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VISUAL NARRATIVE IN PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Photography is a complex concept that includes numerous aspects and dimensions, ranging from technological to conceptual [1, p. 14]. It is not only used to document the reality [11, p. 4] and form collective memory of the events [3, p. 279], but also to frame the perception of events through images [4, p. 226]. The latter is especially true of the narrower section of visual culture – the press photography.

Press photography has gained a prominent place and role in communication of media message [13, p. 99]. Global media trends over the past five years have consistently shown that the role of images in the media is becoming increasingly powerful [1, p. 12]. The number of images multiplies every year. Digital photo storage platform Mylio reports that as of 2016, humanity has created 3.8 trillion photos [2]. Thus 1 trillion was made in 2015. After all, 80% of the information a person receives comes through the visual receptors [12, p. 12].

The Reuters Institute report for 2019 states that the media will move towards formats in which the visual component will dominate and which are easier for the audience to consume [8, p. 57]. This prediction was also in the Reuters Institute reports for 2018 [7, p. 29] and 2016 [6, p. 18]. The latest analytical report of the institute showed that young audiences are increasingly consuming news in a visual format through the social platforms Instagram and Facebook [9, p. 29]. Therefore, this trend towards the development of images as a component of media content, including photography, confirms the relevance and demand for research in the field of press photography.

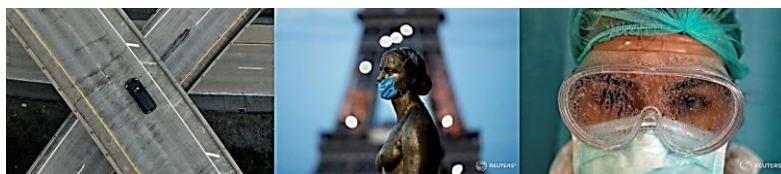
Researchers note that journalism itself becomes more and more «visually driven.» Mortensen, Allan and Petters point out that nowadays «the sheer volume, spread and re-inflection of newsworthy imagery expanding exponentially, particularly across social media platforms.» [5, p. 82]. The

visual component and visual studies are becoming increasingly important for understanding the media ecosystem.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, media ecosystem has undergone significant distortions and deformation that researchers yet to analyze and investigate. However, there is a visible effort of media organizations to adapt to new conditions through staff reductions, reallocation of resources and the transition to remote work [10]. And in this context, it must be understood that most reporters had little or no experience in pandemic coverage.

Media outlets had to embed new visual symbols and images in their work in order to convey the news messages about COVID-19 to their audience. An initial sample of the three largest news agencies shows that the visual narrative regarding pandemic was not static and transformed during 2020 since the outburst of the virus. In order to track these changes, we analyzed the Instagram pages of the agencies Reuters, AP, Getty Images.

There were several turning points in the way reporters portrayed the development of the pandemic. The beginning of the lockdown is marked by a large number of images with empty spaces: deserted streets, abandoned offices, closed cafes and restaurants. Masks, antiseptics, devices for measuring body temperature, gloves and other personal protective equipment became one of the main symbols for the images of this period. At the same time, two important locations came to the fore in the visual field of press photography: hospital spaces and homes.



***Visual images of COVID-19 pandemic in April-May 2020
(Reuters, Instagram)***

With the development of the pandemic and a few months of lockdown, a new powerful visual element appeared in the press of photography: physical barriers between people, the inability to be close to each other, solitude.

The next focal point in the visual narrative of the pandemic was the image of exhausted medical workers. It was also combined with images of patients: both those who are being ill in medical institutions and those who are struggling with the disease at home, in self-isolation.



***Visual images of COVID-19 pandemic in June-August 2020
(AP, Instagram)***

After about six months of mass pandemics and lockdown, the media began to be dominated by images of how people adapt to new conditions: create infrastructure to maintain social distance, set up home offices, and communicate through online tools.

The latest turning point in the narrative was the news about the invention of the vaccine and preparation for its mass production. At the beginning of the pandemic this image was practically absent in the general flow of images. Nonetheless, in latest month it has become prominent, displacing most of the images and symbols used by the media in previous periods.

The practical aspect of this research is to help newsrooms and editors to inform the audience in the best possible way about events in such crisis moments as a pandemic. The analysis of visual language and visual patterns in press photography helps to understand which locations are available to the reporters, what are the best ways to cover them and to report from those spots. Due to limited resources and lack of staff, caused by the COVID-19 crisis, it will be easier for editors to plan the work of the newsroom, knowing what tools and options for reporting they have.

The decision making and the planning during crisis events like this one has to be carried out both fast and effective. Therefore, having a deep and thought-through analysis of previous coverage under similar circumstances may be a big assistance and valuable asset to media outlets.

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