

The photography as a tool of social communication: the role of visual narrative in shaping public discourses

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Abstract. The article examines photography as a tool of social communication, functioning as an active agent in shaping public discourses through visual narratives. It is emphasized that in the contemporary digital environment, where mobile devices and social networks enable the instant dissemination of images to millions of people, photography ceases to be merely an illustration of events and becomes a proactive means of influencing cognition, emotions, memory, political behavior, and social mobilization.

The photography does a lot of things, actually. For one, it really boosts how believable messages seem to be – our brains just eat up visual stuff faster than words, and we tend to treat what we see as solid proof of something happening. Second, photographs generate emotions such as empathy and solidarity, which makes us more sensitive to social issues. Third, the identity function of photography helps to create collective memory and narratives of national identity. Finally, the media-structural function involves the interaction between the author, the distribution platform and the audience, which affects how information is perceived and interpreted.

It is also important to consider the role of humanistic and documentary photography in the context of social events, such as funerals of fallen soldiers. Ethical, moral and legal issues arise here, as it is important to respect the rights of the participants and their families, as well as to find a balance between the right of society to information and the dignity of those who have died. Photography in the media space performs the function of documentation and scientific research, and at the same time is a tool that shapes social narratives, attracts attention, influences public opinion, and supports international solidarity.

The effectiveness of photography as a social tool depends on several factors, including the professional skills of the authors, the ethical approach to the content, the use of retouching and consideration of the psychological impact on the audience. Also important are the context in which the photograph is distributed and the platform used.

In general, we can say that photography combines documentary and semiotic potential. It is able to transform the collective narrative, shape public discourses and plays an important role in preserving cultural, historical and national memory. In addition, in the digital age, photography is becoming an essential tool for social interaction.

Keywords: photography, social communication, visual narrative, documentary photography, media, collective memory, ethics, sensitive content, social discourses, digital environment.

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Introduction

Modern society is experiencing an intensive visualization of the communication space, which determines the growing role of photography as a key tool for shaping public discourses. The digitalization of the communication environment has significantly enhanced this effect: it is estimated that more than 5.3 billion photographs are taken every day [1]. The mass and rapid dissemination of visual images create a new dynamic of social interaction, in which photography becomes not only a recorder of events, but also an active agent of social influence.

The impact of photography in the context of information warfare is particularly telling: Theisen et al.'s research shows that on the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Telegram channels of pro-Russian "milbloggers" saw an 8,925% increase in posts and 5,352% in images [2]. Visual content is growing exponentially, and this shows how skillfully images are used to engage people, influence public sentiment, and shape political narratives. However, it is worth noting that photography as a means of communication faces a number of challenges. The fact that it can "construct reality" raises acute questions about ethics, the possibility of manipulation, framing, and the veracity of information. Scholars are increasingly talking about the need to develop certain approaches to analyzing visual narratives. Quite often, this leads to the development of media literacy and the emergence of standards for assessing the impact of photographs in social communications.

Analysis of recent research and publications. In recent years, photography has become an increasingly influential means of social communication that shapes public discourses. E. Biryukova [3] draws attention to the fact that photographs have weight in the Ukrainian press - they make reading texts easier and make the material more interesting for the audience. It is also worth taking into account the opinion of R. Åker [4], who points out that documentary photography constructs visual narratives that influence how people think and act in society, demonstrating the connection between the image and the world around us. M. Boeriis [5] studies how the manipulation of photographs online disperses our understanding of social phenomena - this emphasizes how powerful photography is. This is especially clearly visible in social networks. Despite this, R. Davis [6] demonstrates that through photos people understand environmental crises differently and form their beliefs. N. Yusof [7] notes that professionals behind the camera are forced to reorient themselves to new communication channels and distribution formats. S. Song, M. Adnan and M. Ibrahim [8] emphasize that when images are well-made and well-thought-out, they help people perceive social phenomena with greater sympathy. At the same time, we would like to add that L. Milasan [9] explores how photography works in social projects, especially when it comes to mental well-being - it not only informs, but also breaks down stereotypes and prejudices.

At the same time, G. Aiello [10] analyzes how commercial photo banks shape cultural representations and influence what we see in the media. In the art space, A. Rodríguez-Vera [11] shows how European museums use Instagram to dialogue with visitors and transmit cultural content. Y. Kundenko [12] and O. Kiya [13] explore in their works how photography affects the mood of society during periods of armed conflict, focusing on how digital material shapes a shared historical memory. ResearchGate [14] publishes works that consider photography as a catalyst for social transformation, encouraging people to speak and share. E. Tan and N. Lazim [15] bring an interesting aspect - the psychological mechanisms that are triggered when we look at digital photos significantly influence how the audience reacts, confirming that images are key to constructing social meanings.

Therefore, the analysis of various studies allows us to highlight the important role of photography in the creation and dissemination of visual narratives that significantly influence the formation of public discourses, and indicates the need to develop methodological approaches to assess its impact and develop media literacy.

The purpose of the article is to examine how photography is used in social communication, as well as the impact that visual narratives have on how public discourses are shaped.

Results

First of all, it is worth noting that photography has acquired strategic importance in social communication. It does not simply record what is happening, but also actively changes social discourses through visual stories, creating a connection between reality and how we understand it.

In the modern era, when gadgets, smartphones and social networks provide instant circulation of images among millions of audiences, photography ceases to perform a purely illustrative function. In particular, it turns into an intellectual and emotional moderator that influences our ways of thinking, emotional reactions, mechanisms of collective memory and even political behavior. Visual information, at the same time, forms specific modes of perception: the brain processes images much faster than verbal messages, so photographic evidence is often perceived as direct "proof" of an event. As L. I. Lysenko thoroughly emphasizes, in news communications photography performs a verification function, increasing the level of trust in information resources [16, p. 238].

Humanistic and documentary photography, as Janine Wiedel observes, acquires anthropological value: it records practices of resistance, patterns of social mobilization, and the ways in which communities shape their own notions of identity and solidarity. [17] At the same time, the very nature of photography is changing in the digital environment: it ceases to be a fixed carrier of meaning and is transformed into an interactive space where meanings are not only transmitted but also synthesized in the process of transforming users into co-creators of visual content.

Modern digital platforms – from Instagram and TikTok to specialized mobile applications – form a complex ecosystem of visual communication, within which photography becomes a tool for modeling cultural scenarios, social archetypes, and symbolic structures that determine the dynamics of public discourses.

Algorithmic mechanisms for sorting, recommending, and scaling content help individual images become "visual quotes" that are easily recognized and reproduced in collective memory. This function is well illustrated by real-life photographs from the 2022–2024 war in Ukraine, taken by both professional photojournalists and ordinary citizens (Fig. 1-6).



Fig. 1. A child in a bus window, March 9, 2022 (Irpin, Ukraine, Vadim Ghirda/AP) – a shot during the evacuation of civilians from Irpin, symbolizing fear, loss and at the same time hope for salvation.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]



Fig. 2. A firefighter in Kyiv, March 15, 2022 (Vadim Ghirda/AP) – An image of a rescuer near a destroyed apartment building after a bombing, highlighting the danger to civilians and the heroic role of rescuers.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]



Fig. 3. Destruction in Kharkiv, March 24, 2022 (Felipe Dana/AP) - A man walks through the rubble of a burning building after Russian shelling, recording traces of violence and destruction.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]



Fig. 4. Sunflowers for Ukraine, March 11, 2022 (Jae C. Hong/AP) – A man holds sunflowers against a Ukrainian flag during a rally in support of Ukraine in Los Angeles; the photo demonstrates how visual symbols shape international solidarity.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]



Fig. 5. A bomb shelter in Lviv, March 26, 2022 (Nariman El-Mofty/AP) - People hide underground after explosions; the image reflects the daily dangers and survival strategies of civilians.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]



Fig. 6. Searching for belongings in the rubble, April 5, 2022 (Vadim Ghirda/AP) - A resident examines a destroyed apartment, demonstrating the loss and psychological impact of war on the civilian population.

Source: compiled by the author based on [24]

Such photos function in the digital space not only as evidence of reality, but also as visual arguments capable of influencing international public opinion, mobilizing attention to humanitarian problems, and shaping collective memory [22, p. 10]. It is thanks to such digital and visual artifacts that photography acts as a polyphonic platform for representing different social groups, their everyday practices, symbolic gestures, and narratives.

On the periphery of conflicts or crises, photography acquires special political, communicative and medial importance, becoming a key element of the digital visual ecosystem of modern communications. In the age of mobile technologies and extensive social platforms, each participant in events can become a content producer, and therefore a creator of a visual narrative. As studies of Ukrainian military photojournalism have shown, mobile devices and digital broadcast channels provide almost instant recording of events from the front line, and then their rapid replication in the global information space, which directly affects the formation of international public discourse [21, pp. 58–59].

In such conditions, photography functions not only as a representative of a fact, but also as a tool of visual argumentation, capable of structurally influencing the audience's

perception. Photographs, created by professional journalists or ordinary citizens, simultaneously perform several communicative roles: they serve as information signals of an operational nature; act as means of social and emotional mobilization; form visual repertoires that are subsequently integrated into collective memory. In the digital environment, such images are not simply recorded and stored - they are constantly circulated, remixed, interpreted and reformatted by the algorithms of social platforms, which strengthens their ability to set the framework for understanding events and create stable visual markers through which society constructs an idea of the conflict.

The ethical aspect of photography in social communication is particularly acute when it comes to "sensitive visual content." In the context of covering military funerals, O. Peleshok [23] explores the media framing of such images in social networks, noting that frames of death or loss can evoke empathy and solidarity, but at the same time are used to manipulate the audience's perception and create a certain emotional effect.

Photographing a funeral ceremony in journalism involves a photojournalist capturing events within the ceremony without interfering with the process itself. Such reportage is aimed at confirming the reality of the event, rather than personalizing the participants, creating the impression of direct interaction of the viewer with the reflected part of the world [23, p. 312]. The strategy of covering such events is determined by numerous cultural and political factors, as well as the motives of the publication.

The combination of ethical and legal dimensions of photography allows us to consider the interaction of the four parties involved: the photographer, society, the state and the depicted person. It is this interaction, in our opinion, that shapes the discussion about the ethics of the gaze, the ethics of distribution and the ethics of reaction, emphasizing the social responsibility of the author and the impact of photography on the audience. In the coverage of the burials of fallen soldiers, which are widely demonstrated in the media, especially at the local level, it is clearly visible that the media do not always take into account the impact of photographs on readers. Part of the audience may consider it undesirable to view images of the soldier's body in close-up, but journalists try to achieve an affective effect by emphasizing the drama and tragedy of the event.

Analysis of current publications shows that most of the photographic materials do not blur the faces of the funeral participants, and the headlines do not contain 18+ labels or warnings about sensitive content that may cause moral distress. Retouching of photographs, in particular blurring of faces, is a professionally recommended practice in such situations, as it helps to preserve the dignity of the deceased and facilitate the process of adaptation of the family to the loss [23, pp. 314-315]. In addition, the media should take into account that from the moment of death, irreversible biological changes begin with the human body, which can significantly change the appearance of the deceased. Therefore, the audience's right to view such photos should be conscious, not accidental, which ensures a balance between informing the public and respect for privacy.

The coverage of the funeral procession of fallen servicemen demonstrates that the media often ignore the potential psycho-emotional impact of images on readers. Such photographs can demean the memory of the deceased and cause psychological harm to their families, even if the coverage of the event is considered to be of public importance. In this context, journalists are faced with the challenge of balancing two democratic principles: the public's right to information and human dignity. Particular attention should be paid to the secondary circle of persons - the relatives of the deceased, who have a moral and legal right to privacy and protection of dignity. Showing photographs without taking these rights into account can lead to a violation of ethical norms and moral harm to the audience.

In scientific and practical terms, the coverage of such events can be illustrated by schemes of the influence of photography on social discourse, which take into account five main levels:

cognitive (increasing credibility and attracting attention), emotional (forming empathy and solidarity), ethical (discussing dignity and privacy), identity (constructing collective memory) and media-structural (influence on the role of the author, platform and audience). Such schemes can be combined with photo evidence (Fig. 7-9) to demonstrate the real action of photography in the media space and its impact on social narratives.



Fig. 7. A 34-year-old soldier from Ternopil region died after being seriously wounded. (2024, September 15).

Source: compiled by the author based on [18]



Fig. 8. "This is a holy war with the invader": in Lutsk they said goodbye to the fallen Hero Vladyslav Nedilko. (2022, February 7).

Source: compiled by the author based on [19]



Fig. 9. Killed three days before the rotation: in the Trostyanets region they say goodbye to the soldier who died in the JFO zone. (2024, July 29).

Source: compiled by the author based on [20]

In view of the above, ethical documentation of military funerals requires journalists to adopt a comprehensive approach that combines legal norms, moral and ethical principles, and socio-psychological analysis. Only if these rules are followed can photography fulfill its social function: to inform, mobilize attention, and contribute to the construction of collective memory, without violating the rights and dignity of the ceremony participants and their families.

The historical function of photography as a memory carrier has not lost its significance: it continues to act as an archival tool for constructing national and collective identity. According to D. D. Pyatina, photographs of historical events and everyday life can preserve cultural heritage, acting as a source for historical knowledge, and their importance is growing in the era of "post-truth", when visual documents often become key evidence for collective memory [21].

At the same time, photography also functions as a research method in social and psychological sciences. I. Koshova notes that photography as a method is not only for documentation, but also for deep semiotic and discursive analysis in psychology and sociology: photographs can be considered as texts that encode not only objective reality, but also subjective experience and cultural attitudes [22].

Modern social communication actively exploits this "language of photography" to shape social narratives. In addition, it should be noted that in digital networks, visual content spreads instantly, and its impact often exceeds that of text messages: users are more likely to interact with images, react to them, and share them [23]. Photography thus becomes a means of mobilization, memorialization, or activist communication – depending on the narrative it carries.

The model of the influence of photography on public discourse (Fig. 1) can be visualized as a process, starting with the generation of the image (fixation of the event), passing through semantic coding (choice of composition, symbols, angle), then through the perception by the audience (emotions, empathy, shock), then through the interpretation of the social problem and ending with the transformation of the collective narrative or social practice (international solidarity, political actions, collective memory). The presented schematic model emphasizes that photography is not just a reproduction, but a social act that affects the unification of people, their identity and behavior.

Thus, photography in the context of social communication occupies a prominent, conceptually loaded role. At the same time, photography has become an active participant in communication, capable of shaping how people understand the world around them. In a digital world where images are distributed instantly, photography plays the role of an agent of change.

Conclusions. The results of the study showed that photography in the modern communicative environment functions as a kind of "sense generator", capable of enlivening experience and ordering the chaos of events. At the same time, the visual image not only captures a moment, but also builds entire semantic landscapes around it, directing collective attention and highlighting those emotions that shape a shared experience. In media discourse, photography enhances the persuasiveness of messages, gives them emotional depth and becomes a tool for creating collective memory, which determines the way of understanding social reality. In our opinion, this is especially evident in the coverage of conflicts and crisis situations, where digital platforms allow for the instant distribution of visual content and mobilize the attention of an international audience. The study showed that photographs of military funerals simultaneously perform informational, memorial, and socio-psychological functions, but at the same time require compliance with ethical and legal norms to protect the rights and dignity of participants, especially relatives of the deceased.

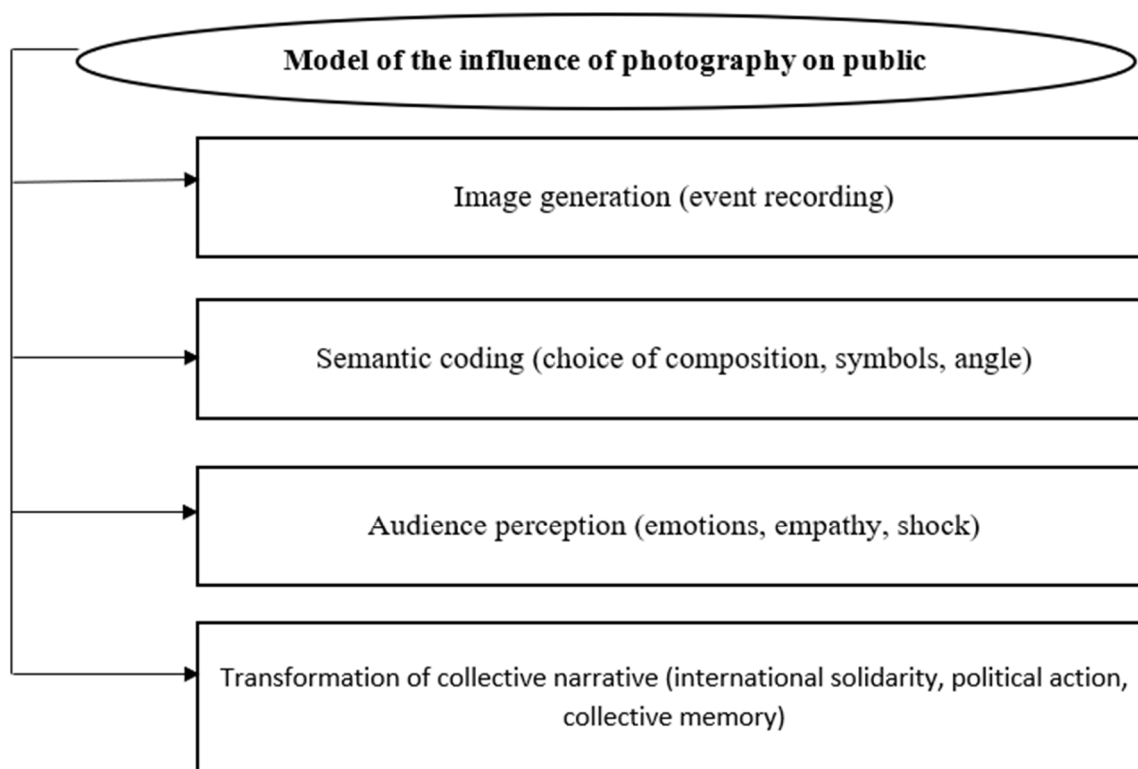


Fig. 10. Model of the influence of photography on public discourse

Source: compiled by the author himself

The combination of cognitive, emotional, ethical and media-structural dimensions of photography demonstrates its multidimensional impact on society. The practical implications of this study are the need for a systematic approach to documenting sensitive content that integrates professional journalistic ethics, legislative requirements and socio-psychological analysis of the audience. Such an approach allows photography to fulfill its social function: to inform, mobilize attention, contribute to the construction of collective memory and national identity, without violating the rights and dignity of the participants in the event.

Further research could be aimed at studying the impact of visual content on international discourse, media literacy of information consumers, and the development of ethical standards of photojournalism in conflict settings.

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