THE PHOTOJOURNALISTIC GIF: VISUAL JOURNALISM IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Alongside photographs and videos, a new form of visual storytelling has entered the repertoire of visual journalism in recent years: the photographic GIF (graphics interchange format). The emergence of the GIF in online news as a legitimate image for the documentary representation of disaster, violence, and tragedy is unexpected. The GIF, characterized by its silent, short-looped movement, is identified with popular culture and is mainly known from social media networks; it is recognized as a humorous metaphorical image and is used for amusing and witty interactions and reactions (Eppink, 2014; Miltner & Highfield, 2017). However, using a GIF to illustrate the news, especially in cases of tragedy or disaster, seems to contradict the more serious purposes and solemn tone of much journalistic reporting. The GIF's mechanical, repetitive motion and absence of sound are reminiscent of "slapstick" comedy in cinema and appear incompatible with the depicted event's more complex and somber emotional tenor.

For many years, photojournalism has been telling stories and creating news narratives via photographs or videos. Photographs are historically associated with printed newspapers and videos with television news broadcasts. Both are identified in journalistic practices as formats with epistemological value as evidence (e.g., Carlson, 2019; Schwartz, 1999), but specific technical capabilities, limitations, and narrative possibilities characterize each. A photograph portrays a story through the frozen, silent capture of reality, enabling long and repeated observation (Barthes, 1981). A moment that the well-known photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952) defined as "the decisive moment": a single still image that invites the viewer, through aesthetic composition, to imagine the flow of the depicted narrative (Zelizer, 2010). In contrast, a video or a television broadcast presents a story by showing a sequence of filmed occurrences accompanied by sound. This assemblage allows more sensory experience (Sobchack, 1992) and enhances the sense of "witnessing" events as they have occurred in real time (Zelizer, 2010). However, the moving sequence of videotaped footage is time-limited, represents a linear evolution that presents a beginning and an end, and therefore

constrains and defines the duration of viewing and the boundaries of the narrative in advance.

The photographic GIF seems like a hybrid format – a merging of photograph and film into a new visual form: silent like a photograph, moving like a film, but distinguished by the unique attribute of a short, repetitive looped movement that requires further examination. The ceaseless repetitive motion of the GIF stands in overt contrast to conventional photographs and videos in the news but, at the same time, seems to echo the transformations that followed the intense use of smartphones that have affected visual news production and news consumption. The current news production's material and technological processes embody temporal aspects, such as immediacy, liveness, and preparation time, that stem from the pressure to generate news updates for online platforms continuously competing with the opportunity for more in-depth story development typically available in print. Therefore, the temporal orientation of news narratives is influenced by topical content, the medium's inherent properties, and its surrounding work environment (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2018). Furthermore, turning the smartphone into an information consumption device increased the growth of online news and, consequently, changed news consumption habits (see Newman et al., 2022). In particular, the prevalent use of smartphones as integrated gateways to social media platforms led to young people's preference to consume news on social media, which is expressed with the possibility of keeping up with news immediately and concisely (Boczkowski et al., 2018). This increasing popularity of smartphones and competition with social media for public attention has led news organizations to try to design their apps and websites around the user experience models of social media smartphone apps. One of the expressions of adopting new visual designs in online news is the GIF, a format that is well-known from social media, and although it has emerged in the past decade as another form of visual journalism, it has received little to no attention in the research literature.

Consequently, this article identifies the photographic GIF as a new visual form in online news and focuses on the extreme case of representation of tragic news. It underlines the unique character of the short-looped movement by drawing on relevant literature concerning photojournalism and visual storytelling, news production, and the attention economy. It then examines the uses of photographic GIFs in online news, their potential meanings, and the editorial considerations underpinning their production in newsrooms. Methodologically, it uses a mixed-methods qualitative approach, combining semiotic visual analysis of a sample of online GIFs and in-depth interviews with senior online news-desk editors of the sampled news organizations.

The research corpus was constructed by collecting GIFs from the homepages of Israeli news websites from the beginning of September 2022 to the end of May 2023 (nine months). The findings of the sampling demonstrate how the GIF has been extended beyond its initial contexts, such as humor, reaction, and social media, and how the GIF has become a legitimate visual format of journalistic documentation by presenting various uses of photographic GIFs in digital journalism and, among them negative news, such as armed and unarmed violence, destruction, natural or infrastructure disasters, and tragedies.

Since the GIF must be created after "taking" photographs or video footage and editing by selecting a sequence and assembling it into a loop, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior online news editors after collecting the sample to examine editorial practices. Modeled on approaches from newsroom research (e.g., Bock, 2012; Gursel, 2016; Ilan, 2019; Mäenpää, 2022; Nilsson, 2017), the interviews included co-viewing of GIFs from various online news websites to explore the advantages of the photographic GIF compared to traditional photographs and videos, to define what constitutes a "good GIF" in digital journalism, and to reveal editorial policies, norms and ethical considerations.

Lastly, by combining the two methods, the contribution of this article will be presented as twofold: to the best of my knowledge, photojournalistic GIFs have yet to be researched despite their presence in online news in recent years. This article thus discovers how the instrumental technique of the GIF – the short, looped movement – not only functions as clickbait in a digital network environment but provides informative and even traumatic content in ways that serve key frameworks and goals of visual journalism: storytelling, reporting, and documenting. Therefore, this research contributes to visual and digital journalism studies: exploring the photographic GIF as a new journalistic storytelling format reveals the enrichment of the visual journalism repertoire in the digital and social media era and emphasizes how, by using GIFs, the digital journalism industry adapts to the contemporary environment based on endless scrolling and a competitive, continuous data-stream environment.

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