

Relational labour or digital resistance: social media practices of non-Western women photographers

Saumava Mitra and Brenda Witherspoon

To cite this book chapter:

Mitra, S., & Witherspoon, B. (2022). Relational Labour or Digital Resistance: Social Media Practices of Non-Western Women Photographers. In *Social Media Images and Conflicts* (pp. 16-32). Routledge.

Introduction

It is widely understood that the rise of social media has profoundly changed how images of conflicts and crises come to be produced, circulated, and consumed by globally dispersed audiences (Mortensen 2015; Blaagaard et al. 2017; Allan 2017).

Within this broader area, studies focused on non-Western contexts have investigated images produced by citizen journalists, amateurs and activists that reach global audiences through uptake of their digital content by journalists (e.g. Mortensen 2015; Allan 2017). However, studies on the experiences and practices of *professional* non-Western visual journalists and photographers from places where indirect – structural and cultural – violence (Galtung & Fischer 2013) or in conflict-affected contexts where direct violence persists (Galtung & Fischer 2013) are only more recently being undertaken (Walsh 2020; Mitra 2020; Mollerup and Mortensen 2020; Zhang and Hadland 2021). In this chapter, we add to this growing academic endeavour by applying a gender-based approach to investigating professional photojournalistic practices and interactions with social media in non-Western contexts. In particular, we explore a) how social

media are perceived by non-Western women photographers as a part of their professional lives and b) whether they see social media as a platform to circulate alternative images that challenge established regimes of visibility of the peoples and places they photograph.

Digitalisation and its impacts on photographic labour

Growing digitalisation of the photographic profession has resulted in loss of income security for professional visual journalists and photographers. This is fuelled by unauthorised use of their work without remuneration (Hadland and Barnett 2018a, 6), contractual and freelance labour replacing long-term employment (Thomson 2018; Hadland and Barnett 2018b), and growing use of user-generated images for journalistic purposes that started a process of replacing professionals (Daubs 2016) and now challenges the very conception of professional identity among photojournalists (Ferrucci et al. 2020). The use of both ad hoc labour and user-generated images is most prominent when it comes to photographing conflicts, crises and other indirect violence-affected contexts outside the West (Mast & Hanegreefs 2015; Mortensen 2015; Istek 2017; Krajewski and Ekdale 2017; Mollerup and Mortensen 2020; Mitra 2020).

Within this context, Thomson (2018) has drawn attention to how digitally mediated interactions with peers and higher-ups have replaced traditional workplace interactions for visual journalists. This importance of digitally mediated networking extends to professional photographers' need to be present and foster relationships on social media for professional purposes: a practice where every fan or follower is viewed as a potential advocate of their work, if not a potential client (Chan 2011, 227).

In what is essentially a gig economy for visual journalists and documentary photographers, promoting themselves professionally through relationships on social media has become necessary but unpaid, immaterial labour. Following Baym's (2015; 2018) description of the online labour of intimate connection-building on social media by music professionals, we use the term "relational labour" (Baym 2015, 16-17; Baym 2018, 16-22) to describe this form of work. In this conceptualisation, broadcasting information, seeking validation from peers and higher-ups, sparking conversations, and even maintaining genuine friendships on social media are forms of self-promotion and together make up the relational labour undertaken by creative professionals (Baym 2018, 20).

Relational labour of visual journalists and photographers

When it comes to social media practices related to journalists' work, much is known about how the lines between personal and professional are blurred in such practices (Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017; Brems et al. 2017; Molyneux et al. 2018). Unrecognised emotional labour routinely performed by journalists has also been studied for quite some time (see Kotisova 2019 for an overview). Our focus on relational labour of visual journalists and documentary photographers extends these two investigative areas. Firstly, we understand visual journalists and photographers' practices holistically with their personal *and* professional motivations having become inseparable as they, within the context of a gig economy, must connect on social media, while always eyeing the need to monetise these connections (Baym 2015, 16; *Cf.* Chan 2011). The relational labour on social media performed by photographers has been acknowledged (Blaagaard et al. 2017, 1112) or implied (Borges-Rey 2015, 587), but not termed as such, even though the growing need to have an engaged and engaging presence on

social media for photographers maintained through image sharing as well as related performative discourses is well-known (Borges-Rey 2015; Thomson 2018).

There is evidence, however, that, for visual journalists and photographers, such relational labour on social media gravitates to platforms whose primary affordance is visibility (Laestadius 2017). Recent quantitative data collected worldwide show Facebook and increasingly Instagram as the social media of choice for professional photographers (Hadland and Barnett 2018a, 9). Most compellingly for our framework of relational labour, maintaining visibility on such platforms is known to be associated by photographers globally with increased financial rewards (Hadland and Barnett 2018a, 9). Studies on the perceptions and practices of women photographers from non-Western contexts regarding their social media use, and their relational labour on such platforms, is non-existent (*cf.* Brems et al. 2017, 444).

The need to understand connection-building on social media by photographers as a gendered practice is underscored by recent studies focusing on journalistic practices that exceed traditional journalistic labour. Thomson (2021) found that, unlike their male colleagues, women photographers tend to feel “compelled to stay connected to their subjects post-publication” (p. 969). Mesmer and Jahng’s recent study (2021) reinforces Thomson’s findings about the emotional labour performed by women journalists and highlights the role social media can play in this context. These point to gender-based variations within extra-journalistic labour performed by photographers and journalists.

At a structural level, Somerstein (2021) found that continuing patterns of gender-based marginalisation effectively render women invisible within the photographic profession. She concludes that such, “... professional invisibility complicates women’s access and relationships with other photographers, subjects, authorities, and clients” (p.683). Somerstein (2020b) also

notes that, apart from gender, racial dimensions exacerbate such invisibility (p.8). According to Daniella Zalcman, photojournalist and founder of Women Photograph, an organisation seeking to empower women photographers from underrepresented communities around the world, the lack of inclusivity in the industry stems from intersectional – both gender-related and racial – marginalisation. As she said in an interview with Tim Greyhavens (2017):

When an industry is largely populated by white men, generally speaking, the people they tend to reach out to, to mentor, are people who remind them of them when they were younger. So white men are mentoring young white men instead of people of color or young women.

The *outcome* of what Somerstein found in her studies (2020; 2021), and what Zalcman has observed as a professional and seeks to remedy as an activist, is most likely reflected in Hadland and Barnett's findings (2018a) that a non-Caucasian, non-male photographer from outside North America and Europe is more likely than their peers to experience financial precarity. Importantly, the lack of ability to foster relationships through geographical and cultural proximity to powerful "image-brokers" in the international photography industry situated in Western countries (Gürsel 2016) further increases the need to maintain professional visibility and relationships through social media for women photographers in non-Western countries (Zalcman, personal communication, 20th May, 2021).

Thus we argue for a need to focus on the relational labour of non-Western women photographers on social media. As freelancification has increased and digitally mediated relationships between editors, audiences and photographers have become the norm, these women are the most likely to experience intersectional marginalisation because of their gender, ethnicity and geocultural

positionalities, and thus have the most motivation to engage in this form of relational labour.

Based on this, our first research goal in this study is:

What are the perceptions among non-Western women photographers regarding social media platforms' role in their professional lives?

The potential of social media to offer alternative visual expressions

Rich theoretical and conceptual discussions, as well as empirical evidence, have shed light on the “pictorial hegemony” (Campbell 2009, 54) underpinned by a “visual economy” (ibid) that organises peoples, places and knowledge structures implicated in the production, circulation and reception of images in ways that are based on current economic, political, and cultural power dynamics at local, regional and global levels (Campbell 2009, 53). When seen from a contemporary transnational perspective, this hegemony has created “regimes of visibility” (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017) that govern how peoples and places outside the West come to be represented for Western audiences, especially with visual representation of conflicts and crises.

Social media’s potential to circumvent or conform to these established regimes of visibility has been much studied in the context of their particular affordances. While Dencik and Allan (2017, 1186) found “social media platforms are being tested to find new possibilities for the visualisation of crises, often privileging creative and unconventional types of truth-telling to advance human-centred narratives otherwise difficult to align with news agendas”, Blaagaard et al., (2017, 1114) have questioned “whether the options that digital media make available for actors involved in conflict to represent their experiences and perspectives genuinely challenge

implicit and explicit hierarchies of visibility.¹ In sum, social media's ability to foster alternative visualisations of distant peoples and places provides grounds for both optimism and pessimism when it comes to challenging the well-known problems in how distant conflicts and crises are represented for globally dispersed audiences.

But the potential agency of professionals who produce and circulate such visuals, particularly those outside Western contexts, to *challenge* these established regimes of visibility *from within* has not been significantly investigated. We argue that it is important to investigate the perceptions and practices of professional photographers, who are also affected by the conflicts and crises they photograph, when it comes to using social media to offer alternative visual expressions. While they are driven to acquire “the cultural and social status to be seen and heard” (Blaagaard et al. 2017, 1114) by harnessing social media as visual journalists and photographers working within “corporate structures of media institutions”, their positionality at the margins of these structures has the potential to make them active agents in challenging the established regimes of visibility as well (Blaagaard et al. 2017, 1114-5). Based on this, the second research goal of this study is:

Are social media seen as having the potential, and harnessed as such by non-Western women photographers, to circulate alternative images that challenge established regimes of visual representation regarding the places and peoples affected by direct and indirect violence that they photograph?

Methodology

¹ See also Krajewski and Ekdale (2017) for their study showing the failure of user-generated content based journalism in producing counter-narratives to existing tropes and stereotypes in the context of a natural disaster.

Between March and May 2020, we conducted semi-structured online interviews with 20 female-identifying photographers who described their work as falling within or encompassing photojournalism, documentary photography, visual journalism, and, in one case, visual art (*cf.* Hadland et al. 2015, 15). All were members of Native Agency and/or Women Photograph – organisations representing professional photographers from under-represented communities outside the West, and of marginalised gender identities, respectively. Both maintain online member databases which allowed us to invite participants. The photographers’ identities and countries are confidential under the study’s ethical protocols; broadly they identified as from 17 non-Western countries from South Asia (5 photographers), South-East Asia (5), Sub-Saharan Africa (4), Middle East and North Africa (3) and Latin America and the Caribbean (3).

These countries host fragile democracies or politically repressive regimes that rank mid-to-low on indicators measuring democracy. Almost all feature low on gender-equity indicators and high on incidences of gender-based violence. Besides these forms of structural and cultural violence, all but four countries (three of which previously have had large-scale, multiyear, intrastate wars) are also affected by direct violence tied to ongoing state-based or non-state-based conflicts. We take a grounded approach (Charmaz 2005) in interpreting the interview data and report the statements of the photographers relevant to their perceptions of and practices on social media directly rather than through intermediary interpretative codes.

Social media content analysis

We qualitatively analysed social media content these photographers shared as well.

Comparability with the interview data through maintaining a qualitative focus informed our “small data” approach in this area (Mayr and Weller 2017). While all 20 photographers have active Instagram profiles, only some used Facebook and Twitter. As such, we focused on

Instagram for better comparability, as different platforms' affordances differ and can determine user behaviour (Laestadius 2017). We collected Instagram posts starting approximately a year before the interviews. This pre-Covid-19 timeframe made the social media data more comparable to the interviews because the pandemic did not feature significantly in interviewees' responses in the first half of 2020. Instagram posting frequency differed among the photographers, so our data collection parameter was the first ten posts by each in 2019. As such, our analysis is based on 200 Instagram posts, a number manageable to analyse individually with a qualitative focus. We limited our analysis to primary posts, not comments or other user engagements, because the photographers themselves were our focus. We did analyse hashtags the photographers used in primary posts to understand the connections they intended to build and the contexts they wanted to suggest (Laestadius 2017, 578).

The posts were analysed multi-modally, taking into account both the images posted and accompanying written texts and hashtags. Based on the unfixed (visual) and fixed (textual) meanings embedded in these posts (Laestadius 2017), five categories were identified – personal, promotional, political, alternative views and exotica. Individual posts were understood to fall within multiple categories.

Two categories were defined based primarily on understandings of relational labour, as well as previous studies on journalists' use of social media.

Personal: Posts related to family members, friends, leisure activities including travel where no photographic assignment or other professional work is mentioned. The photographer herself is not mentioned textually or present visually.

Promotional: Visual or textual references to the photographer's self. Posts that showcase photographic and journalistic skills, e.g. visually or textually highlighting aesthetic composition and editing or by highlighting news-related event/issue/actor photographed. Posts with textual highlighting of camera equipment used and genre of photography. Posts mentioning assignment or work-related travel or self-led photographic projects, or with images presented as outtakes from photographic work. Posts textually referring to the photographer's Instagram followers.

Two other categories were informed by theoretical and empirical understandings of photographic representations of conflicts and crises-affected places and peoples in non-Western contexts (see Mitra et al. 2021b for a full discussion).

Political: Visual or textual references to social or political upheaval, humanitarian crisis, direct and indirect violence in the photographer's own country and neighbouring region. References to electoral politics or to gender and other forms of discrimination, marginalisation or repression were understood to be part of this category.

Alternative View: Visual or textual *claims* to show or refer to photographer's country's or neighbouring region's politics (understood broadly as in the category immediately above), peoples and places in a novel way through implicit or explicit inter-textual references to existing regimes of visual representation. Such claims were most often embedded through hashtags. The most common form these took were #Everyday[country/region/continent].

Another code was also informed by theoretical and empirical understandings of photographic representations of conflicts and crises-affected places and peoples, and of non-Western contexts more broadly, but was unique in being unexpected based on the interview data.

Exotica: Posts that visually or textually reinforced pictorial hegemony through established tropes and stereotypes associated with the peoples and places of countries or regions. We restricted this code to posts by the photographer about and from countries they did not self-identify with.

Relational labour of women photographers on social media

The women photographers interviewed for this study largely perceived social media as instrumental in gaining and maintaining visibility within the industry. For one photographer from South Asia, this view was supported by her direct experience when moving into her role as a professional photojournalist.

It was more of a hobby. ... I also took pictures, and I shared them on my Facebook. And a friend of mine re-shared it, and an editor at a daily newspaper in [home country] picked up those pictures and asked me if they could publish them in the newspaper, and they gave me more than half a page. So when I saw my pictures published for the first time, that's when I realized that this is what I want to do from now on.

The photographers also perceived social media as essential at subsequent stages of career progression. According to them, it helped in advancing their career and moving from working in national media industries in their own countries to working transnationally for international

media organisations centred in Western countries. As a photographer from Sub-Saharan Africa explained,

It is thanks to social networks because a lot of the contracts that I have, be they from Instagram, from tweeting, good contacts, [are] always through social networks. Therefore, it is thanks in part to what I showed, what I write, that validates me a bit and that made me known at the international level. I would say that is often [the] case with social networks. ... It's a bit like professional accounts for me, not just for social networks, for hobbies; no, it's professional. Facebook [is] also professional [Translated from French].

Beyond entering and gaining international visibility in their profession, some described social media as key to maintaining professional networks. The need to remain visible, among peers, colleagues, editors and audiences required constant relational labour, said a photographer from Southeast Asia.

A lot of it, I feel, is true word of mouth and constant, constant, constant networking, which you actually have to do. And really putting yourself out there in the in the digital space, like in Instagram or on Facebook or, you know, constantly updating people, what you're working on, that sort of help them to remember that, OK, I know this person in [home country] whom I could possibly get to work on these issues or travel in Southeast Asia.

Interviewees often mentioned using social media for relational labour in the context of disadvantages based on gender, ethnicity and their geocultural positionality away from the West. As such, they associated their need to build and maintain visibility through social media with their need to transcend the gendered, racialised, and geocultural exclusions they faced as non-Western women photographers. Several mentioned that they were advised by established professionals in their line of work to engage in relational labour on social media. A participant from South Asia cited this as a formal goal during an international professional mentorship

programme, while another from the same region said learning how to harness hashtags on Instagram for promotional purposes was part of her mentorship experience as well.

I am very, very bad at updating my Instagram, so I made a promise to them, my mentors, that I'm going to be better. And always making a note of that, and you know, trying to post more on Instagram.

Our mentorship programme is not only like, goes through our work, mentoring of work. There are other things also, to manage our website, for example, and how to be active on the Everyday [hashtag], like how to manage Instagram.

The photographers emphasized that other photographers from their countries or regions, particularly women, needed to also recognise the potential of social media in this respect and engage in relational labour on these platforms to gain visibility. As a photographer from Southeast Asia described,

White reporters, white photographers, are still much more visible here than locals because [of] the[ir] contacts and editors look out for [them], particularly because they just are more visible on social media, for example. ... I also remember that my mentor also sometimes like at one point just told me that, you know, sometimes it's really difficult for them to find a woman photographer in the area, simply because you know they're not on social media, for example. They're not visible and this kind of thing.

Apart from relational labour focused on professional advancement through increased visibility among editors and audiences, photographers cited social media in the context of maintaining supportive connections with peers. Some described such networks as valuable in a non-monetary sense, such as this photographer South Asia, who sought to understand other national contexts through other photographers' social media accounts.

There are so many people there sharing their experience there, their problem there, so many things. That also helps us like what is happening over there. We also understand what is happening globally.

But such peer networks were not perceived as fully separated from the motive of monetising connections built on social media. As two women from the Middle East/North Africa described:

There's a Facebook group we're all on. Anyone who has questions can just go in and pop in their question and can be answered. It can be a very detailed question about like a fee or a certain grant that is being opened and you want to apply for and you need certain paperwork for it, which you don't have.

So this community and network really helps me to push further, to learn, to open, to ask. ... Like assignments, sorry I didn't know about th[ese] things [laughs], like pitching story to magazines, like doing money from websites, like a lot of things that I didn't know. So this community is really, really helping me out.

However, the interviewees also recognised the limits of networking via social media compared with in-person connections. Two photographers from South Asia and from Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, spoke to the shortcomings of digitally mediated social interactions and the possibility that such connections are less robust compared with real-world interactions.

Obviously, it's helpful, but it's not as good as when you are connecting people really in a very personal way, not in a virtual way.

I knew others based on like, OK, we follow each other. But it was hard to... convert the follows and the Instagram likes into relationships.

Notwithstanding, we found that social media were integral to how the photographers managed their professional lives. This was directly linked to their view that social media could transform their comparative lack of visibility in the profession, particularly transnationally. Relational labour required of women photographers in non-Western contexts finds a powerful home in social media, according to them, particularly on image-driven platforms Facebook and Instagram, despite some limitations.

Photographers' perception of social media as platforms for alternative visuals

Many women we interviewed also saw social media as tools for resisting what they see as misrepresentation of peoples and places. In general, these photographers' professional perceptions and practices were highly marked by their awareness about and reaction against the iniquitous nature of regimes of visibility when it came to the people and places they photographed but also felt they belonged to. Almost all of the women interviewed reflected on the history and practice of photojournalism misrepresenting non-Western societies by visually over-emphasizing societal problems, conflicts and crises over other aspects of life, which they saw largely continuing at present. They mentioned the lack of respect for non-Western peoples as photographic subjects compared with those in the West both during the act of creating images and through the images themselves.

All 20 women also saw their roles as professional visual journalists or photographers to include actively resisting entrenched tropes, stereotypes and disrespectful practices through the images they produce as well as how they produce them. The perceptions about their professional role and practice as non-Western women photographers were marked by an intersectional reflexivity. They perceived a goal of challenging and changing established regimes of visibility accorded to the peoples and places they had close ties with.

When it came to social media as a platform to exercise such intersectional reflexivity, the photographers were more ambivalent about their potential to offer alternative visual expressions. Several spoke specifically to social media as amplifying existing tropes and stereotypes at times,

such as this photographer from Southeast Asia and another from the Middle East and North

Africa:

So, people actually want to see what they want to see. And all they want to see is very beautiful images, but not necessarily true. ... So that ... constant exoticising of places, I feel like I see that every day.

It bothers me that there are stories of starvation. I mean, the starving baby now, all what do you see when you open like just write the hashtag [home country] and Twitter. And that's what's the first thing you would see. But there are so many good work[s] that ha[ve] emerged, you know, to tackle this issue And yet this is not what you're going to see in the media.

However, the photographers did not link their own image-sharing practices with such pessimistic views of social media's potential to offer alternative visual expressions. When it came to their own ability to offer alternative representations, including on social media, they were confident in their intention, and ability, to challenge the established regimes of visibility, as these two photographers from Southeast Asia and from Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, mentioned.

But it's just in the past two years that I have realised like, oh, my God, I'm the only [minority] female photographer. And it's so important to try my best to push those issues out there. I guess it really helps with social media to actually have that space because in our country we do a lot of talking about this and a lot of things. ... I'm starting to try to push those issues out there and engage in those conversations. Because I am a minority myself. So I feel that there's so much of things which needs to be discussed, and I feel like this great responsibility to bring it forward.

It's so that we can fight [misrepresentation] on our social networks, on our sites. ... It's not just war. There is another choice. ... if you see a little on my Instagram account, it's scenes of everyday life, of populations from everywhere I go because I have a bit of the chance to travel in several regions from my country. I kind of capture everything I see, everything that goes to my head, everything I feel, everything I see, everything that is happening around me—a little to promote my region, but also to show the daily life of these people. [Translated from French]

A photographer from the Middle East and North Africa said offering such alternative visuals clearly fell within her professional role: “I feel like I’m not an activist necessarily, but I have a role to educate, and I’m going to take that.”

Some photographers we interviewed bemoaned the use of their images in traditional publications with inaccurate captions, either as initially written by others during editing or when the photos were repurposed months or years later to illustrate unrelated events. Social media offered them a chance at reclamation by writing text to accompany the images and thus fix the meanings they wanted to convey. In this context, a photographer from Sub-Saharan Africa mentioned the hashtag adoptions and extensions introduced by Everyday Everywhere, the Instagram page of the Everyday Project, a collective started by two photographers seeking to challenge accepted representations of people and places outside the West in international media.² She described what she saw as the value of this project.

[It offers] a common vision, but behind, the objective, it is to break the stigmas [that are] in each region. For example, in my area, there is war and all ... [and] the other side people are not used to seeing. ... Everyone can value their region as they wish. I do that on my page. ... You have an Instagram page and a Facebook page and a Twitter page; that’s where you can share all that you have to share. ... You... can show, for example, beautiful landscapes and fishermen on the lake. A few things [that are] a bit specific. People aren’t used to seeing that. [Translated from French]

Among the Instagram posts by these 20 women photographers we analysed, the hashtag #Everyday[country/region/continent] was widely used to contextualise their posts as offering alternative views of their countries and communities. This brings us to analysis of the photographers’ social media posts.

² <https://www.instagram.com/theeverydayproject/?hl=en>. Link accessed November 18, 2021.

Photographers' use of Instagram for relational labour and providing alternative visuals

Table 1 shows our findings from the photographers' Instagram posts.

	Promotional	Personal	Alternate View	Political	Exotica
Photographer 1	1	0	10	3	0
Photographer 2	10	3	6	0	1
Photographer 3	9	3	0	7	1
Photographer 4	10	10	0	0	10
Photographer 5	2	7	9	1	0
Photographer 6	10	0	9	7	0
Photographer 7	10	8	8	0	0
Photographer 8	9	2	0	0	0
Photographer 9	10	0	0	0	0
Photographer 10	3	8	0	0	0
Photographer 11	5	8	3	0	0
Photographer 12	10	7	5	0	0
Photographer 13	10	2	1	0	0
Photographer 14	10	3	1	4	0
Photographer 15	9	6	0	0	1
Photographer 16	10	0	3	8	0
Photographer 17	10	8	0	0	0
Photographer 18	9	4	4	6	0

Photographer 19	10	4	0	0	0
Photographer 20	1	9	1	0	4
Total by category	158	92	60	36	17
Photographers with at least one post in category	20	16	12	7	5

Table 1: Categories of Interviewees' Instagram Posts (N=200)

The majority of the Instagram posts we analysed (140 of 200) fell within two or more categories. However, a clear ranking was evident in how the 20 women we interviewed employed Instagram during the period when we collected data. Posts with implicit and explicit promotional motivations, and as such speaking to relational labour, were employed by all 20 photographers and constituted almost 80% of analysed posts. Three-quarters (15) of these photographers sought to promote themselves in at least 90 percent of their posts. Significantly, the single biggest overlap in categories was between personal and promotional. Of those whose posts included both categories, 14 of 16 had no more than two posts that included one category but not the other, signifying just how blurry the line might be for photographers in the current gig economy. In turn, when seen together with the interviews, this lends further credence that women photographers from non-Western contexts rely on relational labour conducted through social media to gain visibility otherwise not accorded to them.

We found just less than one-third of the 200 posts we analysed (60 out of the 200) claiming to provide an alternative view of peoples and places the photographers had close ties with. This category was the third-largest among the five categories, and a majority of the photographers (12 out of the 20) had at least one such post, while nine had more than three such posts.

The two least present categories were those with overtly political content and those reinforcing stereotypes about countries and regions other than the photographers' own.

Image-building through image-sharing

The women photographers' perception of social media was both utilitarian and, when it came to their own practices, tending toward utopian.

They mentioned the platforms as tools to circumvent or transcend the gendered, racialised, and geoculturally constituted invisibility imposed upon them within the transnational field of international photography. In sum, based on our interviews and the analysis of Instagram posts, we found that the photographers viewed and most often used social media platforms to conduct relational labour to gain professional visibility, build professional networks with peers and higher-ups, and communicate with audiences.

The photographers also saw social media as platforms to offer images of their countries and communities that challenge "pictorial hegemony" (Campbell 2009) and actively seek to change the regimes of visibility (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017) that are reified by supply and demand in the international photography industry. Our analysis of 200 Instagram posts shows posts that matched this latter category were less present compared with the ubiquity of posts of the former category. However, when seen in relation with the accounts provided during the interviews, the potential of harnessing social media to change and challenge the status quo of how non-Western peoples and places affected by conflicts and crises are represented cannot be entirely discounted.

In this context, it is important to reiterate an interesting question that Blaagaard et al. (2017) have raised.

New 'visibility entrepreneurs' appearing on the scene may to some degree reconfigure the traditional distribution of power inherent in the politics of visibility (i.e. who possesses the cultural and social status as well as the geopolitical situatedness to be seen and heard). Be

that as it may, established hierarchies hardly seem to be subverted at this point. Indeed, commercialization and commodification potentially threatens to hand alternative visual expressions over to the corporate power of media institutions.

(Blagaard et al. 2017, 1114)

While the term *new visibility entrepreneurs* as used by the authors above is primarily meant for individuals from outside the professional boundaries of visual journalism or photography, our findings show that, within the international photography industry itself, photography professionals whose geopolitical situation and ethnic, cultural and gender identities place them at the margins, even if still within the loci of “corporate power of media institutions,” may play a role in reconfiguring traditional power dynamics inherent in the politics of visibility. Indeed, the very forces of commercialisation and commodification that Blagaard et al. (ibid) decry might fuel such reconfiguration because the need to be entrepreneurial through relational labour on social media is paramount for these professionals. As a result, promoting themselves as unique through image sharing and surrounding performative discourses may be especially important. Our analysis indicated that such social media use, if not ubiquitous, may be substantially present among women photographers from non-Western contexts.

This chapter cannot provide a definitive answer regarding non-Western women photographers’ relational labour on social media resulting in alternatives to entrenched regimes of visibilities of places and peoples experiencing direct and indirect forms of violence through the images they share given its narrow and qualitative focus. But we argue it points to the *potential* for alternative visual expressions of conflicts and crises to emerge from the convergence of the forces of the current gig economy, social media affordances, and the individual motivations and agency of

these photographers to promote themselves as professionals who photograph societies they hail from affected by direct and indirect violence.

In sum, our analysis shows a distinct possibility that resistance through alternative visual expression by professional photographers who have been traditionally marginalised can find a foothold in social media, given that they are also driven to build their personas as professionals with a unique insight into the locations where they work. This sometimes takes the form of offering aesthetic resistance through images shared on social media. This question of whether and how the two purposes feed each other—specifically whether substantial visibility is a precursor to successful advancement of alternative images and whether the act of appearing novel or unique, through providing alternative representations on social media, enhances visibility—we argue, merits further investigation. Particularly, the implications for alternative visual expressions to emerge as a result of the professional strategy of image-building through image-sharing on social media for photographers who see themselves as marginalised within the profession needs further exploration through grounded and qualitative investigations.

We have painted a cautiously optimistic picture of the possibility of aesthetic resistance to existing regimes of visibility and the entrenched pictorial hegemony on social media by non-Western women photographers. But we cannot find grounds for such optimism when it comes to overt political engagement or resistance by these photographers. Less than one-fifth (36 out of the 200) of all analysed posts could be interpreted as involving engagement with politics, forms of injustice or oppression by the photographers. While we are not able to provide conclusive evidence regarding this, the relative paucity of Instagram posts of this category may also be linked to the politically repressive contexts within which most of the photographers worked, as well as the heightened potential for online harassment that women journalists experience. Online

presence for journalists in conflict-affected contexts, politically repressive regimes and societies where gender-related inequity and gender-based violence are high is not risk-free, as it increases journalists' surfaces of exposure to potential threat and harassment (Mitra et al. 2021a, 92). Most recent global data show that female journalists as a whole are indeed more likely to face online harassment (Posetti et al. 2021). However, this lack of political engagement might also be linked to the shaping of the photographers' social media use by the overarching market logic inherent in relational labour, as a result of which overt political engagement might be seen as antagonising for potential employers or sections of the audience. The need to maintain journalistic neutrality could be another cause.

Another emergent finding from our analysis was the presence of posts that exoticised peoples and places other than the photographers' own, through posts that resonated with existing tropes and stereotypes. These were the least prevalent of all the categories and found in the posts of only one-quarter of the photographers. A single one of the five photographers with such Instagram posts accounted for 10 of the 17 posts which could be categorised as reinforcing stereotypes. While numerically not very significant within the sample, we believe it is noteworthy that photographers' articulations of promoting alternative views about misrepresented peoples and places were counteracted by the presence also of posts that overlapped with historical stereotypes when it came to *other* peoples and places than their own. Further study drawing on larger samples of social media posts by a larger number of photographers would be needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn regarding this, however.

More broadly, we hope this chapter will help refocus academic research agenda on social media and conflict images to have a more globally inclusive perspective of visual professionals whose

practices need to be investigated in ways that keep in view the particular positionalities they occupy within their profession.

Acknowledgement: The authors wish to thank doctoral students Sara Creta and Rabia Qusien, and Dr Andreas Rauh of Dublin City University, as well as Neysa Goodman of Iowa State University and independent researcher Stephanie McDonald, for their assistance with this study at several stages.

Bibliography

- Allan, Stuart, ed. *Photojournalism and citizen journalism: co-operation, collaboration and connectivity*. Taylor & Francis, 2017.
- Baym, Nancy K. "Connect with your audience! The relational labor of connection." *The communication review* 18, no. 1 (2015): 14-22.
- Baym, Nancy K. *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. NYU Press, 2018.
- Blaagaard, Bolette, Mette Mortensen, and Christina Neumayer. "Digital images and globalized conflict." *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1111-1121.
- Borges-Rey, Eddy. "News images on Instagram: The paradox of authenticity in hyperreal photo reportage." *Digital Journalism* 3, no. 4 (2015): 571-593.
- Brems, Cara, Martina Temmerman, Todd Graham, and Marcel Broersma. "Personal branding on Twitter: How employed and freelance journalists stage themselves on social media." *Digital journalism* 5, no. 4 (2017): 443-459.
- Campbell, David. "'Black skin and blood': Documentary photography and santu mofokeng's critique of the visualization of apartheid south Africa." *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 52-58.
- Chan, Lawrence. *Social media marketing for digital photographers*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011).
- Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded theory in the 21st century: A qualitative method for advancing social justice research." *Handbook of qualitative research* edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 507-535. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005.

- Chouliaraki, Lilie, and Tijana Stolic. "Rethinking media responsibility in the refugee 'crisis': A visual typology of European news." *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1162-1177.
- Daubs, Michael. "The Social News Network: The appropriation of community labour in CNN's iReport." *The Political Economy of Communication* 3, no. 2 (2016): 55-73
- Dencik, Lina, and Stuart Allan. "In/visible conflicts: NGOs and the visual politics of humanitarian photography." *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1178-1193.
- Ferrucci, Patrick, Ross Taylor, and Kathleen I. Alaimo. "On the boundaries: Professional photojournalists navigating identity in an age of technological democratization." *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 3 (2020): 367-385.
- Galtung, Johan and Dietrich Fischer. "Violence: direct, structural and cultural". In *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research* edited by Dietrich Fischer, 35-40. Berlin: Springer, 2013.
- Tim Greyhavens. "We Can't Wait Any Longer: An Interview with Daniella Zalcmán". [Timgreyhavens.com](https://www.timgreyhavens.com/post/we-can-t-wait-any-longer-an-interview-with-daniella-zalcmán), October 30, 2017, <https://www.timgreyhavens.com/post/we-can-t-wait-any-longer-an-interview-with-daniella-zalcmán>
- Hadland, Adrian, David Campbell, and Paul Lambert. *The state of news photography: The lives and livelihoods of photojournalists in the digital age*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015.
- Hadland, Adrian, and Camilla Barnett. *The State of News Photography: Photojournalists' Attitudes Toward Work Practices, Technology and Life in the Digital Age*. University of Stirling, 2018a.
- Hadland, Adrian, and Camilla Barnett. "The gender crisis in professional photojournalism: demise of the female gaze?" *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 13 (2018b): 2011-2020.
- Istek, Pinar. "On their own: Freelance photojournalists in conflict zones." *Visual Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2017): 32-39.
- Kotisova, Johana. "The elephant in the newsroom: Current research on journalism and emotion." *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019): e12677.
- Krajewski, Joanna MT, and Brian Ekdale. "Constructing Cholera: CNN iReport, the Haitian cholera epidemic, and the limits of citizen journalism." *Journalism Practice* 11, no. 2-3 (2017): 229-246.
- Laestadius, Linnea. "Instagram". In *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods* edited by Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase, 573-92. London: Sage, 2017.
- Mast, Jelle, and Samuel Hanegreefs. "When news media turn to citizen-generated images of war: Transparency and graphicness in the visual coverage of the Syrian conflict." *Digital Journalism* 3, no. 4 (2015): 594-614.

- Mayr, Philipp, and Katrin Weller. "Think before you collect: Setting up a data collection approach for social media studies." In *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods* edited by Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase, 108-124. London: Sage, 2017.
- Mesmer, K., & Jahng, M. R. (2021). Using Facebook to Discuss Aspects of Industry Safety: How Women Journalists Enact Ethics of Care in Online Professional Space. *Journalism Studies*, 22(8), 1083-1102.
- Mitra, Saumava. "'Picturing Afghan Women' for Western Audiences: The Afghan Perspective." *Journalism* 21, no. 6 (2020): 800-820.
- Mitra, Saumava, Marte Høiby, and Mariateresa Garrido. "Medium-specific threats for journalists: Examples from Philippines, Afghanistan and Venezuela." *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 1 (2021): 80-98.
- Mitra, Saumava, Sara Creta, and Stephanie McDonald. "How our rage is represented: Acts of resistance among women photographers of the Global South." In *Insights on Peace and Conflict Reporting*, Routledge (2021): 89-105.
- Mollerup, Nina Grønlykke, and Mette Mortensen. "Proximity and distance in the mediation of suffering: Local photographers in war-torn Aleppo and the international media circuit." *Journalism* 21, no. 6 (2020): 729-745.
- Molyneux, Logan, Avery Holton, and Seth C. Lewis. "How journalists engage in branding on Twitter: Individual, organizational, and institutional levels." *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 10 (2018): 1386-1401.
- Mortensen, Mette. *Journalism and eyewitness images: Digital media, participation, and conflict*. Routledge, 2014.
- Ottovordemgentschenfelde, Svenja. "'Organizational, professional, personal': An exploratory study of political journalists and their hybrid brand on Twitter." *Journalism* 18, no. 1 (2017): 64-80.
- Posetti, Julie, Nabeelah Shabbir, Diana Maynard, Kalina Bontcheva and Nermin Aboulez. *The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence against Women Journalists*. Paris: UNESCO, 2021.
- Thomson, T. J. "Freelance photojournalists and photo editors: Learning and adapting in a (mostly faceless) virtual world." *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 6 (2018): 803-823.
- Thomson, T. J. "Mapping the emotional labor and work of visual journalism." *Journalism* 22, no. 4 (2021): 956-973.
- Somerstein, Rachel. "'Stay back for your own safety': News photographers, interference, and the photographs they are prevented from taking." *Journalism* 21, no. 6 (2020): 746-765.
- Somerstein, Rachel. "'Just a Junior Journalist': Field Theory and Editorial Photographers' Gendered Experiences." *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 5 (2021): 669-687.
- Walsh, Lauren. *Conversations on Conflict Photography*. Routledge, 2020.

Zhang, Shixin Ivy and Adrian Hadland. "A Survey of Chinese Photojournalists: Identities, work conditions and attitudes in the digital age." In *Chinese News Discourse: From Perspectives of Communication, Linguistics and Pedagogy* edited by Nancy Xiuzhi Liu, Candace Veacock, and Shixin Ivy Zhang, 43-61. Routledge, 2021.