

Visual Communication in Crisis Contexts: Media, Perception, and Public Response

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Abstract

This article examines the role of visual communication in shaping perception and public response in contexts of crisis. The study analyzes how visual narratives influence the interpretation of social instability, conflict, and displacement. It argues that visual media functions as a primary mechanism through which crises are rendered visible, structured, and understood across diverse audiences.

The article explores how images and audiovisual content mediate between events and public perception, often determining which aspects of crisis are emphasized and how they are framed. Particular attention is given to the role of digital platforms, where the speed of circulation and the logic of visibility reshape the relationship between representation and response. The study also considers the position of creative professionals as producers of crisis narratives, whose work operates within conditions of urgency, ethical responsibility, and heightened social impact.

The article proposes a conceptual framework for understanding visual communication in crisis contexts as a form of mediated perception that directly influences public interpretation and collective reaction in transnational environments.

Keywords

visual communication, crisis, media, perception, public response, digital platforms, migration, conflict

1. Introduction

The contemporary media environment is increasingly defined by the rapid circulation of visual content in response to crisis situations. Armed conflicts, forced migration, economic instability, and social disruptions are no longer experienced solely through direct observation or traditional reporting. Instead, they are encountered primarily through images and audiovisual narratives that travel across digital platforms with unprecedented speed. In this environment, visual

communication plays a central role in shaping how crises are perceived and how publics respond to them.

The concept of crisis itself is mediated. Events do not enter public consciousness in a raw or unstructured form. They are selected, framed, and distributed through systems of communication that determine their visibility and meaning. Visual media is particularly influential in this process because it provides immediate and emotionally powerful representations. Images can convey urgency, scale, and human impact in ways that textual descriptions often cannot. As a result, visual narratives frequently become the primary reference points through which crises are understood.

This transformation has significant implications for both perception and response. Public reactions to crises are not formed solely on the basis of factual information, but are shaped by how events are visually presented. The selection of images, narrative sequencing, and contextual framing all influence interpretation. Visual communication thus operates as a mediating layer between reality and response, structuring how individuals and societies engage with crisis situations.

Digital platforms play a central role in this dynamic. Platforms centered on visual content have become dominant channels for the dissemination of information, prioritizing immediacy and engagement. Content that is visually striking or emotionally resonant is often amplified, shaping which aspects of crisis gain visibility. This creates a media environment in which the perception of crisis is influenced not only by events themselves, but also by the mechanisms through which those events are represented and circulated.

At the same time, the production of visual narratives in crisis contexts involves significant ethical and professional challenges. Creative professionals, journalists, and content producers must operate under conditions of urgency, uncertainty, and potential risk. Decisions about what to show, how to present it, and when to distribute it carry consequences for both those represented and those who consume the content. Visual communication in such contexts is therefore not neutral, but actively participates in shaping public understanding and response.

The purpose of this article is to analyze visual communication in crisis contexts as a structured and influential process rather than a passive reflection of events. It seeks to understand how visual narratives construct perception, how they influence public response, and how they are produced within environments shaped by digital platforms and transnational communication flows.

2. Construction of Crisis Through Visual Narratives

The perception of crisis in contemporary media environments is not a direct reflection of events but a constructed process shaped by visual narratives. Crises do not become socially meaningful simply by occurring. They acquire meaning through representation, selection, and circulation.

Visual communication plays a central role in this process by organizing how events are framed, interpreted, and integrated into public consciousness.

Crisis, in this sense, is not only a condition but also a narrative form. It is constructed through sequences of images and audiovisual materials that define what is visible, what is emphasized, and what remains outside the frame. Visual narratives do not merely show events. They structure them, creating coherence where there may be fragmentation and assigning significance where there may be ambiguity. This structuring function is particularly important in situations characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, and incomplete information.

One of the key mechanisms in the construction of crisis is selection. Not all aspects of an event are equally represented. Visual media prioritizes certain images over others, often based on their emotional intensity, symbolic value, or capacity to attract attention. As a result, public perception is shaped by a limited set of visual references that come to represent the crisis as a whole. These references may include images of destruction, displacement, or human suffering, which become dominant markers of the situation.

This selective visibility has important consequences. It creates a hierarchy of perception in which certain elements of reality are foregrounded while others remain marginal. For example, images of immediate impact, such as violence or physical damage, are more likely to circulate widely than images of long-term adaptation or recovery. This imbalance influences how crises are understood, often reinforcing a focus on urgency rather than complexity.

The temporal dimension of crisis construction further complicates this process. In many cases, crises are not short-term events but prolonged conditions that evolve over time. Research on journalism in conditions of protracted conflict emphasizes that media representation in such environments tends to shift from initial intensity to normalized repetition. Hryhoriev (2023) argues that prolonged crises generate a specific media dynamic in which continuous exposure leads to both saturation and selective attention. Certain narratives become stabilized, while others disappear from public visibility.

This dynamic affects how audiences engage with crisis over time. Initial exposure may produce strong emotional reactions, but repeated exposure can lead to desensitization or reduced attention. Visual narratives must therefore continuously adapt to maintain visibility within competitive media environments. This often results in the emphasis on more dramatic or visually striking elements, further reinforcing selective representation.

Another important mechanism is framing. Visual narratives do not present events in isolation. They position them within interpretive frameworks that influence how they are understood. Framing involves choices related to composition, context, sequencing, and accompanying information. These choices guide the viewer's interpretation, shaping perceptions of causality, responsibility, and significance.

For example, an image of displacement can be framed as a humanitarian issue, a political consequence, or a security concern, depending on how it is contextualized. The same visual material may produce different interpretations depending on its narrative environment. This highlights the role of visual communication as an active agent in the construction of meaning rather than a passive medium.

The concept of visual evidence introduces an additional dimension to this analysis. In contemporary crisis contexts, images are increasingly used not only for representation but also as forms of documentation. Visual materials serve as records of events, supporting claims about what has occurred. Research on human rights documentation demonstrates that images can function as evidence in legal and investigative processes, providing verification and supporting accountability mechanisms.

This evidentiary function enhances the significance of visual communication. It transforms images from illustrative elements into components of knowledge production. Visual narratives contribute to the construction of factual understanding, influencing how events are recorded and interpreted. However, this also introduces challenges. The interpretation of visual evidence depends on context, authenticity, and framing. Without careful analysis, images may be misinterpreted or used selectively to support particular narratives.

The interaction between representation and evidence creates a complex field in which visual communication operates simultaneously as narrative and documentation. Creative professionals and journalists working in crisis contexts must navigate this dual role. They are not only producing content for audiences but also contributing to processes of recording and interpreting reality. This increases the responsibility associated with visual production, as inaccuracies or distortions can have significant consequences.

Examples from contemporary media environments illustrate these dynamics. Visual coverage of migration, for instance, often relies on recurring motifs such as border crossings, temporary shelters, or overcrowded transportation. These images create a recognizable visual language of crisis. At the same time, they may obscure other aspects of migration, such as long-term integration, professional activity, or everyday life. The repetition of certain visual patterns contributes to a stable but limited understanding of the phenomenon.

Similarly, in conflict contexts, images of destruction and military activity tend to dominate visual narratives. While these images convey the scale and intensity of events, they may overshadow other dimensions, such as civilian adaptation, local resilience, or institutional responses. This selective representation shapes public perception by emphasizing certain aspects of crisis while marginalizing others.

The role of digital platforms further influences the construction of crisis. Platform algorithms prioritize content that generates engagement, often amplifying visually striking or emotionally intense material. This creates an environment in which certain narratives are more likely to

achieve visibility. As a result, the construction of crisis is not only shaped by journalistic or professional decisions but also by automated systems that influence distribution.

This interaction between human and algorithmic selection introduces additional complexity. Creative professionals must consider not only how to represent events but also how their representations will circulate within platform environments. The need to achieve visibility may influence choices related to composition, timing, and narrative structure. This creates a tension between accuracy and visibility, where the demands of communication may affect the representation of reality.

In analytical terms, the construction of crisis through visual narratives can be understood as a layered process involving selection, framing, circulation, and interpretation. Each of these elements contributes to the formation of perception, shaping how crises are understood at both individual and societal levels. Visual communication does not simply transmit information. It organizes it, creating structured representations that influence response.

In conclusion, visual narratives play a central role in the construction of crisis as a socially meaningful phenomenon. Through processes of selection and framing, they define what becomes visible and how it is interpreted. Through circulation, they determine which narratives gain prominence. Through their evidentiary function, they contribute to the formation of knowledge about events. Understanding these processes is essential for analyzing how media shapes perception and response in contemporary crisis contexts.

3. Public Response and the Emotional Economy of Visual Media

The construction of crisis through visual narratives does not end at the level of representation. It extends into the domain of public response, where images and audiovisual content influence how individuals and societies react to events. Public response is not formed solely through rational analysis of information. It is shaped by an interplay of perception, emotion, and interpretation, all of which are mediated through visual communication. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine what may be described as the emotional economy of visual media.

The term emotional economy refers to the circulation, distribution, and structuring of affect within media environments. Visual narratives do not simply convey information. They generate emotional responses that influence attention, engagement, and interpretation. In crisis contexts, these responses often include empathy, fear, urgency, or moral concern. The intensity and direction of these emotions play a significant role in shaping how audiences understand and respond to events.

One of the defining features of visual media is its capacity to produce immediate affective engagement. Images can communicate complex situations in a condensed and accessible form, allowing viewers to grasp the human dimension of crisis quickly. This immediacy is particularly

important in environments where information is abundant and attention is limited. Visual narratives can capture attention more effectively than abstract or textual descriptions, making them central to the formation of initial responses.

However, affective engagement is not uniform or stable. It is structured by the way visual content is presented and by the broader media environment in which it circulates. Repeated exposure to similar images can lead to desensitization, reducing the intensity of emotional response over time. This phenomenon has been observed in prolonged crisis contexts, where continuous visual coverage leads to a gradual normalization of events. As a result, the same type of image that initially generated strong reactions may later produce limited engagement.

This dynamic creates a paradox within the emotional economy of visual media. On the one hand, emotional intensity is necessary to attract attention and generate response. On the other hand, sustained exposure can diminish that intensity, requiring increasingly striking or dramatic content to maintain visibility. This escalation influences how crises are represented, often prioritizing images that maximize emotional impact. While this may increase engagement, it can also distort perception by emphasizing extreme or exceptional aspects of reality.

The relationship between emotion and interpretation is also central to understanding public response. Emotional reactions influence how information is processed. Images that evoke strong feelings are more likely to be remembered and to shape subsequent understanding. However, emotion does not automatically lead to accurate interpretation. It can simplify complex situations, directing attention toward certain elements while obscuring others. For example, images of suffering may generate empathy but may not provide sufficient context to understand the underlying causes of a crisis.

Research on visual evidence and human rights documentation highlights the dual role of images in this process. Khokhotva (2023) argues that visual materials can function both as sources of emotional engagement and as forms of evidentiary documentation. Images of violations, displacement, or destruction can mobilize public attention while also contributing to processes of verification and accountability. This dual function increases the significance of visual communication, as it connects perception with knowledge production. At the same time, it introduces challenges related to interpretation, authenticity, and context.

Public response is also shaped by the temporal structure of visual media. Digital platforms create a continuous flow of content in which new images rapidly replace previous ones. This flow affects how audiences engage with crisis. Attention may shift quickly from one event to another, limiting the duration of sustained response. Even highly significant crises may struggle to maintain visibility over time, as they compete with other forms of content within the same media environment. This temporal fragmentation influences the depth and continuity of public engagement.

The role of platforms is particularly important in structuring the emotional economy. Platform algorithms prioritize content that generates interaction, often measured through reactions such as likes, shares, and comments. Content that evokes strong emotional responses is more likely to be amplified, creating feedback loops that reinforce certain types of narratives. This can lead to a concentration of attention around specific images or themes, while others remain underrepresented.

For creative professionals and journalists, this environment introduces strategic considerations. The production of visual narratives must account for both communicative effectiveness and ethical responsibility. The need to engage audiences may encourage the use of emotionally powerful imagery, but this must be balanced with the obligation to avoid manipulation or distortion. The ethical dimension of visual communication is therefore closely linked to its emotional impact.

Examples from contemporary media illustrate how the emotional economy operates in practice. Visual coverage of displacement often focuses on individual stories that highlight vulnerability and resilience. These narratives can generate empathy and increase awareness, but they may also create a narrow representation of migration that emphasizes suffering over complexity. Similarly, images of conflict that highlight destruction and violence can mobilize attention but may overshadow other aspects of the situation, such as long-term adaptation or institutional response.

Another important aspect of public response is the role of identification. Audiences are more likely to engage with visual narratives when they can identify with the subjects represented. Identification may be based on perceived similarity, shared experience, or relatable situations. Visual storytelling often seeks to create such connections by focusing on everyday moments, personal stories, or universal themes. This approach can reduce social distance and facilitate recognition.

At the same time, identification is not always inclusive. Certain groups may be more easily recognized or empathized with than others, depending on cultural, social, or political factors. This creates inequalities in the distribution of attention and response. Visual narratives that align with dominant cultural frameworks may receive more engagement, while others may remain marginal. Understanding these patterns is essential for analyzing how public response is structured.

The concept of mediated response highlights the fact that reactions to crisis are not purely individual. They are shaped by social contexts and communicative environments. Discussions, comments, and shared interpretations contribute to the formation of collective responses. Visual media often serves as a focal point for these interactions, providing a common reference for discussion. This collective dimension reinforces the idea that public response is a social process rather than an isolated reaction.

The interaction between emotion, perception, and response also has implications for social action. Visual narratives can mobilize support, influence public opinion, and contribute to policy debates. Images that achieve high visibility may become symbols of particular issues, shaping how they are discussed and addressed. However, the relationship between emotional engagement and sustained action is complex. Initial reactions may not always translate into long-term involvement, particularly in environments characterized by rapid content turnover.

In analytical terms, the emotional economy of visual media can be understood as a system in which affect, attention, and interpretation are interconnected. Visual narratives generate emotional responses that influence attention, which in turn shapes how information is interpreted and remembered. This system operates within the constraints of digital platforms and broader social structures, producing patterns of engagement that are both dynamic and uneven.

In conclusion, public response to crisis is deeply influenced by the emotional economy of visual media. Images and audiovisual narratives shape not only what is seen but how it is felt and understood. The interplay between emotion and interpretation creates both opportunities and challenges for communication. While visual media can generate awareness and facilitate engagement, it can also simplify complex realities and contribute to uneven patterns of attention. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for understanding how visual communication influences perception and response in contemporary crisis contexts.

The next chapter examines the role of creative professionals within this environment, focusing on how they navigate the tensions between visibility, responsibility, and the production of meaningful narratives in conditions of crisis.

4. Creative Professionals in Crisis Contexts: Mediation, Responsibility, and Strategic Visibility

The role of creative professionals becomes particularly complex in crisis contexts, where visual communication operates under conditions of urgency, uncertainty, and heightened consequence. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, visual narratives shape perception and influence public response through both structural and emotional mechanisms. Creative professionals occupy a central position within this process. They are not only producers of content but mediators of meaning, working within environments where representation carries ethical, social, and sometimes political implications.

In crisis situations, the act of visual production cannot be separated from the conditions under which it occurs. Unlike stable environments, where creative practice may unfold within predictable frameworks, crisis contexts introduce volatility. Events evolve rapidly, information is incomplete, and access to reliable sources may be limited. Creative professionals must therefore make decisions in real time, often without full knowledge of the consequences. This increases

the significance of their role, as the narratives they produce may become key reference points for broader audiences.

One of the defining characteristics of creative practice in crisis contexts is mediation under constraint. Professionals must navigate multiple limitations, including restricted access to locations, safety risks, and ethical considerations related to representation. At the same time, they operate within media environments that demand immediacy and visibility. This creates a tension between the need for rapid production and the need for careful interpretation. The process of mediation involves balancing these competing demands, ensuring that visual narratives remain both communicatively effective and responsible.

The concept of responsibility is central to this discussion. As visual media shapes perception and response, creative professionals must consider the potential impact of their work. Representation can influence how individuals and communities are perceived, how events are understood, and how responses are mobilized. In crisis contexts, these effects are amplified. Images may contribute to awareness and accountability, but they may also expose individuals to risk or reinforce simplified narratives. Responsibility therefore involves an awareness of both the immediate and long-term consequences of visual production.

Research on journalism and visual media in prolonged crisis environments highlights the complexity of this responsibility. Hryhoriev (2023) emphasizes that in conditions of extended conflict, media narratives do not simply report events but participate in shaping the informational environment in which those events are interpreted. Continuous coverage creates patterns of representation that influence attention and understanding over time. Creative professionals working within such environments must therefore consider how their work contributes to these patterns, not only at the moment of production but also in its cumulative effect.

The issue of risk is closely connected to responsibility. Risk operates at multiple levels, including physical, social, and representational dimensions. In some cases, the production of visual content may involve direct exposure to danger, particularly in conflict or unstable environments. In other cases, risk may be indirect, affecting those who are represented rather than those who produce the content. For example, images that reveal identities or locations may have unintended consequences for individuals in vulnerable situations. Creative professionals must therefore assess not only their own safety but also the potential impact of their work on others.

At the same time, visual communication in crisis contexts often serves an evidentiary function. As discussed earlier, images can act as forms of documentation, contributing to processes of verification and accountability. Khokhotva (2023) argues that visual evidence plays a critical role in documenting human rights violations, providing material that can support legal and investigative processes. This function increases the importance of accuracy and context, as the interpretation of visual material may have implications beyond immediate perception.

The coexistence of narrative and evidentiary functions creates a complex field of practice. Creative professionals must balance the need to produce compelling narratives with the requirement to maintain factual integrity. This balance is not always easy to achieve. The demands of visibility and audience engagement may encourage the use of visually striking or emotionally intense imagery, while the requirements of documentation emphasize precision and context. Navigating this tension is a key aspect of professional practice in crisis environments.

Another important dimension of creative work in crisis contexts is strategic visibility. As discussed in previous chapters, visibility is structured by platform dynamics and audience attention. In crisis situations, this structure becomes even more pronounced, as multiple events compete for visibility within the same media environment. Creative professionals must therefore consider how to position their work in ways that achieve visibility without compromising integrity.

Strategic visibility involves decisions about timing, format, and narrative structure. It may include the selection of images that are both representative and engaging, the use of sequences that build narrative coherence, and the adaptation of content to different platforms. This strategic dimension does not necessarily imply manipulation. Rather, it reflects an awareness of the conditions under which communication occurs. Effective representation requires not only accuracy but also the ability to reach audiences.

Examples from contemporary practice illustrate these dynamics. A visual journalist documenting displacement may choose to focus on specific moments that convey both urgency and continuity, balancing immediate impact with broader context. A photographer working in a conflict environment may limit the use of identifiable images to reduce risk while still providing evidence of events. A content producer may structure narratives in ways that maintain audience engagement while preserving complexity. In each case, creative decisions are shaped by the interplay between visibility, responsibility, and risk.

The role of platforms further complicates these processes. As noted earlier, algorithmic systems influence which content becomes visible. In crisis contexts, this can lead to the amplification of certain narratives while others remain marginal. Creative professionals must navigate these systems, understanding how platform dynamics affect the distribution of their work. This includes awareness of how content is categorized, how engagement is measured, and how visibility is sustained over time.

At the same time, crisis contexts often generate alternative spaces of communication. Community-based platforms, independent media, and decentralized networks may provide channels for representation that differ from mainstream environments. These spaces can allow for more nuanced and context-sensitive narratives, although they may have limited reach. Creative professionals may operate across multiple platforms, adapting their work to different audiences and conditions of visibility.

The interaction between professional practice and public response also plays a role in shaping creative decisions. As audiences engage with visual narratives, their reactions provide feedback that can influence subsequent production. This creates a dynamic process in which representation is continuously adjusted in response to reception. While this interaction can enhance communication, it may also introduce pressures to conform to audience expectations. Creative professionals must therefore balance responsiveness with independence, ensuring that their work remains grounded in its intended purpose.

In analytical terms, the role of creative professionals in crisis contexts can be understood as a form of situated mediation. Their work is embedded within specific conditions that shape both production and reception. They operate within systems of visibility that are structured by technology and inequality, while also engaging with ethical considerations related to representation and impact. This positioning requires a high degree of reflexivity, as professionals must continuously assess the implications of their work.

In conclusion, creative professionals in crisis contexts function as mediators who navigate the intersection of visibility, responsibility, and risk. Their work contributes to the construction of narratives that shape perception and response, while also participating in processes of documentation and accountability. Understanding their role requires attention to both the structural conditions in which they operate and the ethical considerations that guide their practice.

The next chapter synthesizes the arguments developed throughout the article, offering a concluding analysis of how visual communication functions as a central mechanism in shaping perception and public response in contemporary crisis environments.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined visual communication in crisis contexts as a structured and influential process that shapes perception and public response. It has argued that crises are not only events but mediated phenomena that acquire meaning through representation, circulation, and interpretation. Visual media plays a central role in this process by organizing how crises become visible, how they are understood, and how audiences engage with them.

The analysis began by demonstrating that crisis is constructed through visual narratives rather than simply reflected by them. Through processes of selection and framing, visual communication determines which aspects of events are emphasized and which remain outside public attention. This selective visibility creates structured representations that influence how crises are perceived. The temporal dimension of representation further affects this process, particularly in prolonged crises where repeated exposure can lead to normalization and selective attention.

The article then examined the role of emotional engagement in shaping public response. It was shown that visual media operates within an emotional economy in which affect influences attention, interpretation, and memory. Images that evoke strong emotional reactions are more likely to circulate and shape perception, but this dynamic can also lead to simplification and distortion. The relationship between emotion and understanding is therefore complex, requiring careful consideration of how narratives are constructed and received.

The evidentiary function of visual communication was also addressed. Visual materials were shown to operate not only as representations but as forms of documentation that contribute to knowledge production. Images can support processes of verification and accountability, particularly in contexts related to human rights and conflict. At the same time, their interpretation depends on context and framing, highlighting the importance of accuracy and responsibility in visual production.

A key focus of the article was the role of creative professionals in mediating these processes. Creative practitioners and journalists were shown to operate within environments shaped by urgency, constraint, and ethical complexity. Their work involves balancing the need for visibility with the responsibility to represent reality accurately and without harm. They must navigate risks associated with both production and representation, while also responding to the structural conditions of media systems and platform dynamics.

The concept of strategic visibility was introduced to explain how creative professionals position their work within competitive media environments. Visibility is not simply achieved but actively constructed through decisions related to narrative structure, timing, and format. This process reflects the interaction between professional practice and the technological systems that govern distribution. At the same time, inequalities in access to resources and platforms shape who is able to achieve visibility, reinforcing broader patterns of representational imbalance.

Taken together, these elements illustrate that visual communication in crisis contexts functions as a central mechanism of mediated perception. It connects events with interpretation, emotion with response, and representation with knowledge. The construction of crisis, the shaping of public response, and the role of creative professionals are all interconnected within this system.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond crisis contexts themselves. They point to a broader transformation in how social reality is mediated in contemporary environments. Visual communication has become a primary means through which complex phenomena are interpreted and understood. As a result, the processes that shape visual narratives have significant consequences for public discourse and collective action.

Future research may explore these dynamics in more specific contexts, examining variations across different regions, media systems, and types of crisis. Comparative analysis could provide further insight into how structural conditions influence the production and reception of visual

narratives. Additional attention may also be given to the role of emerging technologies in shaping visual communication and its impact on perception.

In conclusion, visual communication should be understood as a fundamental component of how crises are constructed and experienced in contemporary society. Through its capacity to shape visibility, influence emotion, and contribute to knowledge production, it plays a decisive role in connecting events with public response. Recognizing this role is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between media, perception, and social action in a world characterized by rapid communication and global interconnection.

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Author's Note

This article reflects analytical work on visual communication, media dynamics, and the construction of perception in crisis contexts. It is based on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates media theory, migration studies, and cultural analysis, with particular attention to the role of visual narratives in shaping public understanding and response.

The study emphasizes the structural and communicative dimensions of visual media, highlighting its function in organizing perception, mediating emotional engagement, and contributing to processes of documentation and accountability. By situating visual communication within broader transnational and digital environments, the article contributes to the understanding of how crises are represented and interpreted in contemporary society.