

# Communicating Through Photojournalism in Conflict Zones

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Photographs are effective tools for communication and photojournalism has helped communicate to a distant audience through agenda-setting. Over the past century, the agenda-setting role of photojournalism in conflict zones has been varied. Visuals reduce the distance between home audiences and the conflict zones. If news images led to public opposition of the U.S. government's role in the Vietnam war, photographs strengthened biases and prejudices in the minds of the public as was seen in the one-sided representation of the Kosovo tragedy and 1991 Gulf war. The agenda-setting role of news photographs emerges from the strong emotional appeal a visual can have. Also, photojournalists work within an organizational framework which often results in an incomplete and biased portrayal of the truth. This paper explores the various aspects of how photojournalism helps assist agenda-setting in conflict zones and argues that visuals have a strong role to play in forming public perception about an event. The paper also examines the increasing role of citizen photojournalism and contends that citizen images are redefining mainstream news.

*Keywords:* photojournalism, conflict, agenda-setting, communication, citizen journalism

## Introduction

“It is no light matter to use words and images together in mass communication, for their combination is powerful; they demand respect and responsible use” (Lester, 2005). Over the last two decades, there has been increasing debate between academics and the media on the role of journalists in reporting conflict and conflict resolution as well as the subsequent impact it has in shaping public opinion (Aslam, 2014). To make the public aware of significant global events, a key element of photojournalism is that it reduces the geographical distance between viewers and the event (Pogliano, 2015). In a study by Kim and Smith (2005), it was found that the most dominant theme among Pulitzer Prize photographs between 1942 to 2002 in the international category was coups and warfare. Countries have revised foreign policies because of photo documentation of central events such as the Vietnam war, the Nazi concentration camps, the Gaza conflict, 9/11 and the Afghan war, or the Balkan crisis—news photographs have served as an agent for the communications of humanitarian agencies and for journalism (Pogliano, 2015). Memories of turning points in history are marked by news photography (Goodnow, 2003). Characterized by a high degree of sensationalism, visual media publications appeal to the emotions and attention of the audiences; another dimension is created by allowing readers to understand the reality of the situation beyond the text (Below, 2010; Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015).

For a person in the west, for instance, the constant news reports and magazine articles on turbulent regions in the Middle East can give the impression that beyond the West, the world is backward, chaotic, violent, and

tragic. The ability to affect the public perception is a consequence of the agenda-setting role of media houses (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Social, political and economic factors can severely influence the way a story is told. This can lead to moral and ethical dilemmas for war correspondents, and quite often, put their lives at risk. The predicament between what to show and the reality can result in a one-sided representation because of political and financial factors (Below, 2010). Due to factors such as agenda setting and propaganda, the role of the fourth estate as watchdogs of democracies is increasingly being jeopardized. This report explores the various aspects of how photojournalism helps assist agenda-setting in conflict zones and argues that visuals have a strong role to play in forming public perception about an event. The report also examines the increasing role of citizen photojournalism and contends that citizen images are redefining mainstream news.

## **Agenda-Setting**

The origins of the agenda-setting theory can be traced to Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion* (1922) who studied how mass media has a dominant effect in creating a perception about an event; the public react to the picture presented by media houses and not the actual event. McCombs and Shaw (1972) defined the theory by studying the effect the media had in the 1968 U.S. presidential elections (McCombs, 1997). It was found that as media was the main source providing political information to the public, there was a positive correlation between issues on the news agenda and importance of the issue in the eyes of the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 1997). Shaw (1979) examined how besides determining what people include and exclude from their cognitions, mass media assigns importance to a story by emphasizing certain events, persons, and issues. According to Shaw and Martin (1992), the basic essence of the agenda-setting theory is the media telling the public what to contemplate. The patterns of news covered over a period help understand the agenda and priorities of a news organization (McCombs, 2011). Depending on power, factors like gatekeepers, governmental policies, bureaucrats, can affect the agenda setting process of a news organization (Sanchez, 2002). Expanding the agenda-setting theory, authors like Littlejohn, Foss, and Oetzel (2002) and Weaver (2007), have identified two stages of agenda-setting: The first stage focuses on "the relative salience of issues or objects", and second stage focuses on identifying the important parts of the subject.

## **Framing**

To persuade the audiences to think about an issue in a certain way, the concept of "framing" has a crucial role to play in agenda-setting. Framing underscores the way audiences understand an issue based on the characterization of the topic in news coverage (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In other words, as described by Weaver (2007), by revising a story, media houses can affect the way audiences perceive a certain issue. The difference between agenda-setting and framing is subtle. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) have simply identified agenda-setting as "whether we think about an issue" and framing as "how we think about the issue". As audiences pay more attention to messages, it is more probable that audiences are influenced by framing (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Bonfiglio, 2013).

While Lippmann (1922) coined the phrase "the pictures in our heads", authors like Gruber (1990), as cited in D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010), examined how news stories are remembered better with visuals. Over words, images can provide an additional narrative. In a study by Gibson and Zillmann (2000), it was found that even without text, the audiences' perceptions on an issue match what the picture tries to convey. Research has found that images with a negative message have an agenda-setting effect unlike positive images—audiences do not

react as strongly to a positive image as they do to a negative image (Coleman & Wu, 2006; Newhagen & Reeves, 1990). Given the nature of photographs, the chances of readers being aware of visual framing are less likely than verbal framing (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Mandell & Shaw, 1973). Groshek (2008), as cited in Angelo and Kuypers (2010), noted that when topics are not directly related to readers or their personal experiences, framing is a vital source of orienting the readers to the issue and providing information on the same. With respect to wars and conflict zones, visual representation of the conflict helps acquaint readers with foreign people, places, and the events taking place.

### **Photojournalism**

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Jamieson (1992), in her study on presidential campaign advertising, found that attitudes and emotions of individuals are closely related to visual images. An article accompanied by a photograph is more likely to grab a readers' attention and evoke an emotional response (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002). News articles can be interpreted based on whether an image is present or not (Entman, 1993). Unlike images, texts require "linear logic" and are more difficult to process (Schwalbe & Dougherty, 2015). Certain news photographs, such as the Saddam Hussien statue falling in Baghdad in 2003, have the potential to become icons and audiences remember a news event because of the image (Perlmutter, 1998; Major & Perlmutter, 2005; Fahmy, Cho, Wanta, & Song, 2006).

Zillmann, Gibson, and Sargent (1999) found that while visuals help readers make sense of an article, it can lead to a biased view on an issue or simply provide one side of the story. The nature of an image and consequently the memory of the emotions elicited by visuals can have an agenda-setting effect.

As mentioned earlier, the agenda-setting role of photojournalism is affected by various external factors such as laws and foreign policies. Rachlin (1988), as cited in Fahmy and Kim (2008), argued that a host country's media will report international events in a manner that conforms with the country's national interest and its socio-economic- cultural perspective. In selecting the photos to display to the public, Schwartz (1992) has pointed out that news photographs are socially constructed products, i.e., journalistic practices within an institutional context affect the way photojournalists work. As a result, photojournalism only represents a fraction of the reality and by selecting a specific visual narrative, the large part of the audience is likely to have a uniform understanding of the news event.

In a study on the 2006 Lebanon war, Schwalbe and Dougherty (2015) found that US news magazines are more inclined to provide human interest stories where the US is not directly involved in the war—such proportional representation of people affected by conflict has not been found in articles where the US is directly involved. Fahmy et al. (2006) studied the agenda-setting role of the 9/11 visual images and how it affected an individual's concerns on terrorism—levels of concern increased as there was a positive correlation between the total number of images recalled of Palestinians dancing and cheering after the 9/11 attacks and the recollection of corpses. In a study on the US press reportage on the Afghan war, Fahmy (2005) found that the representation differed from foreign press in terms of visual depiction of human suffering, global reaction, patriotism and the political atmosphere. There was a differing approach in the manner Arab- and English-transnational press highlighted the tragedies of the war. While the Arabic newspaper, *Al Hayat*, provided more images of human tragedies, primary focus was placed on material destruction and visuals of the 9/11 attack. On the other hand, the English newspaper, *The International Herald Tribune*, focused on patriotism, aid, and weaponry of Western troops engaged in the Afghan war. It also provided more images with messages that humanised the victims of

the 9/11 attacks. Brantner, Lobinger, and Wetzstein (2011), in a study on the 2009 Gaza conflict reported in newspapers from Germany, Austria and Great Britain, found contrasting visual messages aimed at highlighting the institutional strength and statesmanship of the Isralies and generating empathy for Palestinians.

The agenda-setting role of photojournalism can also be determined by the size of the photographs used. Huh (1993) and Wanta (1986) argued that readers will pay more attention to a story and comprehend it better if the accompanying picture is a large photo.

As mentioned earlier, photojournalism has the potential to affect public perception. There is increasing debate about whether photojournalism reinforces existing biases and stereotypes on certain events. News photographs in US media on the 1991 Gulf war were US centric that laid emphasis on military might and technology rather than highlighting the tragedies of war (Griffin & Lee, 1995; Perlmutter, 1992). On the other hand, in an experiment on the news coverage of the Vietnam war, it was found that images define how information is processed and judged by reaching out to an individual's grasp of world events (Domke et al., 2002). The gruesome images of the Vietnam war created strong opposition to the U.S. government's involvement in the war.

It remains a fact that visual news coverage plays a crucial role in informing people about conflict. While photojournalists try to adhere to journalistic codes of ethics, many journalistic decisions on reportage are influenced by internal and external factors (Fahmy, 2005; Hulteng, 1985). Though freedom of the press is enshrined in the First Amendment, Knightley (2002) has observed that U.S. mainstream media prefers self-censorship over free expression. Winfield (1992) noted, as cited in Fahmy (2005), during conflict people's right to information gets restricted, military achievements are exaggerated and patriotism is worn on the sleeve; "truth becomes subordinate to victory" (Fahmy, 2005,).

## News Photographs and Public Perception: Case Studies

### Case 1: Vietnam War—The Positive Role of Photojournalism in Conflict Resolution

Nick Ut's image of a naked girl running down the street after being burnt by "accidental napalm", the burning monk and the execution of a Viet Cong member on the streets of Saigon are some of the most iconic photos of the Vietnam war. The role of the mass media in the Vietnam war has been a turning point in photojournalism (Lovelace, 2010); news photographs had a vital role to play in ending the conflict. Before the Vietnam war, news that went against national interest was censored to keep the spirit of patriotism alive and to stop the opposition from gaining an upper hand (Hallin, 1986). As the US government did not give Vietnam the status of an official war, journalists were not subject to censorship (Hallin, 1986). The incremental flow of photographs from Vietnam played an important role in the public questioning the legitimacy of the military and political claims that Vietnam was a justifiable and winnable war (Kennedy, 2017). For instance, the "Accidental Napalm" photograph, according to Hariman and Lucaites (2003), "violates one set of norms to activate another". The photograph had a strong emotional appeal as it evokes terror, pain, fear, and pity.

The iconic photos created disillusionment over the role of the US in Vietnam and encouraged the public to act against the government on behalf of democracy (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). As mentioned earlier, news photos that have a powerful emotional appeal are more likely to be remembered by the public and evoke strong emotional responses. The news photographs that came out of Vietnam challenged the ideology behind the war and depicted horror (Strunk, 1997).

**Case 2: Kosovo War—The Negative Role of Photojournalism in Strengthening Bias and Prejudice**

The image of an Albanian woman feeding her child while walking into Macedonia featured on the cover of *Time* magazine's special report is an iconic image of the Kosovo war. But has the photographic representation of the tragedy been fair? In a study conducted by Nikolaev (2009) on the war in Kosovo in 1999, it was found that photo coverage by American media was imbalanced with an apparent bias towards the Serbians. The study examined the reliability of the photojournalistic accounts of the Kosovo tragedy. Chomsky (1999) argued that the US government used media as a propaganda tool to justify American intervention in the Kosovo conflict, and exposed some official fabrications created by American media regarding the Kosovo crisis. Mueller's (1970) "rally-round-the-flag effect" highlights the phenomenon wherein domestic media agencies are compliant with the foreign policies of the home government. Nikolaev (2009) asserted that the main parties—the Albanians and the Serbians—suffered because of the war. A just representation of the tragedy would reflect similar portrayals of both ethnic groups. A one-sided approach by American media was visible where Serbians were portrayed as military machines, devastating everything that would come in its way. The American media replaced Serbian civilians with one metonymic image—that of Slobodan Milosevic and overlooked the adversities faced by Serbians. Albanians were depicted as defenseless civilians. The study found only two photos (out of 365) that highlighted the suffering of Serbians. Prior to the NATO and US involvement in the Kosovo war, no image of Kosovo was published in the three magazines examined in the study.

**Citizen Photojournalism and News Agenda**

In 2009, images depicting the death of Neda Agha-Soltan went viral on social media triggering anti-government protests in Iran. With the advent of internet technologies and social media, the ubiquitous electronic "war images" are playing an increasing role in shaping the public perceptions in conflict zones—while a war correspondent struggles with professional and ethical dilemmas, the internet is exposing ground realities and circumventing the agendas of traditional media houses. A plethora of digital information compounded with virtual images can swiftly investigate contradictions in "declared values, apparent policies and actions" (Kennedy, 2008). From providing rare insight into tension and conflict zones to reporting from places that are inaccessible by traditional photojournalists, the role of citizen photojournalists is increasing (Mortensen, 2011). Mortensen and Keshelashvili (2013) stated that with access to the internet and a mobile phone, citizen photojournalists can undertake most of the tasks performed by traditional photojournalists.

Given the increasing debate on citizen journalists as gatekeepers, Ali and Fahmy (2013) argued that traditional "gatekeepers" maintain the status quo when reporting about conflict zones. Though it has been argued that traditional photojournalism only reveals a small fraction of the reality, citizen photojournalism and amateur footage challenges conventional journalism ethics and practices—be it images circulating in and out of context, the poor-quality visuals or difficulty in tracking the original source and author of the image—digital photojournalism may also fall prey to agenda-setting (Mortensen, 2011). A limitation of this area is the little academic scrutiny that it has received. It is also debatable whether there has been any significant reduction in the power of mainstream photojournalism.

Kennedy (2008) argued that with the advent of digital technologies in traditional photojournalism, mainstream visual journalism is becoming a porous and volatile sphere. For instance, the images from Iraq and the Arab world on the website *crisispictures.org* provided striking graphic imagery that had a true likeness to the

ground realities, rather than the images that were being broadcast by mainstream American media. The swiftness of uploading a photograph taken from a mobile phone online cannot be matched by mainstream photojournalists who require time to download and edit the photographs taken from a professional camera.

Though the photographs of conflict zones appearing on social media and other websites are erratic, citizen photojournalism has the potential to remodel and influence traditional news images.

## Conclusion

The role of photojournalism in conflict zones has shaped public policies at the highest levels. Unlike texts, news images have a strong emotional appeal; striking images are generally included in a person's cognition, and many people identify historic events by a photograph. Given the persuasive nature of news photographs, academics have argued that such images can have an agenda-setting effect by providing an emotional appeal to the readers. Though photojournalists try to adhere to ethical standards of journalism, many are bound by internal and external factors such as organizational framework, national interests, and foreign policy. Photos from conflict zones, such as the 1991 Gulf war, reveal that quite often, news photos can lead to an incomplete representation of the reality. The emotional appeal of photographs coupled with the agenda of the newspapers results in most the readers thinking about an issue in a congruent manner. The rise of citizen photojournalism and digital technologies has challenged conventional photojournalism. Generally unfiltered, citizen photos can bypass official regulations. The rapid and unfiltered photo sharing can draw attention to discrepancies in governmental policies. Yet there is increasing debate over the credibility and professionalism of citizen photojournalism. Regardless of the erratic nature of citizen journalism, it cannot be denied that digital technologies and social media are reshaping mainstream news and traditional news images, as was seen in the case of the Arab Spring.

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