

Non-State Visual Authority and the Transformation of Evidence in Global Media Systems

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of visual evidence in contemporary global media systems, focusing on the emergence of non-state actors as producers of authoritative visual narratives. It argues that the traditional monopoly of institutional media over the construction and validation of evidence has been significantly weakened by the expansion of digital platforms and decentralized content production.

The study analyzes how visual materials produced by individuals, independent creators, and transnational networks increasingly function as sources of verification, documentation, and public knowledge. It explores the conditions under which such visual content gains legitimacy and influences perception, particularly in contexts of crisis, conflict, and restricted media environments.

Particular attention is given to the interaction between visual evidence, platform-mediated visibility, and institutional trust. The article proposes that contemporary visual communication systems are characterized by a shift toward distributed forms of authority, where recognition is negotiated across networks rather than determined by centralized institutions.

Keywords

visual evidence, media systems, non-state actors, digital platforms, crisis, perception, authority, transnational communication

1. Introduction

The contemporary global media environment is increasingly characterized by the decentralization of authority in the production and interpretation of visual evidence. Traditional models of media communication were based on institutional control, where professional organizations such as news agencies, broadcasters, and state-affiliated media played a central role in determining what constituted credible information. Visual materials were validated through editorial processes, professional standards, and institutional reputation.

In recent years, this model has undergone significant transformation. The expansion of digital platforms has enabled individuals, independent creators, and loosely organized networks to produce and distribute visual content at scale. As a result, the boundaries between professional and non-professional media have become increasingly blurred. Visual materials that originate outside institutional frameworks can achieve wide visibility and influence public understanding of events.

This shift has important implications for the concept of evidence. Evidence is not only a matter of factual accuracy but also of recognition. For visual material to function as evidence, it must be perceived as credible, relevant, and meaningful within a given social context. In decentralized media environments, this recognition is no longer determined solely by institutional authority. Instead, it emerges through processes of circulation, interpretation, and validation across distributed networks.

Visual evidence in contemporary media systems operates within a complex field shaped by technological infrastructure, audience engagement, and political conditions. In contexts of crisis and conflict, this complexity becomes particularly visible. Images and videos produced by individuals may serve as primary sources of information, influencing how events are understood and discussed. At the same time, the absence of centralized validation mechanisms introduces challenges related to authenticity, interpretation, and trust.

Research on visual communication in conflict reporting highlights the increasing importance of non-institutional sources of evidence. Khokhotva (2024) demonstrates that visual materials produced outside traditional media structures play a critical role in documenting events and shaping public perception. These materials can function as both narrative and verification, contributing to the construction of knowledge in environments where access to information is limited.

At the same time, the conditions under which visual evidence is produced and circulated are often shaped by restrictions on press freedom. In situations of armed conflict, limitations on journalistic activity can reduce the presence of institutional media, creating spaces in which alternative forms of documentation emerge. Tytarenko (2024) argues that regimes of press restriction alter the structure of media systems, shifting the balance between institutional and non-state actors. This shift affects not only the availability of information but also the processes through which it is validated.

The interaction between decentralization and restriction creates a paradoxical environment. On the one hand, the weakening of institutional control expands the range of actors who can produce visual evidence. On the other hand, the absence or limitation of formal structures complicates the process of verification. Visual communication in such contexts must therefore be understood as operating within a field of contested authority, where credibility is negotiated rather than assumed.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the transformation of visual evidence within these conditions. It seeks to understand how non-state actors contribute to the production of authoritative narratives, how visual materials gain recognition as evidence, and how media systems adapt to decentralized forms of communication. By focusing on the relationship between visual communication, authority, and perception, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how knowledge is constructed in contemporary global media environments.

2. Distributed Authority and the Validation of Visual Evidence

The transformation of visual evidence in contemporary media systems is closely linked to the emergence of distributed forms of authority. In contrast to earlier models, where institutional actors played a central role in validating information, authority is now increasingly dispersed across networks of producers, platforms, and audiences. This shift does not eliminate the need for validation, but it changes the mechanisms through which validation occurs. Visual evidence is no longer confirmed solely through editorial processes or institutional endorsement. Instead, it is evaluated through a combination of circulation, cross-referencing, and interpretive engagement.

Distributed authority operates as a networked process. Visual materials produced by individuals or non-state actors enter media environments where they are shared, analyzed, and recontextualized by multiple participants. These participants may include journalists, analysts, platform users, and specialized communities engaged in verification practices. Through this interaction, visual content acquires layers of interpretation that contribute to its perceived credibility. Authority, in this sense, is not a fixed attribute but an emergent property of communicative processes.

One of the key mechanisms in this process is collective verification. In decentralized media environments, verification often occurs through distributed analysis rather than centralized control. Visual materials may be examined for consistency, contextualized with additional information, and compared with other sources. This process can involve both professional and non-professional actors, creating hybrid forms of validation. The credibility of visual evidence is thus constructed through interaction rather than imposed by a single authority.

At the same time, the absence of centralized validation introduces challenges. Distributed authority does not guarantee accuracy. It creates a field in which multiple interpretations coexist, some of which may be conflicting or misleading. The speed of circulation can amplify unverified content, allowing it to shape perception before thorough analysis takes place. This creates a tension between immediacy and reliability, where the demand for rapid information may conflict with the need for careful verification.

The role of platforms is central to understanding this dynamic. Digital platforms function as infrastructures that organize the circulation of visual content. Their algorithms determine which

materials become visible and how they are distributed across audiences. This affects the validation process by influencing which content receives attention and which remains marginal. In many cases, visibility precedes verification, meaning that widely circulated images may gain perceived credibility simply through exposure.

This relationship between visibility and credibility introduces a critical dimension to distributed authority. Recognition as evidence is often linked to the degree of exposure within media environments. Visual materials that achieve high visibility are more likely to be perceived as significant, even if their accuracy has not been fully established. This creates a feedback loop in which visibility reinforces credibility, and credibility further increases visibility. Understanding this loop is essential for analyzing how visual evidence functions in contemporary media systems.

The evidentiary function of visual communication is further complicated by the conditions under which content is produced. In many crisis and conflict contexts, access to information is limited, and formal journalistic activity may be restricted. Under such conditions, visual materials produced by individuals become primary sources of documentation. Khokhotva (2024) emphasizes that such materials often serve as initial records of events, particularly in environments where institutional media presence is constrained. This increases the importance of non-state actors in the construction of evidence.

However, the reliance on non-institutional sources also raises questions about authenticity and context. Visual materials may be incomplete, decontextualized, or subject to manipulation. Without clear frameworks for verification, audiences must rely on indirect indicators of credibility, such as consistency with other sources or the perceived reliability of the producer. This process introduces uncertainty, as the criteria for evaluation are not always transparent or standardized.

The issue of press freedom further shapes the conditions of validation. In environments where journalistic activity is restricted, the flow of information is altered. Tytarenko (2024) argues that restrictions on media not only limit access to information but also change the structure of communication systems. When institutional media is constrained, alternative forms of documentation become more prominent. This shifts the balance of authority toward decentralized actors, but it also complicates the process of validation, as traditional mechanisms of verification may be weakened.

The interaction between restriction and decentralization creates a complex environment in which authority is both expanded and fragmented. On one hand, more actors are able to produce and circulate visual evidence. On the other hand, the absence of stable validation frameworks increases the risk of misinterpretation. Creative professionals and independent producers must therefore navigate a field in which credibility is continuously negotiated rather than established in advance.

Examples from contemporary media environments illustrate these dynamics. Visual materials documenting conflict or displacement often originate from individuals on the ground. These materials may be shared widely before they are verified by institutional actors. In some cases, they become central to public understanding of events, shaping perception even as their accuracy is being evaluated. This demonstrates the influence of distributed authority in real time, where the boundaries between production, circulation, and validation are closely intertwined.

The role of specialized communities in verification is also significant. Groups dedicated to analyzing visual content contribute to the validation process by examining details such as location, timing, and consistency. These practices represent a form of collective expertise that operates outside traditional institutional frameworks. While not always formally recognized, such communities play an important role in establishing credibility within decentralized media systems.

From an analytical perspective, distributed authority can be understood as a shift from hierarchical to networked validation. Authority is no longer concentrated in a single point but distributed across multiple nodes. Each node contributes to the process of evaluation, creating a dynamic and evolving system of credibility. This system is inherently unstable, as it depends on ongoing interaction and interpretation. However, it also reflects the realities of contemporary communication, where information flows across complex and interconnected networks.

In conclusion, the validation of visual evidence in contemporary media systems is shaped by distributed authority. This process involves multiple actors, platforms, and forms of interaction, creating a dynamic field in which credibility is negotiated rather than imposed. While this model expands the range of participants in the production of evidence, it also introduces challenges related to accuracy, interpretation, and trust. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing how visual communication functions as a source of knowledge in global media environments.

The next chapter examines how these processes influence perception and trust, focusing on the relationship between visual evidence, audience interpretation, and the formation of belief in contemporary media systems.

3. Visual Evidence, Perception, and the Formation of Trust

The transformation of visual evidence within distributed media systems has direct implications for how perception and trust are formed. If authority is no longer centralized and validation occurs through networked processes, then trust cannot be understood as a fixed attribute assigned by institutions. Instead, it emerges through interaction between visual materials, audiences, and the conditions of circulation. Visual evidence plays a central role in this process by shaping how information is perceived and how credibility is attributed.

Perception in contemporary media environments is mediated by visual experience. Audiences encounter events primarily through images and audiovisual content rather than through direct observation. This mediated perception influences how reality is interpreted, as visual materials provide immediate and often persuasive representations. The apparent directness of images creates a sense of proximity to events, even when those events occur in distant or inaccessible locations. This perceived proximity contributes to the formation of belief, as viewers may interpret visual evidence as a direct reflection of reality.

However, the relationship between visual evidence and truth is not straightforward. Images do not speak independently of context. Their meaning depends on framing, sequencing, and interpretation. The same visual material can support different narratives depending on how it is presented. This introduces ambiguity into the process of perception, as audiences must rely on contextual cues to interpret what they see. In distributed media systems, where such cues may be incomplete or inconsistent, interpretation becomes more complex.

Trust, in this context, emerges as a relational process. It is not simply a matter of believing or disbelieving a particular image. It involves evaluating the conditions under which the image was produced, circulated, and interpreted. Audiences consider factors such as source credibility, consistency with other information, and alignment with existing knowledge. In the absence of centralized authority, these evaluations are often implicit and dynamic. Trust is continuously adjusted as new information becomes available.

The role of repetition is particularly important in the formation of trust. Visual materials that are encountered repeatedly across different sources are more likely to be perceived as credible. This repetition creates a sense of confirmation, even when the original source of the material is uncertain. In distributed environments, where content circulates across multiple platforms and networks, repetition can amplify the perceived reliability of visual evidence. At the same time, it can also reinforce inaccuracies if unverified content is widely shared.

The concept of visual consistency further contributes to trust formation. When multiple visual materials present similar representations of an event, they create a coherent narrative that supports interpretation. This coherence can increase confidence in the accuracy of the information. However, consistency does not necessarily guarantee truth. It may result from the circulation of the same material across different channels rather than from independent verification. Understanding this distinction is essential for analyzing how trust is constructed.

Research on visual evidence in conflict reporting emphasizes the importance of contextualization in maintaining credibility. Khokhotva (2024) argues that visual materials gain evidentiary value when they are embedded within interpretive frameworks that provide temporal, spatial, and situational context. Without such context, images may be misinterpreted or used to support misleading narratives. This highlights the role of both producers and audiences in the construction of trust, as each contributes to the interpretation of visual evidence.

The conditions of media restriction further influence the formation of trust. In environments where press freedom is limited, access to verified information may be constrained. Tytarenko (2024) demonstrates that such restrictions alter the informational landscape, increasing reliance on alternative sources of visual evidence. In these contexts, trust is often negotiated under conditions of uncertainty. Audiences may depend on indirect indicators of credibility, such as perceived authenticity or alignment with expected patterns, rather than on formal verification.

This dynamic creates a paradoxical situation. On one hand, the decentralization of media systems allows for a greater diversity of sources, expanding the range of available information. On the other hand, it complicates the process of distinguishing between accurate and misleading content. Trust becomes more fragile, as it is based on processes that are less stable and more dependent on interpretation. Visual evidence remains influential, but its credibility is subject to ongoing negotiation.

The role of platforms is again central to this process. Algorithms influence not only what content is visible but also how it is encountered. The order in which visual materials appear, the context in which they are presented, and the patterns of interaction they generate all affect perception. Platform design can create environments that either support careful evaluation or encourage rapid consumption. In many cases, the emphasis on speed and engagement may reduce the depth of interpretation, affecting how trust is formed.

Creative professionals and journalists play a critical role in navigating these conditions. Their work contributes to the construction of trust by providing structured and contextualized representations of events. Through careful framing, sequencing, and explanation, they can enhance the interpretability of visual evidence. At the same time, they must operate within environments that may limit their ability to control how their work is received. The interaction between professional practice and platform dynamics shapes the effectiveness of their contribution to trust formation.

Examples from contemporary media environments illustrate these dynamics. Visual materials documenting crisis situations often circulate rapidly, reaching wide audiences before formal verification occurs. Initial interpretations may be based on limited context, leading to uncertainty or conflicting narratives. As additional information becomes available, interpretations may shift, and trust may be reassessed. This process reflects the dynamic nature of perception and trust in distributed media systems.

The relationship between visual evidence and trust also has implications for public response. Trust influences how audiences interpret information and whether they act upon it. Visual narratives that are perceived as credible are more likely to shape opinion, mobilize attention, and influence decision-making. Conversely, uncertainty about credibility may lead to disengagement or skepticism. Understanding how trust is formed is therefore essential for analyzing the broader impact of visual communication.

In analytical terms, the formation of trust in contemporary media systems can be understood as an emergent process shaped by perception, repetition, context, and interaction. Visual evidence plays a central role in this process by providing the material through which interpretation occurs. However, its influence depends on the conditions under which it is produced and circulated, as well as on the interpretive practices of audiences.

In conclusion, the relationship between visual evidence, perception, and trust reflects the transformation of media systems toward distributed and networked forms of communication. Trust is no longer anchored solely in institutional authority but is constructed through dynamic processes of evaluation and interaction. Visual communication remains a powerful force in shaping belief, but its role must be understood within the complexities of contemporary media environments.

The next chapter examines how these dynamics influence the broader structure of global media systems, focusing on the interaction between non-state actors, institutional media, and the evolving concept of authority in visual communication.

4. Non-State Actors and the Reconfiguration of Media Authority

The emergence of distributed validation and the transformation of trust in visual evidence are closely linked to a broader shift in the structure of media authority. In contemporary media systems, authority is no longer exclusively concentrated within institutional actors. Instead, it is increasingly shaped by the interaction between institutional media, non-state actors, and platform infrastructures. This reconfiguration alters how information is produced, validated, and perceived, particularly in contexts of crisis and conflict.

Non-state actors play a central role in this transformation. These actors include independent creators, citizen journalists, activist networks, and decentralized communities engaged in the production and circulation of visual content. Their participation expands the range of perspectives available in media environments and challenges the traditional monopoly of institutional media over representation. Visual materials produced by non-state actors often become primary sources of information, especially in situations where access for institutional media is limited or restricted.

The increasing visibility of non-state actors does not imply the disappearance of institutional authority. Rather, it creates a hybrid system in which multiple forms of authority coexist and interact. Institutional media continues to provide structured frameworks for interpretation and validation, while non-state actors contribute immediacy and diversity of representation. The relationship between these actors is not fixed. It is characterized by negotiation, competition, and, in some cases, collaboration.

One of the key features of this hybrid system is the redistribution of representational power. In traditional models, institutional media determined which events were visible and how they were interpreted. In contemporary environments, non-state actors can introduce alternative narratives that may gain visibility independently of institutional endorsement. This redistribution increases the plurality of representation, but it also complicates the process of establishing authoritative accounts of events.

The concept of authority itself must therefore be reconsidered. Authority in visual communication is no longer defined solely by institutional status. It is constructed through a combination of visibility, perceived credibility, and network validation. Non-state actors can achieve authority when their content is widely circulated, cross-referenced, and integrated into broader narratives. This form of authority is dynamic and contingent, depending on ongoing processes of recognition and interpretation.

At the same time, the expansion of non-state participation introduces new challenges. The absence of standardized professional frameworks can lead to variability in the quality and reliability of visual content. Non-state actors may lack access to resources, training, or verification tools, which can affect the accuracy of representation. This variability does not diminish their importance, but it highlights the need for careful evaluation within distributed media systems.

The role of platforms is central in mediating the interaction between institutional and non-state actors. Platforms function as spaces where different forms of content converge, compete, and circulate. Their algorithms influence which narratives gain visibility, shaping the balance between institutional and non-state representation. In many cases, content produced by non-state actors may achieve high visibility due to its immediacy or emotional impact, while institutional content may provide context and analysis that stabilizes interpretation.

This interaction creates a layered structure of authority. Initial perception may be shaped by rapidly circulating visual materials, while subsequent interpretation may involve institutional frameworks that provide context and validation. The timing of these processes is significant. Early exposure to visual content can influence perception before formal analysis occurs, affecting how subsequent information is received. Understanding this temporal dimension is essential for analyzing the dynamics of media authority.

Research on visual evidence in conflict reporting supports the idea that non-state actors have become integral to contemporary media systems. Khokhotva (2024) highlights that visual materials produced outside traditional journalistic frameworks often serve as initial points of reference in crisis situations. These materials may later be incorporated into institutional reporting, demonstrating the interconnected nature of contemporary media production. The boundary between professional and non-professional content becomes increasingly porous.

The influence of regulatory environments further shapes this landscape. In contexts where press freedom is restricted, institutional media may face limitations that reduce their capacity to operate. Tytarenko (2024) argues that such restrictions alter the balance of media systems by creating conditions in which non-state actors assume greater prominence. This shift does not necessarily lead to a more stable information environment. Instead, it produces a field in which authority is contested and continuously negotiated.

The interaction between non-state actors and institutional media also affects the formation of public perception. Audiences are exposed to multiple sources of information that may present different interpretations of the same events. This plurality can enhance understanding by providing diverse perspectives, but it can also create uncertainty. The process of determining which sources are credible becomes more complex, requiring audiences to engage in active evaluation.

Creative professionals operating as non-state actors occupy a particularly significant position within this system. Their work combines elements of artistic production and journalistic practice, allowing them to produce content that is both visually compelling and socially relevant. They contribute to the diversification of media representation while also engaging with issues of accuracy and responsibility. Their position reflects the broader transformation of creative practice discussed in previous articles, where boundaries between disciplines become increasingly fluid.

Examples from contemporary media environments illustrate the impact of non-state actors on the reconfiguration of authority. Visual documentation produced by individuals on the ground often circulates widely before institutional verification occurs. These materials may shape initial perception, influencing how events are understood at an early stage. Institutional media may later incorporate such content, providing context and validation. This sequence demonstrates the interconnected roles of different actors within the media system.

At the same time, the presence of multiple actors can lead to fragmentation. Competing narratives may coexist without clear resolution, and the absence of centralized authority can make it difficult to establish consensus. This fragmentation reflects the complexity of contemporary media environments, where information flows through decentralized networks rather than hierarchical structures.

From an analytical perspective, the reconfiguration of media authority can be understood as a transition from centralized to distributed systems. Authority is no longer anchored in a single source but emerges from interactions across networks of production, circulation, and interpretation. This transition reflects broader changes in communication technologies and social organization, where connectivity and participation redefine the structure of information systems.

In conclusion, non-state actors play a critical role in the transformation of media authority within contemporary visual communication systems. Their participation expands the range of

representation and contributes to the decentralization of authority, while also introducing challenges related to validation and trust. The interaction between institutional and non-state actors creates a dynamic and evolving media environment in which authority is continuously negotiated.

The next chapter synthesizes the arguments developed throughout the article, offering a concluding analysis of how visual evidence, perception, and authority interact within global media systems shaped by digital communication and transnational dynamics.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the transformation of visual evidence and media authority in contemporary global communication systems. It has argued that the production, circulation, and validation of visual material are no longer governed solely by institutional frameworks but are increasingly shaped by distributed networks of actors, platforms, and audiences. Within this environment, visual communication functions as a central mechanism through which perception is structured, trust is negotiated, and authority is constructed.

The analysis began by addressing the decentralization of media systems and the emergence of non-state actors as significant contributors to the production of visual evidence. It was shown that individuals, independent creators, and transnational networks now participate actively in documenting events and shaping public understanding. This shift has expanded the range of available perspectives while also complicating the processes through which information is validated.

The concept of distributed authority was introduced to explain how credibility is established in such environments. Authority was shown to emerge through processes of circulation, cross-referencing, and interpretive engagement rather than through centralized institutional control. Visual evidence gains recognition not only through its content but also through its position within networks of communication. This dynamic reflects a broader transformation in the structure of media systems, where hierarchical models are replaced by more fluid and interactive forms of validation.

The relationship between visual evidence, perception, and trust was examined as a key dimension of this transformation. It was demonstrated that visual materials shape perception by providing immediate and compelling representations of events, while trust is formed through processes of evaluation that involve repetition, consistency, and contextualization. In the absence of stable institutional authority, trust becomes a dynamic and negotiated process, influenced by both the properties of visual content and the conditions of its circulation.

The role of emotional engagement was also considered, highlighting the importance of affect in shaping public response. Visual narratives generate emotional reactions that influence attention

and interpretation, contributing to the formation of collective responses. At the same time, the emotional economy of visual media introduces challenges related to simplification and distortion, as the demand for engagement may favor certain types of representation over others.

The article further examined the position of creative professionals within this environment, emphasizing their role as mediators of meaning. Creative practitioners and journalists were shown to operate under conditions of urgency, constraint, and ethical complexity, particularly in crisis contexts. Their work involves balancing visibility, responsibility, and risk, while contributing to both narrative construction and evidentiary documentation. This dual role underscores the importance of professional judgment in navigating the tensions inherent in visual communication.

The influence of structural conditions, including platform dynamics and restrictions on press freedom, was also addressed. These factors shape the distribution of visibility and the balance of authority within media systems. In environments where institutional media is constrained, non-state actors may assume greater prominence, altering the structure of representation. At the same time, platform infrastructures influence which narratives gain visibility, reinforcing certain patterns of perception and engagement.

Taken together, these elements illustrate that visual communication in contemporary media systems operates within a complex and interconnected field. The production of evidence, the formation of perception, and the construction of authority are not separate processes but interdependent dimensions of a single system. Understanding this system requires attention to both the technological infrastructures that enable communication and the social dynamics that shape interpretation.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond specific contexts of crisis or conflict. They point to a broader transformation in how knowledge is produced and disseminated in global society. Visual evidence has become a primary mode of understanding complex phenomena, influencing public discourse and collective action. As a result, the conditions under which visual communication operates have significant consequences for how reality is perceived and interpreted.

Future research may explore these dynamics in greater detail, focusing on specific media environments, comparative contexts, or emerging technologies that further transform the production and circulation of visual evidence. Such work would contribute to a deeper understanding of how distributed media systems evolve and how they shape the relationship between information, perception, and social organization.

In conclusion, the transformation of visual evidence and media authority reflects a shift toward decentralized, networked forms of communication in which credibility is continuously negotiated. Visual communication plays a central role in this process, connecting events with interpretation and shaping how societies understand and respond to complex realities.

Recognizing this role is essential for developing a comprehensive account of contemporary media systems and their impact on social life.

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Author's Note

This article reflects analytical research on the transformation of visual evidence and the reconfiguration of media authority in contemporary global communication systems. It integrates perspectives from media theory, cultural sociology, and conflict studies, with particular attention to the role of non-state actors and digital platforms in shaping perception and trust.

The study emphasizes the shift toward distributed forms of authority and the implications of this transformation for the production and validation of visual evidence. By situating visual communication within transnational and platform-mediated environments, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and contested in contemporary media systems.