” of the picture and she re-created the shot for Wired magazine, which called her “the patron saint of JPEGs”. But later that year, the documentary Losing Lena spearheaded the latest effort to encourage computer science to move on. “I retired from modelling a long time ago,” Forsén said on its release. “It’s time I retired from tech, too. We can make a simple change today that creates a lasting change for tomorrow. Let’s commit to losing me.” • This article was amended on 1 and 25 April 2024. A previous version referred to the IEEE as a trade body; it is a professional association. Also, Alexander Sawchuk’s institution is the University of Southern California, not the University of California.