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Institutional Space and Visual Framing in Online News – Perp Walk Coverage in Croatian Political Scandals

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ABSTRACT The study examines how institutional space structures the visual representation of political scandals in online news media. Building on visual framing theory and research on political scandal communication, the paper focuses on perp walk imagery as a key visual form through which institutional authority and public accusation, as well as the symbolic ordering of social reality, are made visible. The analysis is based on a quantitative content analysis of 486 news photographs published in Croatian online media, covering two political scandals at different levels of political power: a local-level corruption scandal (Hipodrom) and a national-level ministerial scandal (Beroš). Visual framing is operationalized through a set of institutional and spatial indicators, including police presence, restraining devices, legal actors, and institutional environments. The findings show that institutional space plays a central role in structuring visual scandal coverage, while also revealing differences in the distribution of visual indicators between the two cases. The local-level scandal shows a more concentrated combination of institutional control, with a higher prevalence of perp walk imagery, police presence, handcuffs, visual isolation, and institutional spaces connected with the investigation,

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while the national-level scandal follows a different temporal trajectory, with legal actors and investigative settings more prominent in the initial phase and arrest-related imagery emerging later. The results further indicate that institutional spaces are often depicted without the political actor being visually present, suggesting that the visualization of such environments can itself function as a signal of institutional intervention, as well as a marker of symbolic authority and boundary maintenance. These patterns highlight the importance of institutional space in understanding the visual construction of political scandals and point to the limitations of approaches that focus exclusively on textual framing, while also demonstrating the relevance of a communication-anthropological perspective for the understanding of how institutional spaces and political bodies become involved in processes of symbolic classification, boundary maintenance, and status transition.

Key words: political scandals, visual framing, institutional space, perp walk, online news, content analysis, visual communication, anthropology of media.

1. Introduction

Political scandals represent moments of intensified public visibility in which media, power, and accountability intersect (Thompson, 2000). In contemporary digital news settings, these processes are increasingly shaped not only by textual narratives but also by visual representations that structure how events are perceived and interpreted (von Sikorski, 2022). Despite this, research on political scandals has predominantly focused on textual framing (Entman, 1993), while the visual dimension remains underexplored.

News images function as framing devices that guide audience interpretation and structure attention, often serving as the primary entry point into news content (Papacharissi, 2010; Chadwick, 2013; von Sikorski, 2022). In scandal coverage, perp walk imagery – depicting suspects escorted through institutional space – represents a particularly salient visual form through which institutional authority is made visible (Boudana, 2014). Such representations situate political actors within spaces associated with law enforcement and judicial processes, contributing to the construction of scandal as an institutional phenomenon. However, the spatial dimension of visual framing remains insufficiently examined. Institutional environments – such as police and judicial settings – function as visual markers of authority and control (Foucault, 1995), yet comparative analyses across different levels of political power are limited.

This study addresses this gap by analysing visual representations of two Croatian political scandals – a local-level (Hipodrom) and a national-level case (Beroš) – with a focus on institutional space in online news photography. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of visual indicators characterize political scandal coverage in online news photographs?

RQ2: Which spatial and institutional indicators most frequently structure perp walk imagery in online news photographs?

RQ3: How do institutional visual indicators differ between the two selected political scandals and how are they distributed over time?

2. Literature Review

Research in political communication increasingly recognizes visual communication as a central component of political meaning-making rather than a supplementary layer to textual narration (de-Lima-Santos et al., 2024; von Sikorski, 2022). In contemporary news environments, images function as important framing devices (Entman, 2012) that shape how audiences interpret political scandals and evaluate the actors involved (von Sikorski and Knoll, 2019). As Messaris and Abraham (2001) argue, visuals are often perceived as being "closer to the truth" than other forms of communication, which gives them particular persuasive power and enables them to (re)frame and influence audience evaluations of political events (Entman, 2012).

The central theoretical point of departure for the understanding of visual images as autonomous meaning-making units is provided by Entman's definition of framing as the selection and salience of specific aspects of reality that promote "a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993: 52). From this perspective, framing does not operate exclusively through language but is equally embedded in visual representation. Accordingly, frames may be grounded in visual stimuli that are "capable of signifying interpretable information" (Geise and Baden, 2015: 48), highlighting the need to analyse images as independent carriers of meaning. This perspective is further developed by Bock (2020), who conceptualizes visual framing as contingent upon the material properties of images and their ideological embeddedness, emphasizing that meaning is not fixed but emerges through the interaction between visual form, context, and interpretation. Despite this theoretical recognition, research on political scandals has long privileged textual and discursive dimensions of media coverage (Maier, Jansen and von Sikorski, 2019). Classical studies conceptualized scandals primarily through verbal narratives of norm violation and moral evaluation (Thompson, 2000), while subsequent research continued to operationalize scandal framing through textual cues such as keywords, narrative structures, and rhetorical strategies (Esser and Hartung, 2004; Just and Crigler, 2019). As a result, visual dimensions of scandal communication have long been marginalized in framing research (Geise and Xu, 2025) and under-theorized within scandal research (von Sikorski, 2018b). This imbalance is particularly problematic in digital news environments, where images often constitute the first and

most salient point of contact between audiences and scandal narratives. Visuals are processed rapidly, and audiences tend to engage with images before reading accompanying text (Garcia and Stark, 1991). In digitally mediated communication, affective and visual cues guide interpretation prior to deliberative engagement (Papacharissi, 2010), while online news formats structurally privilege visual immediacy and circulation (Chadwick, 2013). In the context of political scandals, lead images and repeated visual elements play a key role in organizing attention and shaping meaning, often preceding or even substituting textual interpretation (Zulli, 2020). Geise and Baden (2015) explicitly criticize this text-centred bias, arguing that frames cannot be understood exclusively as linguistic constructs because visual stimuli convey structured and interpretable meaning. Focusing solely on text therefore risks overlooking how scandal interpretation is shaped implicitly, through images that communicate evaluation without explicit verbal judgment. This is particularly relevant in the early stages of political scandals, when legal uncertainty may limit explicit textual accusations, while visual cues nonetheless structure interpretation - suggest guilt, isolation, or loss of legitimacy (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; von Sikorski, 2018a). Recent empirical research further support this position, demonstrating that visual information interacts with textual framing to shape political impressions and character evaluations (Steffan, Grabe and Famulari, 2026). Experimental studies show that visual cues can influence audience judgments independently of textual framing and may reinforce, amplify, or counteract textual interpretations (von Sikorski, 2022; Geise and Baden, 2015; von Sikorski and Ludwig, 2018).

Studies focusing specifically on news images have identified multiple visual elements relevant for framing effects. Facial appearance and rapid trait inferences influence perceptions of competence and credibility (Todorov et al., 2005), while emotional expressions affect moral evaluation and affective responses (Peng, 2018). Visual composition also plays a role: lighting, colour, and contrast carry symbolic meanings that shape evaluations of political actors (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; von Sikorski, 2018b), while camera angle and spatial arrangement contribute to perceptions of power, weakness, or isolation (Kepplinger, 1982; von Sikorski and Ludwig, 2018). More broadly, visual grammar research shows that compositional features such as framing distance, perspective, and spatial organization systematically construct evaluative meaning in political imagery (El Damanhoury and Garud-Paktar, 2022).

Within political scandal coverage, the perp walk represents a particularly salient and ritualized form of visual framing through which accusation and institutional authority become publicly visible (Boudana, 2014). The term originates from U.S. law-enforcement terminology (derived from perpetrator) and refers to the escorted movement of a suspect – typically between detention and court – under conditions of media visibility (Bock, 2015). Although formally part of procedural practice, the perp walk acquires a strong symbolic dimension, as the suspect's body is exposed to public scrutiny prior

to any legal determination of guilt (Bock, 2015). Bock (2015) further distinguishes between a "classic" perp walk, involving a detained suspect under police escort, and milder variants in which individuals appear voluntarily for court proceedings while still being subjected to intense media exposure, underscoring that all forms share a core feature of coercive visibility and lack of consent (Bock, 2015). This emphasis on public exposure is reinforced in lexicographic definitions. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines perp walk as a public escort of an arrested person by police officers, typically between institutional locations such as courts and police vehicles, thereby emphasizing its procedural and institutional character. In contrast, the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) highlights its spatial and media dimension, defining perp walk as a situation in which the police lead an arrested person through public space so that they can be seen and photographed by the media. Taken together, these definitions identify four constitutive elements of perp walk: physical transfer through institutional space, police escort, media presence ensuring public visibility, and the coerced nature of the display (Bock, 2015). Beyond its physical execution, Bock (2015) problematizes the very terminology of the practice, noting that the label *perp* presupposes guilt and thus linguistically frames the individual as a perpetrator rather than an accused person. This linguistic presumption aligns with visual practices in which suspects are depicted in restraints or under police control, producing an implicit frame of guilt even in the absence of explicit textual claims (Bock, 2015).

From a visual-framing perspective, the perp walk can therefore be understood as a constellation of negative visual cues embedded in press photographs. Drawing on van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) concept of rites of passage, the perp walk may also be understood as a symbolic transition in which a political actor is publicly displaced from a position of authority. Within a broader communication-anthropological framework, this process can be interpreted through Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. In anthropological theory, liminality describes a transitional state in which an individual is symbolically separated from an established social status while not yet incorporated into a new one. Applied to mediated political scandal, the perp walk can therefore be understood as a ritualized status transition: the accused political actor is symbolically separated from the social position of political authority and placed in an ambiguous position between authority and accusation. Institutional space, police escort, bodily restraint, and public exposure become symbolic markers of this transition. In this study, status transition is understood as a theoretical interpretation of the visual representation of the accused political actor, rather than as an empirically observed change in social status or audience perception. Media visibility is therefore not merely a means of representing the event but part of the ritual process through which this liminal status is made publicly visible. This interpretation also resonates with Couldry's (2003) concept of media rituals, which draws attention to the ways in which media practices contribute to the symbolic construction and reproduction of social order and institutional authority. Ben-Porath and Shaker (2010) demonstrate that such negative visual

cues significantly influence audience attributions of responsibility and blame. One particularly salient cue is the image of police escorting a scandalized individual, which Boudana (2014) identifies as central to perp walk imagery.

By depicting the suspect's movement through institutional space under conditions of bodily control, perp walk imagery can be interpreted as a visual narrative of accusation and institutional authority (Boudana, 2014; Bock, 2015). Such staging draws its symbolic force from the institutional spaces in which it unfolds, as locations such as police stations, court buildings, and transitional corridors function as visual markers of authority, legality, and state power (Foucault, 1995). Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power conceptualizes institutions as spaces where bodies are organized, supervised, and rendered visible in ways that produce subjects through practices of control and normalization rather than overt coercion (Foucault, 1995). When suspects are publicly displayed within these spaces, institutional power becomes materially and symbolically observable, as authority is enacted through visibility and bodily regulation (Foucault, 1995).

Building on this spatial logic, Thompson argues that power in mediated societies operates not only through continuous surveillance but through selective visibility, namely the capacity of media to extract individuals from relative anonymity and expose them to moments of intensified public attention (Thompson, 2000). In political scandals, this selective visibility is spatially anchored in institutional settings that visually communicate accountability and legitimacy, thereby transforming procedural events into publicly meaningful performances (Thompson, 2000). Such moments of heightened exposure are central to scandal dynamics, as they invite audiences to draw moral conclusions from institutional action rather than from legal outcomes alone (Thompson, 2000). From a media-sociological perspective, these processes can also be understood as ritualized performances of institutional authority. Couldry (2003) conceptualizes media rituals as symbolic practices that reinforce the central role of media in organizing social reality, particularly through repeated representations of institutional power and public visibility. In the context of political scandals, the circulation of images depicting suspects within institutional environments contributes to the normalization of visibility as a mechanism of accountability and control. Building on these theoretical insights, this study examines how institutional space functions as a key dimension of visual framing in political scandal coverage, with a particular focus on perp walk imagery and its role in structuring the visual representation of political actors and institutional processes in online news.

3. Method and Research Design

This study applies a quantitative visual content analysis to examine how institutional space is constructed in the visual coverage of political scandals in Croatian online news media. The focus is on photographs published in the immediate aftermath of high-profile arrests, with particular attention to spatial configurations, institutional presence, and bodily control. Building on content analysis as a systematic and replicable approach to examining communication content within its context (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004), visual content analysis is particularly suitable for this study because photographs function as autonomous meaning-making units that structure visibility, position actors within space, and articulate relations of authority independently of textual narration (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; Geise and Baden, 2015; Rose, 2016). In political scandal contexts, arrest-related imagery constitutes spatially organized scenes in which institutional environments, law-enforcement actors, and bodily positioning become key resources for constructing authority and accountability (Boudana, 2014; Greer and McLaughlin, 2017; Bock, 2020).

Rather than focusing on evaluative frames, this study conceptualizes visual framing as the spatial organization of institutional power and public visibility. Analytical categories were defined deductively based on framing theory and visual political communication research (Entman, 1993; Geise and Baden, 2015), as well as scholarship on perp walk imagery and institutional ritual (Boudana, 2014; Bock, 2015; Couldry, 2003). Institutional space was operationalized through observable visual indicators, including institutional settings and objects, the presence of police and legal actors, bodily restraint, visual isolation, and perp walk imagery. These indicators capture both the physical settings of institutional action and the spatial positioning of political actors in relation to institutional authority. Concepts such as ritual and symbolic status transition provide a theoretical framework for interpreting these visual configurations; they were not measured as separate empirical variables.

Units of analysis and media sample selection

The unit of analysis was each photographic appearance within an individual news article. When the same photograph appeared in different articles, each appearance was retained as a separate observation. This decision reflects the study's focus on the distribution of institutional and spatial visual indicators in published news coverage. The inclusion of repeated appearances captures how often these indicators were featured in the sampled coverage, since each publication of a photograph contributes to its visual content. Articles and media outlets were treated as contextual variables. The final dataset consists of 486 photographs published across three major Croatian online news portals: Jutarnji.hr (Hanza Media), Dnevnik.hr (Nova TV), and Večernji.hr (Styria Digital Group). Media outlets were selected based on audience reach and ownership diversity using GemiusAudience rankings for 2024.

The empirical corpus was collected as part of a broader research project on the visual representation of political scandals in Croatian online news media, and provides the basis for related analyses. The present study focuses specifically on institutional space and authority across two cases within this corpus: the local-level Hipodrom affair (2025) and the national-level Beroš affair (2024). The Hipodrom affair concerned suspected fraudulent payments for security services by Upravljanje sportskim objektima (Institution for Sports Facilities Management [ISFM]), a Zagreb municipal institution. Its director, Kosta Kostanjević, was arrested, while the case acquired broader political significance because the institution operated under the city administration of Zagreb Mayor Tomislav Tomašević (green-left Možemo!) and the investigation unfolded during the 2025 local election campaign (Ured za suzbijanje korupcije i organiziranog kriminaliteta [USKOK], 2025). The Beroš affair directly involved Vili Beroš, then Minister of Health and a member of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and concerned suspected corruption in the procurement of medical equipment for Croatian hospitals (European Public Prosecutor's Office [EPPO], 2024).

High-profile corruption investigations involving political officeholders are not unprecedented in Croatia, with previous cases occurring at both national and local levels (Šimić Banović, 2019). The two cases were selected as analytically comparable but institutionally distinct examples of visually mediated scandal: both generated intensive arrest-related visual coverage, while the Hipodrom affair was embedded in municipal governance and a local electoral context, and the Beroš affair directly involved a national minister. This contrast enables comparison of how institutional space and authority are visually constructed across different levels of political power.

The empirical corpus analysed in this study was collected as part of a broader research project on the visual representation of political scandals in Croatian online news media. Research on political scandals emphasizes the importance of the early stages of media coverage, when public allegations, institutional responses, and the construction of scandal narratives become particularly salient (Thompson, 2000; Entman, 2012; Clemente and Gabbioneta, 2017; Zulli, 2021). As scandals develop, media coverage may increasingly incorporate institutional reactions, political positioning, and retrospective interpretations (Thompson, 2000; Strömbäck, 2008; Zulli, 2020).

For the present study, the analytical sample was restricted to photographs published during the first six calendar days beginning with the arrest of the main actor in each case: 15 November 2024 for the Beroš affair and 30 April 2025 for the Hipodrom affair. Although the Hipodrom affair had received media attention before the arrests, the arrest date was selected as a common starting point because it marked the beginning of the arrest-related coverage involving identified suspects. This decision reflects the study's focus on institutional and spatial visual indicators, particularly perp walk imagery, police presence, bodily restraint, and institutional settings (Boudana, 2014;

Bock, 2015). The arrest date was defined as Day 1, followed by five consecutive calendar days (Days 2–6). For the temporal analysis, photographs were grouped into three reporting periods: Day 1, Day 2, and Days 3–6 (Day 3+). This approach allows the comparison to focus on a comparable phase of institutional intervention rather than on the initial public disclosure of each scandal.

Operationalization of institutional space and analytical strategy

To examine how institutional space is visually constructed, the coding scheme focused on spatially organized indicators of authority, control, and public visibility. Institutional authority was operationalized through the presence of police officers or police vehicles, coded as indicators of state power and enforcement (Greer and McLaughlin, 2017). Restraining elements (e.g., handcuffs) were coded separately, including whether they were present and covered, as these elements render institutional control materially observable (Boudana, 2014). Perp walk imagery was coded when photographs depicted the escorted movement of a suspect through public or institutional space. Following Boudana (2014) and Bock (2015), such imagery was conceptualized as a ritualized spatial performance in which institutional authority is enacted through controlled bodily movement and mediated visibility. For photographs depicting the political actor, spatial and compositional framing was assessed through visual isolation, background characteristics, and camera angle. Visual isolation captured whether the political actor appeared alone, spatially distant, or embedded within a group, based on research identifying spatial distance as a meaningful cue in political imagery (von Sikorski and Ludwig, 2018). Background was coded as light or dark to capture visual atmosphere and environmental framing, as tonal contrast and lighting contribute to interpretive meaning in political photographs (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; von Sikorski, 2018b). Camera angle (high, low, or eye level) was coded as an indicator of spatial hierarchy and perceived power relations, in line with visual grammar approaches to political imagery (El Damanhoury and Garud-Paktar, 2022).

The coding scheme also included contextual actors to capture the broader institutional setting. Categories included judicial actors, political actors, and other relevant social groups. In addition, a distinct category was introduced for photographs depicting institutional environments without visible persons (e.g., police vehicles, court or prosecution buildings, entrances to institutional facilities, or locations related to investigative procedures). Such images were included because institutional architecture and objects can themselves function as visual indicators of authority and investigation, even in the absence of human actors (Schill, 2012). To assess intracoder consistency, the same coder recoded 50 photographic appearances (approximately 10% of the sample) after a two-week interval. Overall agreement between the two coding rounds was 94% across the variables assessed. This figure represents aggregate intracoder agreement rather than category-specific reliability. Separate agreement estimates for individual

categories, including visual isolation and perp walk identification, were not calculated. The coding rules were defined in advance to support consistency in the classification of visual indicators (Rose, 2016; Geise and Baden, 2015).

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 21.0). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to identify dominant visual indicators (RQ1). The analysis then focused on photographs depicting perp walk imagery to examine the most frequent institutional and spatial indicators structuring this visual form (RQ2). Cross-tabulations, chi-square tests, and Cramer's V were applied to compare institutional indicators between the two scandals (RQ3). Contextual actors were included by focusing on categories representing institutional presence. Finally, temporal patterns were analysed to assess how visual indicators structure the development of scandal coverage over time. Because each photograph was coded as a separate observation, the dataset includes both different photographs published within the same article and identical photographs appearing across different articles. This approach captures how often visual indicators appeared in the sampled coverage. The chi-square tests assume independent observations and do not account for potential dependence arising from either source. Therefore, the reported p-values should be interpreted with caution.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the visual content analysis. The results are organized according to the research questions, focusing on how institutional space is visually constructed in online news coverage of political scandals, which spatial indicators structure perp walk imagery, and whether these visual patterns differ between local-level and national-level scandals. Attention is given to the spatial configuration of authority, including the presence of institutional actors, bodily control, and spatial positioning of the accused within institutional environments.

4.1. Visual Construction of Institutional Space in Political Scandal Coverage (RQ1)

Table 1 presents the distribution of visual indicators used to construct institutional space in early online news coverage of political scandals. The analysis includes 486 photographs embedded in news articles published during the first six days following the arrests in the two examined scandals.

Table 1.
Visual indicators of institutional space in scandal coverage (N = 486 photographs)

Variable	*n*	%
Variables in the total sample (*N* = 486)		
Political actor present	160	32.9
Perp walk imagery	107	22
Police presence	143	29.4
Handcuffs present	87	17.9
Characteristics of photographs depicting the political actor (*n* = 160)		
Visual isolation		
Visually isolated	132	82.5
Spatially distanced	5	3.1
With others / not isolated	23	14.4
Background		
Light	68	42.5
Dark	92	57.5
Camera angle		
Low angle	44	27.5
High angle	16	10
Eye level	100	62.5
Contextual actors - political actor present (n = 160)		
No other persons	42	26.2
Legal actors	89	55.6
Other suspects	4	2.5
Government/local officials	5	3.1
Political opponents	1	0.6
Political allies	5	3.1
Family, friends, and colleagues	11	6.9
Unidentified persons/media actors	3	1.9
Contextual actors - political actor absent (n = 326)		
Institutional spaces/objects connected with the investigation	63	19.3
Legal actors	127	39
Other suspects	34	10.4
Government/local officials	44	13.5
Political opponents	34	10.4
Political allies	12	3.7
Family, friends, and colleagues	9	2.8
Unidentified persons/media actors	3	0.9

Note. Percentages are calculated within the indicated samples; visual indicators are not mutually exclusive.

Source: Own processing, 2026 (SPSS 21)

Perp walk imagery appeared in 22.0% of photographs, indicating that it represents a recognizable but not dominant visual format. Indicators of institutional authority were most visible through police presence (29.4%). Elements of bodily restraint were less frequent, with handcuffs present in 17.9% of photographs; in all instances in which handcuffs were present, they were covered. Among photographs depicting the political actor, visual isolation was dominant (82.5%), indicating that the actor was frequently represented separately from other individuals.

The distribution of contextual actors further underscores the institutional character of scandal imagery. When the political actor was present, legal actors (especially judicial police) were the most frequent contextual actors (55.6%). In photographs without the political actor, legal actors (especially prosecutors and lawyers) were again the most frequent (39.0%), followed by institutional spaces and objects connected with the investigation (19.3%), further emphasizing the institutional context of scandal coverage.

To illustrate how the analytical categories presented in Table 1 were operationalized in the visual material, Figure 1 provides representative examples from the analysed corpus.

Figure 1.
Examples of visual indicators of institutional space in scandal coverage



Note. Individual photographs may represent more than one coded visual indicator.

Source: Authors' research corpus (Jutarnji.hr, Dnevnik.hr, and Večernji.hr). Photo credits: (a) Damir Krajač/Cropix; (b) Luka Stanzl/Pixsell; (c) Vanesa Pandžić/Cropix; (d) Željko Lukunić/Pixsell; (e) Željko Puhovski/Cropix; (f) Nikša Stipaničev/Cropix; (g) Damjan Tadić/Cropix; (h) Igor Kralj/Pixsell; (i) Vanesa Pandžić/Cropix; (j) Igor Kralj/Pixsell.

4.2. Spatial and Institutional Indicators in Perp Walk Imagery (RQ2)

To address RQ2, the analysis was restricted to photographs depicting perp walk imagery (N = 107). The results reveal a highly consistent institutional configuration of these visual scenes.

Table 2.
Spatial and institutional indicators within perp walk imagery (N = 107)

Variable	*n*	%
Characteristics of perp walk imagery (*N* = 107)		
Political actor present	96	89.7
Other suspect(s) depicted instead of the political actor	11	10.3
Police presence	98	91.6
Handcuffs present	87	81.3
Covered handcuffs	87	100.0[1]
Contextual actors		
No other persons	8	7.5
Legal actors	88	82.2
Other suspects	11	10.3
Visual representation of the political actor (*n* = 96)		
Visual isolation		
Visually isolated	95	99
Spatially distanced	0	0
With others / not isolated	1	1
Background		
Light	29	30.2
Dark	67	69.8
Camera angle		
Low angle	25	26
High angle	15	15.6
Eye level	56	58.3

Note. [1]Percentage based on photographs with handcuffs (*n* = 87).

Source: Own processing, 2026 (SPSS 21)

Police presence characterized 91.6% of perp walk photographs, demonstrating the strong association of this visual form with law-enforcement authority. Handcuffs were present in 81.3% of these images and were covered in every instance, indicating a consistent pattern of visually moderating an explicit sign of bodily restraint. Legal actors accompanied perp walk scenes particularly frequently (82.2%), further embedding these images within an institutional context.

Among perp walk photographs depicting the political actor (n = 96), visual isolation was nearly universal (99.0%), making separation from others a defining spatial feature of this imagery. Dark backgrounds prevailed (69.8%), compared with 30.2% of images with light backgrounds, contributing to a visually enclosed and more austere setting in which the political actor is positioned. Eye-level views were most common (58.3%), while low-angle (26.0%) and high-angle depictions (15.6%) were less frequent, suggesting that spatial isolation and institutional surroundings, rather than pronounced vertical camera positioning, carried greater visual weight. Overall, perp walk imagery is structured through the convergence of law-enforcement presence, bodily control, spatial isolation, and institutional context, reinforcing visual constructions of authority and individual accountability.

4.3 Differences Between Hipodrom and Beroš Political Scandals (RQ3)

To examine differences between the two political scandals, the analysis compared the distribution of key institutional indicators, including perp walk imagery, police presence, handcuffs, visual isolation, as well as contextual indicators of institutional environments such as institutional settings and judicial actors. In addition to differences in the presence of these indicators, the analysis also examined their temporal distribution across the first days of scandal coverage to identify potential differences in the visual development of the scandals.

Table 3.
Institutional indicators by political scandal (N = 486)

Institutional indicator	Hipodrom (n = 136), n (%)	Beroš (n = 350), n (%)	χ^2	p	Cramer's V
Perp walk imagery	42 (30.9)	65 (18.6)	8.646	0.003	0.133
Police presence	50 (36.8)	93 (26.6)	4.901	0.027	0.1
Handcuffs present and concealed	37 (27.2)	50 (14.3)	11.125	< .001	0.151
Visual isolation[1]	50 (98.0)	82 (75.2)	12.521	< .001	0.28
Institutional spaces/objects connected with the investigation	27 (19.9)	36 (10.3)	7.946	0.005	0.128
Legal actors (prosecutors, lawyers)	54 (39.7)	162 (46.3)	1.717	0.19	0.059

Note. Percentages are calculated within each political scandal. [1]Visual isolation refers to photographs depicting the political actor (Hipodrom, n = 51; Beroš, n = 109).

Source: Own processing, 2026 (SPSS 21)

Table 3 shows several significant differences in the distribution of institutional indicators across the two scandals. Perp walk imagery was significantly more frequent in the Hipodrom case than in the Beroš case ($\chi^2 = 8.646$, $p = .003$), as were the police presence ($\chi^2 = 4.901$, $p = .027$) and handcuffs ($\chi^2 = 11.125$, $p < .001$), indicating a stronger visual emphasis on bodily control and the spectacle of arrest. Visual isolation also differed significantly ($\chi^2 = 12.521$, $p < .001$), occurring almost systematically in Hipodrom coverage and reinforcing the spatial separation of the political actor from others. Institutional spaces and objects connected with the investigation were likewise more frequent in the Hipodrom case ($\chi^2 = 7.946$, $p = .005$), further embedding the scandal within recognizable environments of institutional action. Legal actors, especially prosecutors and lawyers, appeared somewhat more frequently in the Beroš case, although the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.717$, $p = .190$).

The strongest association was observed for visual isolation (Cramér's V = .280), while the remaining statistically significant associations were weak (V = .100-.151). Thus, although several indicators were more prevalent in the Hipodrom case, the effect sizes suggest that most differences between the two cases were modest. Taken together, these results indicate a higher prevalence of arrest-related and institutional-control indicators in the Hipodrom coverage, without implying substantial differences across all visual dimensions. However, the reported p-values should be interpreted with caution due to the potential dependence between observations.

Table 4 further reveals differences in the temporal development of visual indicators across the two scandals. Although visual coverage was most intensive on the first day in both cases, the composition of this imagery and its subsequent development followed different trajectories.

Table 4.
Temporal distribution of visual indicators across political scandals

Day of scandal	Indicator	Hipodrom *n* (%)	Beroš *n* (%)
Day 1	Political actor present	16 (23.5%)	34 (19.2%)
	Perp walk imagery	7 (10.3%)	0 (0.0%)
	Police presence	15 (22.1%)	12 (6.8%)
	Handcuffs present	6 (8.8%)	0 (0.0%)
	Institutional spaces/objects	24 (35.3%)	24 (13.6%)
	Legal actors	14 (20.6%)	64 (36.2%)
Day 2	Political actor present	24 (50.0%)	44 (39.3%)
	Perp walk imagery	24 (50.0%)	37 (33.0%)
	Police presence	24 (50.0%)	53 (47.3%)
	Handcuffs present	20 (41.7%)	29 (25.9%)
	Institutional spaces/objects	2 (4.2%)	12 (10.7%)
	Legal actors	27 (56.2%)	58 (51.8%)
Day 3+	Political actor present	11 (55.0%)	31 (50.8%)
	Perp walk imagery	11 (55.0%)	28 (45.9%)
	Police presence	11 (55.0%)	28 (45.9%)
	Handcuffs present	11 (55.0%)	21 (34.4%)
	Institutional spaces/objects	1 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Legal actors	13 (65.0%)	40 (65.6%)

Note. Percentages are calculated within each case and reporting period using the number of photographic appearances as the denominator. For Hipodrom, the denominators were n = 68 on Day 1, n = 48 on Day 2, and n = 20 on Day 3+. For Beroš, they were n = 177 on Day 1, n = 112 on Day 2, and n = 61 on Day 3+. The corresponding article counts for Hipodrom were n = 29 on Day 1, n = 15 on Day 2, and n = 8 on Day 3+. For Beroš, they were n = 45 on Day 1, n = 30 on Day 2, and n = 26 on Day 3+. Day 3+ covers Days 3–6 of the analytical period. A single photographic appearance can contain more than one visual indicator, so percentages across indicators may add up to more than 100%.

Source: Own processing, 2026 (SPSS 21)

In the Hipodrom scandal, perp walk imagery was already present on the first day, alongside the police presence and handcuffs, while institutional spaces and objects connected with the investigation were particularly prominent. By the second day, the visual focus had shifted markedly: the political actor, perp walk imagery, and the police presence each appeared in half of the photographs, while handcuffs were present in 41.7%. By Day 3+, these indicators had become closely intertwined: the same 11 photographs depicting the political actor also contained perp walk imagery, the police presence, and handcuffs, suggesting a highly concentrated visual representation of institutional control. This progression reflects a transition from the spatial context of

the investigation toward a more actor-centred representation of bodily control and the spectacle of arrest.

The Beroš scandal followed a different trajectory. First-day coverage centred more strongly on legal actors, particularly prosecutors and lawyers associated with the search and investigative procedures as well as institutional settings, including the suspect's residence, entrances, courtyards etc., while perp walk imagery and handcuffs were absent. Arrest-related imagery became prominent on the second day (when the suspect is escorted for questioning), accompanied by a growing visual presence of the political actor. By Day 3+, the two scandals showed greater similarity, particularly in the prominence of political actors, perp walk imagery, the police presence, and legal actors.

The temporal analysis also indicated differences in the distribution of visual indicators, with the strongest associations observed for perp walk imagery (Hipodrom: $V = .447$; Beroš: $V = .496$, both $p < .001$), subject to the same independence limitation. The number of analysed articles declined across the three reporting periods, from 29 to 15 and 8 in the Hipodrom case and from 45 to 30 and 26 in the Beroš case. These article counts are distinct from the photographic appearances used as the unit of analysis. Overall, these patterns suggest that institutional space does not function merely as a static background: early investigative contexts gradually give way to a more actor-centred visual narrative in which institutional authority is increasingly articulated through police presence, bodily restraint, and escorted movement.

5. Discussion

The findings related to overall visual indicators (RQ1) demonstrate that institutional space plays a central role in structuring visual representations of political scandals in online news coverage. Across both cases, indicators of institutional authority – such as police presence, restraining devices, and judicial actors – appear frequently, situating political actors within environments associated with law enforcement and legal accountability. This pattern aligns with prior research showing that visual journalism relies on institutional cues to signal authority and the seriousness of alleged wrongdoing (Boudana, 2014; von Sikorski and Ludwig, 2018). By positioning suspects within such spaces, news images frame scandals as embedded in institutional processes rather than as isolated individual acts, reinforcing the role of spatial arrangements in visual meaning-making (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; Geise and Baden, 2015).

Focusing specifically on perp walk imagery (RQ2), the results show that this visual form is consistently structured through a combination of law-enforcement presence, bodily control, and spatial isolation. Police presence and restraining elements dominate these images, while visual isolation reinforces individual accountability.

From a communication-anthropological perspective, these visual configurations may be interpreted through Douglas's (1966) concept of symbolic classification and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. The juxtaposition of political actors with police, restraining devices, and institutional settings provides visual cues that can be understood as representing a contrast between established political authority and the position of the accused. Within this interpretative framework, perp walk imagery may be understood as a form of ritualized public exposure in which the political actor is symbolically repositioned from a position of authority to one associated with investigation and institutional control. Such representations may evoke the notion of a liminal and contested status, without establishing an actual change in the actor's social position. Institutional space and bodily positioning can thus be interpreted as symbolic resources through which authority, social classification, and potential status transition are visually represented (Couldry, 2003; Boudana, 2014). These interpretations concern the symbolic meanings that may be attributed to the photographic content rather than empirically established audience perceptions.

The comparative analysis (RQ3) further reveals systematic differences between the two scandals in how institutional space is visually mobilized. The local-level Hipodrom scandal shows a stronger presence of arrest-related indicators, including perp walk imagery, handcuffs, and police presence, as well as greater visual isolation of the political actor and more frequent use of institutional spaces connected with the investigation. Rather than distinguishing the cases through a simple contrast between arrest imagery and institutional settings, the findings point to a more concentrated articulation of institutional control in the Hipodrom coverage. In the national-level Beroš scandal, legal actors are somewhat more frequent, although this difference is not statistically significant. The distinction between the local and national cases therefore lies primarily in the intensity and combination of spatial and bodily indicators through which institutional authority is made visible. These differences indicate that the two cases employ different combinations of visual indicators associated with institutional authority and bodily control, which may support different theoretical interpretations of symbolic status transition.

Although the present study does not aim to establish causal explanations, the comparison highlights differences in the visual representation of two scandals situated at different levels of political authority. These differences may reflect the specific institutional, political, and media contexts of the cases. Since each level of political authority is represented by only one case, the findings should be interpreted as case-specific patterns rather than as general characteristics of local and national political scandals. Such patterns may also be considered in relation to broader media dynamics, including the dramatization of political events in competitive news environments (Strömbäck, 2008).

Differences are also evident in the temporal distribution of visual indicators (RQ3). In the Hipodrom case, perp walk imagery is already present on the first day, alongside police presence and handcuffs, but becomes substantially more prominent from the second day onward. The Beroš scandal follows a different trajectory: its initial coverage places greater emphasis on legal actors and investigative settings, while perp walk imagery and handcuffs are absent on the first day and emerge prominently in the subsequent phase. In both cases, the visual focus increasingly shifts toward the political actor and arrest-related indicators as coverage develops, suggesting a gradual movement from the investigative context toward a more actor-centred representation of institutional control. This pattern should be interpreted cautiously, as the availability of visual material at the moment when scandals become publicly known may shape early coverage (Thompson, 2000). Nevertheless, the findings show that early scandal representation differs in the types of institutional actors and spaces that are foregrounded over time.

An additional finding (RQ1) concerns the use of images depicting institutional environments without visible political actors. Such images foreground locations and objects associated with investigation rather than the focal political actor, diverging from the typically person-centred nature of political news imagery (Schill, 2012). These environments can be understood not merely as physical settings but as symbolically structured spaces through which social order and institutional authority are made visible. Following Douglas (1966), space participates in the cultural organization of boundaries and classifications: particular places acquire meaning through their association with specific social roles, practices, and forms of authority. Police vehicles, court or prosecution buildings, entrances, and other investigative settings can therefore retain and communicate institutional meaning even in the absence of the accused body. From a visual-framing perspective, the selection and repeated representation of such spaces foreground particular institutional meanings, allowing the environment itself to function as a framing device through which investigation and state authority are visually signalled. In this sense, space does not simply provide the background against which scandal unfolds, but becomes an active visual and symbolic resource through which institutional intervention is culturally made legible.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of institutional space as a key dimension of visual framing in political scandal coverage. By focusing on photographs rather than textual narratives, the study contributes to expanding research beyond text-centred approaches and demonstrates how visual communication structures the public representation of political accountability. By integrating visual framing with a communication-anthropological perspective, the study offers an interpretation of how institutional settings, actors, and bodily positioning may contribute to symbolic representations of authority, social classification, and status transition. This interdisciplinary perspective therefore contributes to a broader understanding of visual framing

as a process through which institutional and cultural meanings are jointly constructed in political scandal coverage.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how institutional space structures visual representations of political scandals in Croatian online news media. The findings demonstrate that photographs frequently rely on institutional indicators – such as police presence, restraining devices, legal actors, and institutional environments – to frame scandals within contexts of legal authority and accountability, as well as broader processes of symbolic ordering and boundary maintenance. At the same time, the comparison of the two scandals reveals different patterns in the visual use of institutional space. The local-level corruption scandal (Hipodrom) shows a more concentrated combination of institutional control, with higher prevalence of perp walk imagery, police, handcuffs, visual isolation, and institutional spaces connected with the investigation. The national-level government minister scandal (Beroš), by contrast, is distinguished less by a specific institutional indicator than by its temporal trajectory: early coverage foregrounds legal actors and investigative settings, while arrest-related imagery becomes more prominent in subsequent reporting. These differences suggest that institutional space is not visually mobilized in a uniform way but changes in relation to both the scandal context and the stage of reporting. The results also show that news coverage frequently depicts institutional environments without the visible political actor, suggesting that investigative settings can themselves function as visual signals of institutional intervention and symbolic authority embedded in space.

The findings should be considered in light of the study's scope and methodological limitations. As the analysis focuses on two political scandals in the Croatian context, the observed differences should be understood as case-specific patterns rather than general characteristics of local and national political scandals. Furthermore, potential dependence between photographic appearances warrants caution in interpreting the statistical significance of the observed associations. Finally, the study's interpretations of ritual and symbolic status transition are grounded in observable visual indicators rather than direct measurements of these processes or audience responses.

Future research could compare a wider range of scandals across levels of government, political systems, and media environments to assess whether the patterns observed in Hipodrom and Beroš recur elsewhere. Newsroom studies and interviews with journalists could help explain how institutional imagery is selected and how the availability of photographs shapes coverage over time.

From a communication-anthropological perspective, the recurring images of escorted movement and public exposure can be read in relation to symbolic classification,

boundary maintenance, and status transition. The comparison of Hipodrom and Beroš also brings into view a less person-centred form of visual framing. Images of entrances, vehicles, and investigative settings can foreground institutional intervention even when the political actor is absent from the frame. By showing how both the settings and the positioning of political actors contribute to the visual framing of these cases, the study brings institutional space into the analysis of how political accountability is represented in online news.

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Izvorni znanstveni rad

Institucionalni prostor i vizualno uokviravanje u mrežnim vijestima - 'perp walk' u hrvatskim političkim skandalima

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Sažetak

Rad istražuje na koji način institucionalni prostor strukturira vizualnu reprezentaciju političkih skandala u mrežnim medijima. Polazeći od teorije vizualnog uokviravanja i istraživanja političkih skandala, fokus je stavljen na *perp walk* kao ključni vizualni oblik kroz koji se institucionalna moć i javna optužba, kao i simboličko oblikovanje društvene stvarnosti, čine vidljivima. Analiza se temelji na kvantitativnoj analizi sadržaja 486 novinskih fotografija objavljenih u hrvatskim online medijima, koje obuhvaćaju dva politička skandala na različitim razinama političke moći: lokalni korupcijski skandal (Hipodrom) i nacionalni ministarski skandal (Beroš). Vizualno uokviravanje operacionalizirano je kroz skup institucionalnih i prostornih indikatora, uključujući prisutnost policije, restrikcijskih sredstava, pravnih aktera i institucionalnih okruženja. Rezultati pokazuju da institucionalni prostor ima važnu ulogu u strukturiranju vizualnog prikaza političkih skandala. Istodobno se uočavaju razlike u zastupljenosti vizualnih pokazatelja između analiziranih slučajeva. Lokalni skandal obilježen je izraženijom kombinacijom indikatora institucionalne kontrole, uključujući veću zastupljenost *perp walk* vizuala, prisutnosti policije, lisica, vizualne izolacije i institucionalnih prostora povezanih s istragom, dok nacionalni skandal pokazuje drukčiji vremenski obrazac, s većom zastupljenošću pravnih aktera i prostora istrage u početnoj fazi te izraženijom prisutnošću vizuala povezanih s uhićenjem u kasnijoj fazi izvještavanja. Nalazi također ukazuju na čestu prisutnost prikaza institucionalnih prostora bez vizualne prisutnosti političkog aktera, što sugerira da same vizualizacije prostora mogu funkcionirati kao signal institucionalne intervencije, ali i kao marker simboličkog autoriteta i održavanja društvenih granica. Uočeni obrasci dodatno naglašavaju važnost institucionalnog prostora u razumijevanju vizualnog oblikovanja političkih skandala te ukazuju na ograničenja isključivo tekstualno usmjerenih pristupa, istodobno pokazujući relevantnost komunikacijsko-antropološke perspektive za razumijevanje načina na koji institucionalni prostori i politička tijela sudjeluju u procesima simboličke klasifikacije, održavanja društvenih granica i statusne tranzicije.

Ključne riječi: politički skandali, vizualno uokviravanje, institucionalni prostor, *perp walk*, mrežni mediji, analiza sadržaja, vizualna komunikacija, antropologija medija.