

Photography as Visual Testimony in Conflict Zones:

Methodological and Ethical Dimensions of Evidentiary Images

Mykola Khokhotva

Independent Photojournalist and Visual Researcher

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4365-875X>

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Reviewers:

- **Myroslav Ivanovych Dochynets**
Independent Researcher
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2018-0132>
- **Oleh Tytarenko**
Independent Researcher
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9343-0427>

The reviewers provided expert feedback on the conceptual framing of visual testimony, the integration of ethical and methodological perspectives, and the clarity of interdisciplinary argumentation. Their comments contributed to the refinement of the article's analytical structure and academic rigor.

Abstract

Photography occupies a central role in contemporary conflict reporting, functioning not only as a journalistic medium but increasingly as a form of visual testimony with evidentiary value. Images produced in zones of armed conflict, political unrest, and humanitarian crisis shape public perception, influence policy debates, support human rights advocacy, and contribute to collective historical memory. At the same time, the accelerated circulation of photographs through digital platforms has intensified challenges related to context loss, ethical risk, and misinterpretation.

This research article examines conflict photography as a form of visual testimony situated at the intersection of journalism, ethics, and evidentiary practice. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in journalism studies, visual communication, media ethics, and legal approaches to evidence, the study analyzes how photographs acquire testimonial authority and how this authority may be strengthened or undermined. Particular attention is given to field-level decision-making by photojournalists, including choices related to framing, timing, proximity, and dissemination.

The article proposes an expanded conceptual framework for understanding photographic images as evidentiary artifacts rather than illustrative content. By articulating methodological and ethical dimensions of visual testimony, the study contributes to the theoretical foundation for subsequent verification models and offers guidance for professional photojournalists operating in conflict environments. The findings support a reconceptualization of conflict photography as a form of accountable knowledge production with significant social and political consequences.

Keywords

visual testimony; conflict photography; visual evidence; photojournalism ethics; evidentiary images; media studies

1. Introduction

Photographic images produced in zones of armed conflict and humanitarian crisis function not merely as visual supplements to journalistic narratives but increasingly as autonomous forms of testimony. In contemporary media environments, photographs often circulate independently of accompanying text, shaping public understanding of events before written analysis or verification can take place. As a result, conflict photography has assumed a heightened epistemic status, operating as a primary source of information rather than secondary illustration.

Historically, war photography was embedded within broader narrative structures authored by journalists, editors, and institutions. Images published in print media were contextualized through captions, articles, and editorial framing that guided interpretation. In this model, photographs derived much of their meaning and credibility from their association with established news organizations. However, the transition to digital and networked media has profoundly altered this relationship. Images now circulate across social media platforms, messaging applications, and algorithmically curated feeds, often detached from their original publication context and stripped of explanatory metadata.

This shift has transformed the photograph into a self-contained communicative object capable of influencing public discourse, emotional response, and political judgment. In conflict situations, such images may contribute to international advocacy campaigns, trigger humanitarian interventions, or be cited in legal and quasi-legal proceedings. Consequently,

photographs increasingly operate as **visual testimony**—a form of witnessing that carries implications comparable to written or oral evidence.

The testimonial function of conflict photography raises fundamental questions about credibility, responsibility, and methodology. Unlike traditional eyewitness testimony, photographic testimony is mediated through technical devices, aesthetic choices, and professional norms. Decisions made by the photojournalist in the field—such as where to stand, when to press the shutter, what to include or exclude from the frame, and how images are later selected for publication—directly shape the meaning and evidentiary value of the resulting photograph. These decisions are often made under conditions of urgency, danger, and limited information, complicating conventional assumptions about verification and objectivity.

At the same time, the risks associated with visual testimony are substantial. Decontextualized or misattributed images may fuel misinformation, escalate conflict, or place depicted individuals at risk. Ethical failures in the production or dissemination of conflict photographs can result in retraumatization, loss of trust in journalism, and long-term harm to vulnerable populations. The emergence of synthetic media and AI-assisted image manipulation further destabilizes traditional notions of photographic authenticity, intensifying the need for robust conceptual and methodological approaches to visual evidence.

Despite the growing importance of photographs as evidentiary artifacts, existing academic and professional literature has often focused on newsroom-based verification or audience reception, paying comparatively less attention to the **field practices** of photojournalists themselves. Ethical codes provide essential normative guidance but frequently remain abstract, offering limited assistance in navigating the complex realities of conflict environments. There remains a gap between institutional standards and the lived experience of photographers operating at the front lines of crisis reporting.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining conflict photography through the lens of visual testimony. By situating photographic practice within an interdisciplinary framework that draws on journalism studies, visual theory, media ethics, and evidentiary reasoning, the study aims to clarify how photographs function as carriers of testimonial authority. The analysis emphasizes methodological awareness and ethical reflexivity as essential components of professional photojournalism in conflict zones.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 explores visual testimony as an epistemic category, examining how photographs produce and transmit knowledge. Section 3 analyzes the position of conflict photography between journalistic reporting and evidentiary practice. Section 4 examines ethical risks associated with visual testimony, particularly in relation to vulnerable subjects. Section 5 outlines methodological implications for photojournalists, highlighting practices that support credibility and accountability. The conclusion reflects on the broader significance of reconceptualizing conflict photography as a form of visual testimony and prepares the ground for subsequent research on verification frameworks.

2. Visual Testimony as an Epistemic Category

The concept of testimony occupies a central position in epistemology, law, and historical inquiry. Traditionally, testimony refers to statements made by individuals who directly witnessed events and convey their observations to others. Such testimony derives its epistemic value from the credibility of the witness, the conditions under which the observation was made, and the contextual coherence of the account. In visual journalism, photography performs a parallel function: it records events through mechanical inscription while simultaneously reflecting the perceptual and ethical positioning of the photographer.

Photography has long been associated with claims of objectivity due to its indexical relationship to reality. Early theoretical approaches emphasized the photograph as a physical trace of an event, produced through the interaction of light and photosensitive material. This indexicality supported the widespread belief that photographs “show what happened” and therefore function as reliable evidence. However, subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that photographic meaning is never purely mechanical. Framing, selection, timing, and contextual presentation play decisive roles in shaping interpretation.

When photographs are understood as visual testimony, their epistemic status shifts from passive record to active form of witnessing. Unlike written testimony, which unfolds sequentially and explicitly articulates causality and intent, visual testimony operates through condensation. A single image may compress complex events into a moment that invites interpretation without providing explicit narrative structure. This compression grants photographs emotional immediacy and mnemonic power but also introduces epistemic vulnerability.

In conflict zones, visual testimony often precedes other forms of documentation. Photographs may be captured before official statements are issued, before investigations begin, and sometimes before journalists fully understand the broader context of the events they record. As a result, images frequently become foundational reference points for subsequent narratives. This precedence amplifies their epistemic authority while simultaneously increasing the consequences of error or misinterpretation.

A key distinction between visual and verbal testimony lies in intentionality. Verbal testimony explicitly asserts claims that can be questioned, clarified, or contradicted. Photographic testimony, by contrast, asserts through depiction rather than proposition. The photograph does not state what happened; it shows a fragment of what occurred, leaving interpretation to viewers who may lack sufficient contextual knowledge. In conflict reporting, this gap between depiction and interpretation is particularly pronounced, as audiences may project assumptions based on prior beliefs, political alignments, or emotional responses.

The epistemic power of visual testimony is further reinforced by cultural norms surrounding photographic realism. Audiences tend to attribute a high degree of credibility to images, often perceiving them as less mediated than text. Empirical studies in visual communication demonstrate that viewers frequently regard photographs as direct access points to reality, even when aware of the possibility of manipulation or framing bias. This tendency

contributes to what may be described as *asymmetrical trust*, in which images are granted authority disproportionate to the information they contain.

In conflict environments, asymmetrical trust can produce significant consequences. An image depicting violence or suffering may be interpreted as representative of an entire situation, even when it reflects a highly specific and isolated moment. For example, photographs taken during protests or clashes may circulate globally as symbols of broader political movements, obscuring internal diversity and contextual nuance. In such cases, the photograph functions not only as testimony but as a form of symbolic evidence that shapes collective understanding.

Visual testimony also differs from other forms of evidence in its relationship to time. While written testimony often situates events within a chronological narrative, photographs suspend time, isolating moments that may acquire enduring significance. Iconic conflict images persist in public memory long after the events they depict have passed, influencing historical interpretation and moral judgment. This temporal persistence enhances the evidentiary weight of photographs but also freezes meaning in ways that may resist later contextual revision.

The epistemic challenges of visual testimony are intensified by the conditions under which conflict photographs are produced. Photojournalists operate in environments characterized by danger, restricted access, and limited opportunities for corroboration. Decisions about where to position oneself, whom to photograph, and when to disengage are shaped by immediate survival concerns as well as professional judgment. These constraints do not invalidate photographic testimony but underscore its situated nature.

Recognizing photography as an epistemic category requires acknowledging both its strengths and limitations. Visual testimony offers unparalleled immediacy, affective resonance, and documentary potential. At the same time, it is inherently partial, selective, and dependent on context for interpretation. Treating photographs as self-sufficient evidence risks obscuring the conditions of their production and the interpretive frameworks that give them meaning.

For photojournalists, understanding the epistemic dimensions of visual testimony carries methodological implications. It requires an awareness that each image produced in a conflict zone participates in knowledge formation and may be mobilized beyond its original journalistic purpose. This awareness encourages reflexive practice, in which photographers consider not only what they are witnessing but how their images may function as testimony in diverse contexts, including advocacy, historical documentation, and legal proceedings.

By conceptualizing conflict photography as visual testimony, this article establishes a foundation for examining its ethical and methodological dimensions. The following section builds on this epistemic analysis by situating photographic testimony at the intersection of journalism and evidentiary practice, exploring how images move between media, institutional, and legal domains.

3. Photography Between Journalism and Evidence

Photography produced in conflict zones increasingly circulates across institutional boundaries, moving from journalistic publication into domains traditionally associated with evidentiary practices. While photographs have long been used to illustrate news reporting, their contemporary role extends far beyond media narratives. Images captured by photojournalists are now routinely incorporated into human rights reports, investigative dossiers, advocacy campaigns, and, in some cases, legal proceedings. This migration transforms photographs from communicative artifacts into objects of evidentiary evaluation.

Within journalism, photographs are primarily assessed according to standards of newsworthiness, accuracy, and ethical representation. Editorial decisions focus on whether an image truthfully depicts an event, respects the dignity of subjects, and serves the public interest. However, when the same image enters evidentiary contexts, additional criteria emerge. Questions of provenance, chain of custody, temporal and geographic specificity, and methodological transparency become central. The photograph is no longer judged solely by its narrative impact but by its capacity to withstand scrutiny as a form of proof.

This dual status places photojournalists in a complex professional position. On the one hand, they operate within journalistic norms that prioritize immediacy, access, and storytelling. On the other hand, their work may later be evaluated according to evidentiary standards that demand procedural rigor and contextual documentation. The photographer thus functions as an initial mediator between lived events and multiple institutional audiences, each with distinct expectations regarding credibility and use.

Concrete examples illustrate this transition clearly. Photographs taken during armed conflicts are frequently cited in reports by international organizations documenting potential violations of humanitarian law. In such cases, images originally published as news content may later be analyzed for indicators of time, location, and consistency with witness testimony. A photograph depicting civilian casualties, for instance, may be reinterpreted as visual corroboration of alleged unlawful attacks. The evidentiary value of the image depends not only on what is visible but on accompanying information regarding when and where it was taken and under what circumstances.

Similarly, images documenting protests or state violence often migrate from journalistic platforms into advocacy and accountability frameworks. Photographs capturing police actions during demonstrations may be used by civil society organizations to support claims of excessive force or unlawful detention. In these contexts, the photograph becomes part of an argumentative structure aimed at establishing patterns of behavior rather than isolated incidents. The photographer's original intent—to document a moment of public interest—intersects with subsequent uses that carry legal and political implications.

The boundary between journalism and evidence is further blurred by the increasing reliance of investigative journalists on visual material as primary source data. Long-form investigations often reconstruct events through image sequences, metadata analysis, and geolocation techniques. Photographs serve not merely as illustrative supplements but as

foundational elements from which narratives are derived. In such cases, the photographer's methodological choices at the moment of capture—camera settings, vantage point, sequence—directly affect the evidentiary robustness of the investigation.

At the same time, this migration introduces risks. Photographs may be extracted from their original context and repurposed in ways that exceed or distort their evidentiary scope. An image documenting the aftermath of violence may be presented as evidence of causation rather than consequence, or as representative of broader patterns without sufficient corroboration. When images circulate widely across platforms, attribution may be lost, and critical contextual details may be omitted. These transformations can undermine both journalistic credibility and evidentiary integrity.

The professional challenges associated with this dual use are particularly acute in conflict environments, where photographers often operate with limited resources and under severe constraints. Access to precise location data, opportunities for corroboration, and the ability to document sequences comprehensively may be restricted by security concerns or time pressure. Nevertheless, the potential evidentiary afterlife of photographs suggests that field practices should anticipate these later uses whenever possible.

From a methodological perspective, this does not imply that photojournalists should adopt the role of legal investigators. Rather, it underscores the importance of *evidentiary awareness*—an understanding that images may be mobilized beyond their immediate journalistic function. This awareness can inform practices such as systematic captioning, retention of original files, preservation of metadata, and careful documentation of circumstances surrounding image production.

The increasing convergence of journalism and evidence also raises ethical considerations. Images used as evidence may expose subjects to retaliation, stigmatization, or legal consequences. A photograph that serves public interest in a news context may entail heightened risk when repurposed for accountability processes. Photographers must therefore navigate a tension between visibility and protection, balancing the imperative to bear witness against the obligation to minimize harm.

Importantly, the evidentiary potential of photographs does not derive solely from technical authenticity. While forensic verification tools can assist in assessing image integrity, evidentiary credibility ultimately rests on a combination of factors, including professional reputation, consistency of practice, and transparency of method. In this sense, the photographer's role resembles that of an expert witness whose credibility accumulates over time through demonstrated adherence to professional standards.

Understanding photography as situated between journalism and evidence provides a critical framework for evaluating the contemporary responsibilities of conflict photojournalists. Images are no longer confined to the communicative space of news media; they participate in processes of documentation, accountability, and historical record-making. Recognizing this expanded role clarifies why methodological rigor and ethical reflexivity are essential components of professional practice.

The following section examines the ethical risks inherent in visual testimony, focusing on the potential harms associated with the production and dissemination of evidentiary images in conflict contexts. By addressing these risks, the article further articulates the responsibilities that accompany the testimonial power of photography.

4. Ethical Risks of Visual Testimony

The ethical dimensions of conflict photography acquire heightened significance when images function as visual testimony rather than illustrative content. While the act of bearing witness is often framed as a moral imperative in journalism, the production and dissemination of evidentiary images entail risks that extend beyond traditional concerns of representation and accuracy. Ethical failure in visual testimony may result not only in misinterpretation but in tangible harm to individuals and communities depicted in photographs.

One of the most significant ethical risks concerns the exposure of vulnerable subjects. In conflict zones, individuals captured in photographs may face threats ranging from social stigmatization to physical retaliation. Civilians, activists, detainees, and survivors of violence may be identifiable through facial features, clothing, location markers, or contextual clues, even when photographers attempt anonymization. When images circulate widely or are repurposed for evidentiary use, the risk to subjects may increase exponentially, particularly in authoritarian or post-conflict environments where accountability mechanisms are weak or politicized.

The ethical challenge is compounded by the temporal persistence of photographic testimony. Unlike spoken accounts, which may fade or be revised over time, images often remain accessible indefinitely. Photographs documenting moments of vulnerability—injury, grief, fear, or coercion—may continue to circulate long after the immediate conflict has subsided. For depicted individuals, this persistence can result in ongoing psychological distress, social consequences, or renewed exposure to danger. Ethical evaluation must therefore consider not only immediate publication decisions but also the long-term implications of visual testimony.

Another critical ethical risk involves retraumatization. Images that graphically depict violence or suffering may reinforce harmful narratives and contribute to secondary trauma among both subjects and audiences. For survivors, seeing their experiences repeatedly circulated can exacerbate psychological harm. For viewers, particularly those directly affected by the conflict, exposure to such images may intensify fear, anger, or desensitization. Photojournalists face the difficult task of balancing the public's right to know against the potential psychological impact of evidentiary images.

Ethical risks also arise from asymmetries of power between photographers and subjects. In conflict situations, photographers often hold greater mobility, visibility, and communicative reach than those they document. Subjects may lack meaningful opportunity to consent or to understand how their images will be used. While informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical practice, it is frequently unattainable in fast-moving or dangerous contexts. The absence of

consent does not automatically preclude ethical publication, but it demands heightened responsibility and reflexivity on the part of the photographer.

The use of photographs as evidence introduces additional ethical complexity. Images incorporated into accountability processes may expose subjects to legal scrutiny or retaliation, particularly when judicial mechanisms are perceived as illegitimate or biased. A photograph that serves as proof of abuse may simultaneously endanger the person depicted if authorities or armed groups identify them as a witness or victim. In such cases, the ethical value of contributing to accountability must be weighed against the potential for immediate harm.

Ethical risk is further intensified by decontextualization. When images circulate without adequate explanation, they may be interpreted in ways that misrepresent the experiences of those depicted. For example, photographs of damaged infrastructure or injured individuals may be mobilized to support narratives that oversimplify complex political realities or assign blame inaccurately. Such misuses can perpetuate stereotypes, inflame tensions, or undermine the dignity of affected communities. The ethical responsibility of the photographer extends beyond capture to consideration of how images may be framed, shared, and reinterpreted.

The rise of digital platforms has magnified these challenges. Algorithmic amplification favors emotionally charged images, often privileging shock value over contextual understanding. Once published, photographs may be copied, altered, or re-captioned by third parties without the photographer's knowledge or consent. Although photographers cannot control all downstream uses of their work, ethical practice requires anticipating foreseeable risks and mitigating them where possible through careful selection, captioning, and collaboration with editors.

Importantly, ethical evaluation in visual testimony cannot be reduced to compliance with formal codes alone. While professional guidelines provide essential principles—such as respect for dignity, minimization of harm, and accountability—they do not offer definitive answers to context-specific dilemmas. Ethical judgment in conflict photography is situational and requires ongoing reflection. Decisions that appear justified in one context may produce unintended consequences in another.

Recognizing ethical risk as an integral component of visual testimony underscores the need for a proactive rather than reactive approach. Ethical considerations should inform field practices from the outset, shaping decisions about what to photograph, how to photograph it, and under what conditions images are disseminated. This approach reframes ethics not as an external constraint but as a methodological dimension of professional practice.

By foregrounding ethical risk, this section highlights the responsibilities that accompany the testimonial power of photography. The next section builds on this analysis by examining the methodological implications for photojournalists, outlining practices that support both ethical integrity and evidentiary credibility in conflict reporting.

5. Methodological Implications for Photojournalists

Understanding conflict photography as visual testimony entails concrete methodological consequences for professional practice. If photographs are capable of functioning as evidentiary artifacts—shaping public knowledge, supporting accountability processes, and contributing to historical records—then the production of such images cannot rely solely on intuition or aesthetic judgment. Methodological awareness becomes an essential component of responsible photojournalism in conflict environments.

One of the primary methodological implications concerns **intentionality at the moment of capture**. Photojournalists operating in crisis situations often work under extreme time pressure, yet the testimonial function of images requires conscious reflection on what is being documented and why. This does not imply a departure from journalistic responsiveness but rather an integration of evidentiary awareness into rapid decision-making. Choices regarding framing, distance, angle, and sequencing influence whether an image conveys an isolated moment or suggests a broader pattern of events.

Sequential documentation represents a key methodological practice. Single images may possess strong emotional impact, but sequences provide contextual depth that enhances evidentiary credibility. When feasible, photographing events before, during, and after critical moments allows viewers and secondary users to assess continuity and causality. Even limited sequences—two or three images captured over short intervals—can significantly strengthen the interpretive reliability of visual testimony.

Another methodological dimension involves **contextual documentation**. Photographs rarely speak for themselves; their testimonial value depends on accompanying information regarding time, location, and circumstances. Systematic captioning practices are therefore integral to evidentiary integrity. Captions should strive for factual precision, avoiding speculation while clearly stating what is known and what remains uncertain. When exact details cannot be confirmed, methodological transparency—explicitly acknowledging uncertainty—supports credibility rather than undermines it.

The preservation of original files and metadata constitutes a further methodological requirement. While journalists may not anticipate future evidentiary use at the time of publication, retaining unaltered originals enables later verification and reassessment. Metadata related to time, device, and settings may provide critical contextual cues when images are reexamined in investigative or accountability contexts. This practice aligns professional photojournalism with standards increasingly applied in digital evidence management.

Methodological rigor also extends to **selection and omission**. Deciding what not to photograph or not to publish is as significant as deciding what to include. In conflict environments, the presence of a camera may alter behavior or expose subjects to risk. Methodological restraint—choosing not to capture certain images or delaying publication—may be ethically and evidentially justified when potential harm outweighs informational value. Such decisions reflect professional judgment rather than censorship.

Collaboration with editors and verification specialists represents another methodological implication. While photographers often operate independently in the field, the testimonial function of images benefits from collective scrutiny. Engaging in dialogue about context, potential interpretations, and ethical risks enhances the reliability of visual testimony. This collaborative approach acknowledges that evidentiary credibility is constructed through process rather than guaranteed by individual expertise alone.

Importantly, methodological awareness does not require photographers to assume the role of legal investigators or forensic analysts. Rather, it involves recognizing the potential trajectories of images beyond immediate publication. A photograph may be mobilized in advocacy campaigns, cited in reports, or archived as historical documentation. Anticipating these trajectories encourages practices that preserve integrity without compromising journalistic independence.

Training and professional development play a crucial role in supporting methodological competence. Familiarity with basic principles of visual verification, ethical risk assessment, and contextual documentation equips photojournalists to navigate complex environments more effectively. Such training should be understood not as a constraint on creativity but as a foundation for responsible and impactful work.

Finally, methodological implications encompass reflexivity. Photojournalists engaged in visual testimony must continuously reflect on their positionality, assumptions, and the power dynamics inherent in representation. Reflexive practice does not negate objectivity but situates it within an awareness of context and consequence. By acknowledging the limits of what a photograph can show, photographers strengthen the epistemic humility necessary for credible testimony.

Taken together, these methodological considerations articulate a model of professional practice attuned to the evidentiary and ethical dimensions of conflict photography. Visual testimony emerges not as a byproduct of journalistic activity but as a deliberate form of knowledge production. The following conclusion synthesizes these insights and reflects on their broader implications for contemporary visual journalism.

6. Conclusion

Conflict photography has undergone a profound transformation in contemporary media environments. Once primarily understood as a journalistic illustration accompanying textual narratives, photographic images increasingly function as autonomous forms of visual testimony. They circulate rapidly across platforms, shape public perception, support advocacy and accountability efforts, and contribute to historical memory. This expanded role demands a reconceptualization of conflict photography not merely as representation but as a form of evidentiary knowledge production.

This article has argued that understanding photography as visual testimony requires an interdisciplinary analytical framework that integrates epistemic, ethical, and methodological

considerations. By examining the epistemic status of photographs, the study has shown that images operate as condensed forms of witnessing, endowed with significant persuasive power yet inherently dependent on context for interpretation. Their testimonial authority derives not only from indexicality but from professional practice, transparency, and ethical judgment.

The analysis of photography situated between journalism and evidence highlights the increasingly porous boundaries between media reporting, human rights documentation, and accountability mechanisms. Photographs captured by photojournalists now migrate across institutional domains, where they are evaluated according to evidentiary criteria that extend beyond traditional journalistic norms. This migration amplifies both the societal importance of visual testimony and the responsibilities borne by those who produce it.

Ethical risks associated with visual testimony—particularly the exposure of vulnerable subjects, retraumatization, and decontextualization—underscore the necessity of proactive ethical reflexivity. Ethical responsibility in conflict photography cannot be reduced to compliance with formal codes alone; it requires situational judgment informed by awareness of potential downstream uses and long-term consequences of image circulation.

Finally, the article has articulated methodological implications for photojournalists operating in conflict environments. Methodological awareness—encompassing intentionality, contextual documentation, preservation of originals, collaborative verification, and reflexive practice—emerges as a critical dimension of professional competence. Such practices do not constrain journalistic freedom but enhance the credibility, accountability, and evidentiary value of visual testimony.

By conceptualizing conflict photography as a form of visual testimony, this study contributes to ongoing debates in journalism studies, visual communication, and media ethics. It provides a theoretical foundation for subsequent research on verification frameworks and evidentiary standards in visual reporting. More broadly, it affirms the role of professional photojournalism as a practice of responsible witnessing in an increasingly complex and contested informational landscape.

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