A RAPTURE IN PHOTOJOURNALISM PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF AI-GENERATED PICTURES IN JOURNALISM

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Theoretical Background

The debate on AI-generated images often focuses on their role in disinformation and misinformation. They are frequently interpreted according to dystopian imaginaries, which view information and communication technologies (ICTs) as tools capable of manipulating observers and leading them to believe in events and people that never existed (Farid 2022). AI-generated images, by remediating photorealism (Bolter & Grusin 1999; Grusin, Engberg et al. 2021), have inherited the traditional idea of photography as a form of detection and documentation, although this has been a constitutive paradox (Fontcuberta 1997). The immediacy of photography has historically been linked to the concept of the index, a luminous trace of an external referent, by which photographic technology is believed to record the presence of what was in front of the camera (Barthes 1980). This conception has been tied to photorealism as a visual aesthetic, a depiction capable of conveying the unmediated perception of the image and blending with representation as a form of recording or detection (Hausken 2024). The advent of the internet and digital technology has challenged the deterministic approach to indexicality (Mitchell 1992; Marra 2005), but this has not led to the disappearance of photography's documentary value. Fields such as photojournalism and documentary photography, as well as the legal system, have had to develop new protocols and strategies to ensure the reliability of photographic images in the Photoshop era (Keith, Schwalbe & Silcock 2006; Carlson 2009; Thomson 2019). However, the documentary value of images, within a constructivist framework, cannot be separated from the discourses and codes of social systems that interpret photographs as testimonies (Luhmann 1995; Harper 2023). AI-generated images further complicate this scenario: on the one hand, as many concerns emphasize, they create a visual and emotional realism that may misleadingly replace the document; on the other, they can generate new forms of documentalism by giving shape to realities that can be testified to but not

visualized due to material, legal, or ethical limits.

The objective is to observe whether the mediatization of photorealism through AI generated tools, in the current digital ecology (Boccia Artieri 2015; Gemini, Boccia Artieri 2019) – where the production and distribution of news images involve a variety of actors with different criteria for defining what is informative – can be reintegrated through practices that establish new premises for documentalism.

In the media system, discourses unfold in two directions: concerns regarding the circulation of photorealistic AI-generated images in disinformative ways – as exemplified by the controversy in November 2023 over the sale of AI-generated Gaza conflict images on Adobe Stock –[1] and the recognition of virtuous cases where AI images are used documentarily. Notable examples include the Exhibit AI project by Australian lawyers Maurice Blackburn, where verbal testimonies of offshore detainees were transformed into AI-generated images through prompt engineering, with witnesses involved in the process. [2]

While a growing number of studies address disinformative uses of AI-generated images, fewer analyses examine their informational potential and documentary capacity (Thomson, Thomas, Matich 2024). This study asks: In what situations do media professionals consider AI-generated images a legitimate tool for documenting an event?

Methodology

To answer this question, a qualitative investigation was conducted involving 15 semi structured interviews with key informants, including photo editors, photojournalists, and documentary photographers—professionals involved in the creation or selection of images with documentary value. The interviews took place between June and December 2024.

Interviewees were selected within the Italian context, where the role of the photo editor was formally recognized only in 2002 with the founding of the National Iconographic Editors Group (GRIN). Given its limited institutionalization, snowball sampling was adopted: starting from GRIN members, professionals who had produced or evaluated AI-generated images for documentary purposes were progressively involved. A total of 8 photo editors and 7 photojournalists/documentary photographers working in major national outlets (Il Corriere della Sera, La Stampa, Vogue Italia) were selected. The interviews focused on three thematic areas: (1) the impact of AI-generated images on the information system; (2) the relationship between AI images and documentary photography; and (3) the evolution of the visual content industry and stock agencies. Content analysis revealed relatively consistent patterns among interviewees, with internal nuances reflected in the preliminary results (Williams & Moser 2019).

Preliminary Results

The legitimacy of using images for documentary purposes in journalism follows a long standing trajectory. The interviews reveal three distinct positions regarding the informational value of AI-generated images in journalism.

A first stance, grounded in an orthodox documentary ethos, expresses resistance to synthetic imagery. These interviewees frame journalism as anchored in physical

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[1] The Australian news agency *Crikey* was the first to report the news on the controversy of Adobe Stock's case: https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/11/01/israel-gaza-adobe-artificial-intelligence-images-fake-news/ [2]

presence and evidential witnessing. AI is thus perceived as marginal to their practice, unable to replace what one participant calls the "romantic ambition" of proving that an image stems from a specific moment and place.

A second, more open position accepts the documentary paradigm but does not dismiss AI outright. Here, synthetic imagery is legitimate only as long as it is clearly framed as a mediated interpretation rather than a transparent representation of reality. Interviewees draw analogies with cinematic or artistic perspectives: plausible visions that remain fictional and therefore external to journalism unless accurately contextualized. A third position views AI as potentially integrable into journalistic workflows. Interviewees compare this to historical forms of mediated visualisation, such as courtroom illustrations. In this view, "prompt-journalism" may extend established practices when photography is impossible, enabling visual reconstructions based on verified testimonies rather than replacing on-the-ground reporting.

Within this framework, the informational reliability of AI-generated images rests on three conditions.

First, journalistic proximity remains essential: physical presence and contextual knowledge anchor the legitimacy of visual information. When presence is impossible, AI images must maintain a direct, explicit connection to the specific event to avoid devolving into generic or stereotyped depictions.

Second, interviewees emphasise the role of textual framing. Captions, disclosures ("image generated with AI"), watermarks, embedded metadata, and careful archiving function as tools of transparency that prevent slippage between synthetic and photographic images.

Third, interviewees highlight the aesthetics of representation. Many AI-generated visuals reproduce polished entertainment styles and confirm pre-existing media imaginaries. This "confirmation style" reinforces clichés through glossy surfaces, dramatic lighting, high resolution, and emotionally charged narratives. Such aesthetics risk simplifying suffering into predictable sentimental tropes, privileging audience expectation over situated testimony.

Overall, these preliminary findings suggest that professionals interpret AI not as a monolithic threat or opportunity, but as a technological shift that reactivates long standing questions about evidence, mediation, and the ethics of visual narration in journalism.

Conclusions

If generative AI is here to stay in the information market and visual content industry, rather than opposing it, ethical and validated methods should be sought to integrate it into the media system. However, challenges remain, both within the debate among visual journalism professionals and in the broader digital and algorithmic visual content industry. One of the main difficulties lies in the uncontrolled dissemination of AI generated images online, often lacking adequate information on their origin and purpose.

Although concerns about AI-generated disinformation still dominate the media professionals discourses, the deliberate incorporation of AI-generated images into photojournalism cannot be dismissed outright. The absence of an external referent does not preclude the possibility of a documentary use of AI, if it is treated not as a mere

extension of traditional photography due to its photorealism, but as a new medium with its own distinct characteristics.

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