The Role of Photography in War Reporting: Visual Representation, Ethics and Public Perception

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ABSTRACT[1]

This study examines the role of photography in war reporting through the perspectives of professional photojournalists. The research is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with five internationally recognized war photographers, aiming to explore how photography functions as a form of visual witnessing in contemporary conflict environments. The findings indicate that war photography performs multiple roles: it documents events, informs the public, and shapes collective memory, while also evoking strong emotional responses. However, the study shows that photography is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a practice constrained by political, military, and institutional conditions that influence access, framing, and distribution. Ethical considerations emerge as central to professional identity, particularly in balancing the public's right to know with the protection of human dignity. The results also highlight the importance of front-page imagery in framing conflicts, as well as the role of audience interpretation in shaping meaning. Additionally, the digital media environment introduces challenges related to credibility, verification, and the growing influence of user-generated content. The study concludes that war photography represents a complex, ethically charged, and socially embedded practice that plays a crucial role in mediating contemporary conflicts.

Keywords: war photography; war reporting; photojournalism; visual communication; media ethics; audience perception; conflict reporting

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INTRODUCTION

War reporting represents one of the most demanding and ethically complex domains of journalism. Journalists operating in conflict zones are required not only to report events under conditions of extreme risk, but also to produce credible, timely, and socially relevant accounts of war. Their work extends beyond the transmission of factual information; it actively contributes to shaping public understanding of conflicts, their causes, and their consequences. Within this context, visual journalism, and particularly photography, occupies a central position. War photography provides an immediate and often visceral form of access to distant conflicts, enabling audiences to "see" events that would otherwise remain abstract or mediated solely through textual narratives. As previous research has shown, news images can mobilize public opinion, evoke emotional responses, and contribute to the construction of collective memory (Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 2010). Iconic war photographs frequently transcend their original context, becoming symbolic representations of entire conflicts. In this sense, photography does not merely illustrate journalistic reporting but operates as an autonomous form of visual witnessing. At the same time, the role of photography in war reporting is inherently complex and contested. Visual representations of conflict are shaped by multiple constraints, including restricted access to conflict zones, military and political control, editorial decisions, and broader media logics. As such, war photography cannot be understood as a neutral reflection of reality, but rather as a practice embedded within systems of power that influence what is visible and how it is interpreted (Allbeson & Oldfield, 2016). Furthermore, the rise of digital media has profoundly transformed the production, circulation, and reception of war images. The increasing presence of user-generated content and the erosion of traditional gatekeeping mechanisms have expanded visual coverage of conflicts, while simultaneously raising concerns about credibility, manipulation, and the blurring of boundaries between professional and citizen journalism (Allan, 2010; Allan & Matheson, 2013). In addition to these structural and technological challenges, war photography raises fundamental ethical questions. The act of photographing suffering, death, and destruction involves continuous negotiation between the public's right to know and the need to protect the dignity and privacy of those depicted. Decisions about what to show, how to frame it, and whether to publish certain images are rarely straightforward, particularly in contexts marked by violence and vulnerability. At the same time, war reporting entails significant physical and psychological risks, positioning photojournalists as both observers and participants within the environments they document. Despite a substantial body of literature on war reporting and visual journalism, there remains a need for empirically grounded insights into how professional war photographers themselves understand their role, responsibilities, and constraints in contemporary conflict reporting. In particular, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which practitioners negotiate the relationship between documentation, ethics, audience reception, and risk in rapidly evolving media environments. The aim of this study is therefore to examine the role of photography in war reporting through the perspectives of experienced international photojournalists. The study focuses on the documentary, informational, and emotional functions of war

photography, as well as on the ethical and safety challenges that shape professional practice. More specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the role of photography in war reporting?

(2) What is the significance of front-page photography in the context of war reporting? (3) How does audience interpretation influence the meaning of war photography? (4) How are ethics and journalist safety perceived and negotiated in war photography?

The empirical part of the study is based on qualitative research conducted through semi-structured interviews with five internationally recognized war photojournalists. By focusing on the perspectives of practitioners with extensive field experience, this study provides insight into the lived realities of war reporting and the professional logics that shape visual representations of conflict.

WAR REPORTING AS A PRACTICE OF MEDIATION AND PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Reporting is one of the foundational journalistic forms through which the public is informed about socially significant events. Rather than merely transmitting isolated facts, reporting organizes events into a structured narrative that helps audiences understand not only what happened, but also how and why it happened (Malović, 2005; Sapunar, 1995). In that sense, reporting occupies an intermediate position between the brevity of news and the more atmospheric, interpretive quality of reportage. Its importance lies not only in its informational role, but also in its documentary and social functions, since reporting contributes to the construction of public perception and collective memory (Sapunar, 1995; Zgrabljić Rotar, 2011). Although reporting is often associated with objectivity, scholars have long emphasized that it is never a neutral practice. The selection of sources, the ordering of facts, the framing of events, and the language used in presentation all shape the version of reality made visible to the public (Malović, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Reporting therefore operates both as a descriptive and interpretive journalistic practice. Its ethical credibility depends on truthfulness, verification, loyalty to citizens, and resistance to political manipulation, sensationalism, and economic pressure (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Malović, 2007). These principles are especially important because reporting helps define what counts as socially relevant reality and what remains outside public attention (Kunczik & Zipfel, 2006). These features become even more pronounced in war reporting, one of the most demanding and risky forms of journalism. Historically, war correspondents have acted as witnesses and mediators between the battlefield and distant publics, shaping how wars are understood politically, morally, and emotionally (Knightley, 2004). Since the nineteenth century, and especially with the development of telegraphy, broadcasting, television, and digital media, war reporting has become increasingly immediate and globally influential (Tumber & Webster, 2006). At the same time, modern warfare has made clear that wars are fought not only with weapons, but also with communication, narrative, and visibility (Carruthers, 2000). War reporting serves an indispensable public function by informing audiences about events in

conflict zones, but it also participates in constructing conflict narratives. Allan and Zelizer (2004) argue that war reporting cannot be understood as a neutral transfer of battlefield facts, since framing, selection, and narrative emphasis influence how wars are publicly interpreted. In this sense, journalists do not simply record conflict; they mediate it. Their work can affect public opinion, legitimize or delegitimize political action, and shape historical memory (Seib, 2002). The ethical stakes are therefore exceptionally high, particularly in situations where governments and military actors control access to information or attempt to instrumentalize journalists for propaganda purposes (Tumber & Palmer, 2004). The transformation of war reporting in the digital age has further complicated these dynamics. As information circulates globally and almost instantaneously, journalists no longer hold a monopoly over wartime visibility. Citizens equipped with smartphones increasingly contribute visual and textual material from conflict zones, producing new forms of witnessing but also new problems of verification and context (Allan, 2010; Allan & Matheson, 2013). Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) describe this condition as "diffused war," in which the boundaries between battlefield and media space, professional and amateur reporting, and immediate experience and mediated representation become increasingly blurred. While this environment enables broader access to conflict imagery, it also intensifies the risks of disinformation, selective framing, and emotional oversaturation. For that reason, professional war reporting remains essential not only because of access and skill, but because of its commitment to verification, context, and ethical accountability. Against this background, some scholars have proposed peace journalism as an alternative to dominant conflict-oriented reporting. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) argue for reporting that foregrounds human consequences, dialogue, and possibilities for conflict resolution rather than reproducing binary or sensationalist narratives. Although war journalism continues to operate under conditions of urgency, danger, and political pressure, this perspective is important because it highlights that journalistic representation of war is never merely descriptive. It is also normative, shaping how violence is understood, remembered, and responded to.

PHOTOJOURNALISM, WAR PHOTOGRAPHY, AND THE POLITICS OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION

Within war reporting, photography occupies a particularly powerful role because it appears to offer direct visual access to conflict. Yet photojournalism is not simply an illustrative supplement to written reporting. It is a distinct mode of representation that documents events, produces emotional responses, and shapes public understandings of violence, suffering, and political responsibility (Zelizer, 2010). War photography is therefore both evidentiary and interpretive: it can serve as proof, testimony, and memory, but it also frames conflict through choices of composition, timing, proximity, and circulation. The apparent realism of photography has long contributed to its authority. Barthes (1981) emphasized photography's dual capacity to register reality and to provoke personal, affective engagement through punctum, the detail that

emotionally pierces the viewer. At the same time, scholars have repeatedly cautioned against treating photographs as transparent truth. Newton (2001) describes the burden of visual truth in photojournalism, noting that photographs are widely perceived as objective evidence even though they are always products of framing, selection, and context. Boudana (2011) similarly argues that photographic objectivity is not inherent in the image itself, but constructed through professional norms and institutional practices. This tension is especially significant in war photography, where images often become the dominant public symbols of conflict. Historically, war photography has shaped both immediate public opinion and long-term collective memory. From the earliest images of the Crimean War and the American Civil War to iconic photographs from Vietnam and beyond, images of war have influenced how violence is morally and politically understood (Perlmutter, 1998; Griffin, 2010). They do not merely record events; they can become enduring symbols that stand in for entire conflicts. In this way, war photographs contribute to historical memory, humanitarian response, and even post-conflict processes of reckoning and reconciliation (Bellmer & Möller, 2023). Kamber (2013), drawing on the testimony of war photojournalists, shows that such images are produced under conditions of danger, censorship, restricted access, and institutional pressure, which means that what becomes visible in public discourse is always shaped by power relations as much as by journalistic intention. For this reason, war photography should be understood as a political and discursive practice rather than as a simple visual record. Allan and Allbeson (2013) and Allbeson and Oldfield (2016) demonstrate that war images are embedded in broader media, military, and ideological structures that shape their production and interpretation. O'Loughlin (2011) goes further by arguing that images function as weapons within media conflict, shaping perceptions and influencing political meaning. Phu (2022) likewise shows that contemporary war photography is part of wider visual struggles over who gets to define conflict, suffering, legitimacy, and victimhood. Seen from this perspective, photographs do not just depict war; they help construct its public narrative. At the same time, the emotional force of war photography is central to its social power. Sontag (2003) observed that images of suffering can provoke empathy and moral attention, but can also become routinized or transformed into spectacle. This ambivalence remains central to contemporary scholarship. Research on audience reactions to images from the war in Ukraine suggests that visual depictions of violence can evoke responses ranging from empathy and solidarity to fatigue and desensitization, depending on framing and repetition (Müller & Christ, 2023). War images therefore do not automatically generate understanding; their impact depends on circulation, context, and interpretive framing. Hariman and Lucaites (2007) have shown that some images acquire the status of public icons precisely because they condense complex political realities into emotionally resonant visual forms. The ethical dimension of war photography follows directly from this representational power. Decisions about what to show, how much suffering to reveal, and how to portray the dead, injured, or displaced are never only aesthetic decisions. They are moral and political ones. Sontag (2003) warned of the dehumanizing potential of repeated exposure to atrocity, while Andén-Papadopoulos (2013) stressed the importance of preserving the dignity of war victims in visual re-

porting. Chapnick (1994), Newton (2001), and Ritchin (2009) similarly underline that credibility in photojournalism depends on the simultaneous protection of truthfulness and human dignity. This remains a central challenge in contemporary conflict reporting, particularly when emotionally powerful images are also commercially attractive or politically exploitable. Digital technologies have intensified both the possibilities and the risks of visual war reporting. On the one hand, social media platforms and mobile devices have democratized image production, allowing citizens to act as witnesses and contributors to conflict visibility (Matsilele, 2016; Pantti & Andén-Papadopoulos, 2011). On the other hand, this expanded visual field has also increased the circulation of decontextualized, manipulated, or strategically weaponized images. Ritchin (2013) points to the growing fragility of photographic credibility in digital environments, while Campbell (2014) highlights the threat posed by image manipulation to public trust in photojournalism. More recent work suggests that artificial intelligence, synthetic imagery, and deepfakes will make these ethical problems even more urgent (Hadland, 2025). In this environment, the value of professional photojournalism lies not only in image capture itself, but in verification, contextualization, and adherence to ethical standards. Contemporary war photography must therefore be understood as a form of visual witnessing shaped by competing pressures: documentation and interpretation, empathy and spectacle, public interest and dignity, immediacy and verification. Its power lies precisely in this tension. War photographs can document atrocities, mobilize public attention, and preserve collective memory, but they can also oversimplify conflict, reproduce hierarchies of visibility, or become tools of propaganda. As such, photography in war reporting is not marginal to journalism; it is one of the central arenas in which the meaning of conflict is publicly negotiated.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the role of photography in war reporting from the perspective of professional photojournalists. Given the complexity of war reporting as a mediated, ethical, and experiential practice, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate, as it enables an in-depth understanding of meanings, interpretations, and professional experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary objective of the research is to examine how war photographers conceptualize the value, function, and impact of photography in conflict reporting. Particular attention is given to the conditions under which war photography is produced, the extent to which these conditions influence the messages conveyed to the public, and the ways in which contemporary forms of warfare shape visual representation. In addition, the study explores the relationship between audience reception and photographic production, as well as ethical considerations and professional risks associated with war reporting.

To address these objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What is the role of photography in war reporting?

RQ2: What is the significance of front-page photography in the context of war reporting?

RQ3: How does audience interpretation influence the meaning of war photography?

RQ4: How are ethics and journalist safety perceived and negotiated in war photography?

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, a method particularly suited for exploring complex professional practices and subjective experiences. Semi-structured interviews allow for a balance between comparability across participants and flexibility to probe deeper into specific themes emerging during the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach is especially valuable in research contexts where participants possess highly specialized knowledge and experiential insight, as is the case with war photojournalists.

A total of five internationally recognized war photographers participated in the study: Marko Đurica (Reuters), Alkis Konstantinidis (Reuters), Emilio Morenatti (Associated Press), Emanuele Satolli (The Wall Street Journal), and Goran Tomašević (The Globe and Mail). These participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their extensive professional experience in conflict zones and their affiliation with leading global media organizations. The sampling strategy aimed to ensure diversity of perspectives in terms of institutional affiliation (news agencies vs. newspapers) and professional trajectories (staff photographers vs. freelance background), thereby enhancing the analytical depth of the study (Patton, 2015).

The interviews were conducted between August 28 and September 2, 2025, in Croatian, English, and Italian. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, subsequently transcribed, and translated into a common working language for analysis. The interview guide consisted of 17 questions organized into five thematic areas:

- Photography in war: message and information
- The importance of front-page photography
- The relationship between audience and photography
- Ethics of photography
- Risks of war reporting

This thematic structure was designed to capture both the communicative and ethical dimensions of war photography, as well as its broader social and professional implications.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. The analysis involved several stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review and refinement of themes, and interpretation in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of recurring patterns in participants' narratives, while also preserving the richness and nuance of individual perspectives. The resulting themes were not treated as isolated categories, but as interconnected dimensions of a broader understanding of war photography as a professional and social practice.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study prior to the interviews and provided their consent for participation and the use of their statements for academic purposes. Given the professional status of the participants and their public roles, they agreed to be identified by name in the presentation of findings. At the same time, particular care was taken to ensure that the research process respected the ethical sensitivities associated with war reporting, including issues of trauma, professional risk, and the representation of violence. The study adheres to general principles of research ethics, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and responsible handling of data (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

This study is subject to certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the relatively small sample size reflects the specificity of the research focus, as the study targets highly experienced and internationally recognized war photojournalists. While this limits statistical generalizability, it allows for in-depth insight into professional practices and perspectives that are otherwise difficult to access.

Second, the findings are based on self-reported accounts, which may be shaped by individual experiences, professional norms, and institutional contexts. However, such subjective perspectives are central to qualitative inquiry, particularly in research aiming to understand meaning-making processes within professional communities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Finally, the study does not include audience-based analysis, which could provide additional insight into the reception and interpretation of war photography. Future research could therefore expand the analytical framework by incorporating audience perspectives and comparative approaches.

FINDINGS

While the interview guide included five thematic areas, the analysis resulted in four analytically integrated themes. The analysis identified four interrelated themes: (1) war photography as evidence and constrained witnessing, (2) front-page imagery as visual condensation of conflict, (3) audience reception and the interpretive instability of war images, and (4) ethics, professional credibility, and the risks of war reporting.

Theme 1: War Photography as Evidence and Constrained Witnessing

Across all interviews, participants described war photography primarily as a form of documentation and public witnessing. Photography was consistently understood as a means of making conflict visible to audiences who are physically distant from war zones and would otherwise remain dependent on second-hand accounts. In this sense, participants framed photography not merely as an illustration of written reporting, but as an evidentiary practice that helps establish the reality of war and counters denial, political euphemism, or selective visibility. Several interviewees emphasized that the core value of war photography lies in its ability to show the lived consequences of war, especially for civilians. Rather than focusing exclusively on military action, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of documenting how war transforms everyday life, disrupts families, and produces suffering beyond the battlefield. One interviewee summarized this position by stating that his primary aim is to show "how civilians live in wartime conditions," while another argued that the clearest visual truth war photography can offer is "the undeniable impact on civilian lives." At the same time, participants also made clear that this witnessing function is heavily conditioned by structural constraints. Access to frontline locations is often regulated by military authorities, and the possibility of documenting events depends on permissions, censorship, and security considerations. Several interviewees noted that contemporary conflicts often make it impossible for one journalist to report from both sides, which narrows the scope of visual testimony and complicates aspirations toward balance. One participant explicitly acknowledged that in the current Russia–Ukraine war, he could only work from the Ukrainian side and that such positioning may affect journalistic autonomy, even when the intention remains to produce "honest images." A further recurring issue concerned the tension between access and propaganda. Participants described situations in which journalists were denied access when politically sensitive events were occurring, while in other instances authorities facilitated access in ways that risked turning reporting into managed visibility. One interviewee described such arrangements as creating the feeling of becoming "almost part of a propaganda machine." These accounts suggest that war photography is shaped not only by the photographer's professional judgment, but also by the political conditions under which visual evidence becomes possible. Taken together, these findings indicate that participants view war photography as a powerful documentary practice, but not as a transparent window onto conflict. Rather, it emerges as a constrained form of

witnessing in which truth-telling depends on access, context, professional experience, and constant negotiation with institutions of military and political power.

Theme 2: Front-Page Imagery and the Condensation of Conflict

The second theme concerns the symbolic and editorial significance of front-page war photography. Participants consistently described the front-page image as the strongest or most representative visual element within a story. Its primary role is to attract attention, but also to condense a broader conflict into a single image that can communicate urgency, gravity, and emotional intensity. Interviewees emphasized that such images must do more than simply illustrate an event. In their view, the strongest front-page photographs synthesize the essence of a situation and create an entry point into the wider story. As one participant explained, the front-page photograph must "summarize the essence of the conflict," while also remaining connected to the broader set of images and text that follow. Another participant described the ideal front-page image as one that is both technically strong and capable of representing the people and circumstances that define a particular conflict moment. At the same time, participants recognized that front-page selection is not determined solely by photographic quality. Editorial judgment, exclusivity, timing, and broader political context all influence which images are elevated to front-page status. One interviewee noted that even very strong photographs do not necessarily appear on front pages because "sometimes it is simply not the right political moment." Another stressed that such visibility may depend on being the only photographer to capture a major event. Some participants also pointed to the transformation of the media environment, arguing that the traditional meaning of the front page has shifted in the digital era. While the concept remains relevant, it increasingly refers not only to print newspapers, but to homepage displays, mobile interfaces, and other digital entry points. In this context, the visibility of war photography has expanded, but some participants suggested that increased visual volume has not necessarily improved visual standards. Overall, the findings suggest that front-page war photography functions as a powerful form of visual framing. It does not merely capture attention; it shapes first impressions, determines what is made symbolically central, and influences how audiences enter and interpret the story of conflict.

Theme 3: Audience Reception, Emotional Impact, and Contextual Framing

A third major theme concerns the relationship between war photography and its audiences. Participants broadly agreed that war images produce strong emotional responses, including shock, sadness, empathy, discomfort, and, in some cases, disbelief. War photography was not described as pleasurable viewing; rather, its disturbing character was often seen as intrinsic to its public function. Several participants suggested that such images must sometimes unsettle viewers in order to communicate the reality of war. At the same time, interviewees also recognized that the emotional

power of an image is not fixed. Its effect depends on what is shown, how it is framed, and in what context it is published. Participants repeatedly stressed that photography can intensify or reduce the perceived significance of an event. One photographer noted that a single powerful frame may amplify the dramatic impression of a situation, while another emphasized that the image always shows only a limited visual field and therefore cannot capture everything that surrounds the photographed moment. This suggests a strong awareness among participants that photographs are simultaneously truthful and partial. Context emerged as especially important in relation to captions, editorial placement, and subsequent use by media clients. Some interviewees expressed concern that agency photographers do not fully control how their images are later framed or repurposed, which can alter their meaning substantially. One participant observed that the same photograph may be used in different ways by different outlets, thereby producing "completely different emotions" in viewers. Another recalled having pursued legal action when his images were used in what he considered an inappropriate context. Participants differed somewhat in how much importance they attached to audience response. Some viewed reactions on social media and in public commentary as useful indicators of an image's resonance, while others were less concerned with reception and more focused on professional fidelity to the event itself. Nevertheless, across these differences, there was broad agreement that war photography is deeply entangled with audience interpretation and that its public meaning is never determined by the image alone. These findings suggest that war photography operates through a dynamic relationship between image, caption, platform, and audience. Its emotional force is central to its social function, but its meaning remains interpretively unstable and highly dependent on context.

Theme 4: Ethics, Professional Credibility, and the Risks of War Reporting

The fourth theme combines two closely connected dimensions of participants' accounts: ethical responsibility and professional risk. Interviewees unanimously described ethics as a non-negotiable principle of war photography. Across the interviews, ethical professionalism was associated with truthfulness, non-manipulation, respect for human dignity, and resistance to staging or altering images. Several participants drew a sharp distinction between professional photojournalism and the broader unregulated visual environment of social media, arguing that credibility remains the defining value of their work. At the same time, ethical questions were not framed in simplistic terms. Participants frequently described ethical decision-making as situational, especially when photographing death, suffering, children, or highly vulnerable civilians. A recurring tension emerged between the public's right to see and the individual's right to privacy and dignity. Some interviewees argued that non-explicit images can be equally powerful, or even more effective, because they preserve dignity while still conveying suffering. Others maintained that war photography must show brutality clearly and directly if it is to communicate the reality of violence without euphemism. This divergence is analytically significant, since it suggests that professional consensus exists around

ethical seriousness, but not around a single visual model of ethical representation. Participants also discussed how privacy regulations and institutional restrictions affect visual reporting. While most acknowledged the importance of protecting vulnerable people, especially minors, they also noted that strict privacy requirements can become difficult to apply in urgent wartime conditions and may sometimes inhibit documentation of events with clear public relevance. In this respect, ethical practice was presented not as rigid rule-following, but as judgment exercised under pressure. Risk formed the second major dimension of this theme. All participants emphasized that war reporting necessarily involves exposure to danger, including shelling, kidnapping, injury, trauma, and death. Importantly, however, they presented risk not as an exceptional by-product, but as a constitutive element of war photography. Several interviewees stressed that entering conflict zones is, in principle, a voluntary professional decision and that journalists themselves must assess how much risk is justified by the potential journalistic value of a given image. Participants also reported that media organizations now invest more heavily in safety training, hostile-environment preparation, protective equipment, armored transport, and security protocols. While this was generally welcomed, some interviewees also argued that excessive procedural control can hinder reporting, restrict mobility, and serve institutional liability concerns as much as journalist safety. This points to a broader tension between protection and editorial freedom in contemporary conflict reporting. Finally, participants repeatedly emphasized that the most difficult aspect of war reporting is not only physical danger, but also sustained exposure to civilian suffering and the deaths of colleagues. Such testimonies reveal that risk in war photography is simultaneously physical, emotional, and moral. The findings therefore suggest that professional war photography is sustained through a combination of ethical commitment, embodied exposure, and continuous negotiation between the demands of witnessing and the imperative of survival.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of war photography as a complex journalistic practice situated at the intersection of documentation, ethics, politics, and risk. Across all interviews, participants consistently framed war photography as a form of visual witnessing whose primary function is to document reality and inform the public. This aligns with Sapunar's (1995) understanding of journalism as a form of social communication that contributes to shaping public perception and collective memory. In this sense, war photography extends beyond illustrative support to written reporting and operates as an autonomous evidentiary medium capable of constructing historical narratives and moral awareness. At the same time, the findings challenge any notion of photographic objectivity as transparency. Participants repeatedly emphasized that access to war zones is structured by political and military constraints, confirming Allbeson and Oldfield's (2016) argument that war images are produced within systems of power that shape what can be seen, recorded, and distributed. The impossibility of covering both sides of contemporary conflicts, as

highlighted by several interviewees, further complicates traditional ideals of journalistic balance. War photography thus emerges as a form of constrained witnessing, in which truth-telling is contingent upon access, positioning, and institutional conditions rather than solely on professional intent. Ethics emerged as a central organizing principle of professional identity among participants. Consistent with Malović (2007), who stresses that journalism must resist manipulation and political pressure, interviewees articulated a strong normative commitment to authenticity, non-manipulation, and respect for human dignity. Importantly, however, ethical practice was not described as fixed or universal, but as situational and negotiated. The tension between the public's right to know and the protection of subjects, particularly in cases involving explicit violence or vulnerable individuals, reveals the inherently interpretive nature of ethical decision-making in war photography. This finding resonates with broader debates in visual journalism (Sontag, 2003; Newton, 2001), which highlight the dual responsibility of photographers to both truth and dignity. The study also highlights the transformative impact of digital media environments on war photography. Participants noted that the proliferation of user-generated content and the increasing role of social media have blurred the boundaries between professional and citizen journalism, supporting Allan and Matheson's (2013) and Allan's (2010) arguments about the erosion of traditional gatekeeping structures. While this democratization expands the volume of visual information, it simultaneously introduces challenges related to credibility, verification, and professional authority. In response, participants emphasized the importance of individual credibility and institutional reputation as key mechanisms for maintaining trust in an environment saturated with images. Front-page photography remains a particularly significant site of visual power. The findings confirm Zelizer's (2010) assertion that news images can mobilize public opinion and shape historical narratives. Participants described front-page images as those that condense complex conflicts into a single, symbolically powerful frame capable of attracting attention and framing interpretation. However, the selection of such images is not neutral; it is shaped by editorial priorities, political context, and market considerations, echoing Carruthers' (2000) analysis of the relationship between media, conflict, and propaganda. Even in the digital age, where the concept of the "front page" has evolved, its function as an entry point into the narrative of war remains intact. Audience reception emerged as another crucial dimension of war photography. The findings indicate that war images consistently provoke strong emotional responses, including shock, empathy, and discomfort, supporting previous research on the affective power of visual media (Sontag, 2003). However, participants also emphasized the interpretive instability of photographs, noting that meaning is highly dependent on context, captioning, and editorial framing. This confirms Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch's (2009) argument that media framing plays a decisive role in shaping public understanding. War photography is thus inherently polysemic: its meaning is not fixed but co-constructed by journalists, media institutions, and audiences. The identified divergence between preferences for explicit versus non-explicit imagery further illustrates the absence of a single normative model for representing violence. Finally, the findings underscore that risk is an intrinsic and unavoidable dimension of war reporting. In line with Simpson and Coté (2006),

participants described exposure to physical danger, psychological trauma, and moral strain as integral to their professional practice. Although media organizations increasingly invest in safety training and protective measures, these do not eliminate risk but rather redistribute it within institutional frameworks. Moreover, some participants pointed to tensions between safety protocols and journalistic autonomy, suggesting that contemporary war reporting is shaped not only by external dangers but also by internal organizational constraints. In relation to the research questions, the findings confirm that war photography performs multiple, overlapping functions: it documents events, shapes public perception, and evokes emotional engagement (RQ1). Front-page images serve as key instruments of visual framing and narrative condensation (RQ2), while audience interpretation remains context-dependent and emotionally driven (RQ3). Finally, ethical considerations and professional risks are inseparable components of war photography, requiring continuous negotiation between truth, responsibility, and safety (RQ4).

Overall, the study demonstrates that war photography cannot be understood as a neutral reflection of reality. Rather, it is a socially embedded, ethically charged, and politically conditioned practice that plays a central role in mediating contemporary conflicts. Its power lies not only in what it shows, but in how, where, and under what conditions those images become visible to the public.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of photography in war reporting through the perspectives of experienced international photojournalists, offering insight into how visual journalism operates under conditions of conflict, constraint, and risk. The findings demonstrate that war photography cannot be reduced to a mere tool of documentation; rather, it functions simultaneously as evidence, testimony, and a powerful mechanism for shaping public understanding of war. At its core, war photography emerges as a form of visual witnessing that contributes to informing the public, documenting historical events, and sustaining collective memory. However, this witnessing is not neutral or unrestricted. The study shows that photographic practice is embedded within political, military, and institutional frameworks that condition access, visibility, and representation. In this sense, war photography should be understood as a negotiated practice, one that is shaped as much by external constraints as by professional norms and individual judgment. A central contribution of this study lies in highlighting the role of ethics as a defining feature of professional war photography. Participants consistently emphasized credibility, non-manipulation, and respect for human dignity as fundamental principles. Yet, ethical decision-making was also shown to be situational and context-dependent, particularly when navigating tensions between the public's right to know and the protection of vulnerable subjects. This finding reinforces the view that ethical practice in war reporting is not governed by fixed rules alone, but by continuous reflexive judgment under conditions of uncertainty. The study further confirms the enduring importance of front-page imagery as a site of visual power.

Even within a transformed digital media landscape, certain images retain the capacity to condense complex conflicts into symbolic representations that shape public narratives and historical memory. At the same time, audience interpretation of such images remains fluid and context-dependent, underscoring the inherently polysemic nature of war photography and the importance of editorial framing. In addition, the findings draw attention to the challenges posed by digital transformation. The proliferation of user-generated content and the erosion of traditional gatekeeping structures have expanded the visibility of conflict while simultaneously complicating issues of verification and credibility. In this environment, the authority of war photography increasingly depends on the professional integrity of photographers and the institutional trustworthiness of the media organizations that distribute their work. Finally, the study underscores that risk, physical, psychological, and moral, is an inseparable dimension of war reporting. While advances in safety protocols have improved working conditions, they have not eliminated the fundamental dangers of conflict journalism. Instead, they reveal an ongoing tension between protection, autonomy, and the imperative to bear witness. Taken together, these findings suggest that war photography occupies a uniquely complex position within contemporary journalism. It is at once documentary and interpretive, ethical and political, constrained and impactful. Its significance lies not only in its capacity to show what happens in war, but in how it mediates that reality for global audiences. Future research could build on these findings by incorporating audience-based studies, comparative analyses across different conflicts, or examinations of the role of artificial intelligence and synthetic imagery in reshaping visual war reporting. Such approaches would further deepen understanding of how war is increasingly mediated through images in a rapidly evolving digital environment. Ultimately, the continued relevance of war photography depends on its ability to uphold core journalistic values, truthfulness, responsibility, and respect for human dignity, while adapting to the technological and political transformations that define contemporary conflict reporting.

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Uloga fotografije u ratnom izvještavanju: vizualno predstavljanje, etika i javna percepcija

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SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu fotografije u ratnom izvještavanju iz perspektive profesionalnih fotoreportera. Istraživanje se temelji na kvalitativnoj metodi polustrukturiranih intervjua provedenih s pet međunarodno priznatih ratnih fotografa, s ciljem razumijevanja fotografije kao oblika vizualnog svjedočenja u suvremenim sukobima. Rezultati pokazuju da ratna fotografija ima višestruku funkciju: dokumentira događaje, informira javnost i oblikuje kolektivno pamćenje, istodobno izazivajući snažne emocionalne reakcije. Međutim, fotografija nije neutralan odraz stvarnosti, već praksa oblikovana političkim, vojnim i institucionalnim ograničenjima koja utječu na pristup, kadriranje i distribuciju vizualnog sadržaja. Etika se pokazuje kao ključna dimenzija profesionalnog identiteta, osobito u balansiranju između prava javnosti na informaciju i zaštite dostojanstva prikazanih osoba. Rezultati također naglašavaju važnost naslovnih fotografija u oblikovanju percepcije sukoba te ulogu publike u interpretaciji značenja fotografija. Digitalno okruženje dodatno otvara izazove vezane uz vjerodostojnost, provjeru informacija i širenje sadržaja koje proizvode građani. Zaključno, ratna fotografija predstavlja kompleksnu, etički zahtjevnu i društveno uvjetovanu praksu koja ima ključnu ulogu u medijskom posredovanju ratnih sukoba.

Ključne riječi: ratna fotografija; ratno izvještavanje; fotonovinarstvo; vizualna komunikacija; medijska etika; percepcija publike; sukobi