



AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT OF WAR PHOTOJOURNALISM AND ITS SOCIAL AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the emerging profile of freelance war photojournalists and their relationship with the social audience. Its aim is to examine how these journalists engage with their audiences through social media, in order to update the concept of the freelance war correspondent. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining quantitative tools such as content analysis with qualitative techniques including critical discourse analysis. The principal conclusion highlights the potential for these journalists to influence public opinion independently of traditional media outlets or interests aligned with the conflict in question.

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1. Introduction

To understand the emergence of photojournalists and audiovisual war correspondents in Spain, it is necessary to examine the period during which television reached a high point in this form of journalism. According to Josep Lluís Gómez Mompert (2003), the years between 1989 and 1991 marked the technological zenith of television. During the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) and the Balkan War (1991–2001), news reporting began to merge with broader social debate.

Earlier conflicts, such as the Vietnam War (1955–1975), appealed primarily to the emotions of audiences during the Cold War. By contrast, the Persian Gulf War appealed to reason, while the Balkan War invoked respect for human rights and the pursuit of a more civilised future. In the Afghanistan War (2001–2021), the narrative was deliberately stripped of nuance in order to draw a sharp distinction between good and evil, as is common in discourse surrounding terrorism. This shift transformed journalism into a tool of polarisation (Gómez, 2003).

The Vietnam War was the first to be televised, and since then, both the Persian Gulf War and the Balkan War have been broadcast live, with increasing emphasis on the experiences of civilian populations, which is a tendency that continues today. Audiovisual reporting has inherited the narrative techniques of television advertising from Second World War cinema, evolving from a focus on technology to one of melodrama, often resembling a cinematic production (Ramonet, 2000).

War journalism in Spain has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, reflecting broader shifts in international conflicts, communication technologies, and the challenges faced by media professionals. The situation of correspondents and photojournalists within these contexts has been a subject of ongoing debate and concern within the profession, and more recently, within the field of communication studies. Particular attention has been given to issues of safety, independence, and professional ethics.

Each conflict must be analysed within its specific temporal, technological, informational, and social context. As such, the profile of professionals reporting on war and disaster demands particular competencies. These skills and tools are vital for the development of their work and may serve as a safeguard against the physical and psychological consequences frequently experienced by displaced journalists, including post-traumatic stress, psychological dissociation, and apathy, among others (Aranguren-Romero, 2022). This underscores the importance of adequate training, prior preparation, and critical engagement with the state of the art (Beza, 2018).

This area of journalistic specialisation requires continuous research into geopolitics in order to report accurately on the development of conflicts, military movements, combat tactics, and the human consequences of war, including civilian casualties and displaced populations. War journalism also entails the investigation and analysis of the political strategies underlying conflicts, as well as the coverage of diplomatic initiatives and peace negotiations.

In terms of professional competencies, international standards and practices are followed, as outlined by bodies such as the International Federation of Journalists and the Spanish Society of Journalists. With regard to journalistic ethics, those reporting on armed conflicts must uphold the principles of accuracy, rigorous fact-checking, and impartiality. Furthermore, they are required to consider their own physical safety and that of their colleagues, as well as the safety of other media professionals operating in conflict zones.

However, the independence and objectivity of war journalism have been called into question in certain cases, raising concerns not only about the production of content but also about its distribution.

Publications such as *SOMA Comunicación* (2017) warn of a growing trend towards a greater presence of freelance war correspondents worldwide who lack the support of traditional media and instead rely on independence and social media to continue their work (González Alba, 2022). Consequently, freelance war correspondents often operate with limited resources and protection, rendering them more vulnerable to physical dangers and ethical challenges. Regarding the war in Ukraine, Juan (2022) notes a significant increase in non-professional, inexperienced correspondents eager to share their experiences on social media, using their smartphones as their sole technological tool. In this context, Alcaide (2023) argues that, since the attack on the Twin Towers, war and news journalism has sparked an important debate about whether to show images of victims in a society that, at the time, did not yet have social media. This debate, however, does not involve correspondents dedicated to social media from a professional standpoint. From this perspective, contrary to what influential correspondents

publish, reporters or special envoys send their information to the newsroom with direct testimonies, stories, and images of protagonists. This content is then contextualised and supplemented by the media with data from official and unofficial sources regarding the dead, wounded, negotiations, and the advance or retreat of troops, among other aspects. However, the content disseminated on freelancers' social media lacks such context, making it more prone to misinterpretation or being taken out of context (Juan, 2022).

Added to this is the fact that, prior to the universalisation of social media, official government channels consisted of press releases and press conferences, meaning journalists obtained information directly from the source. However, today press offices maintain official accounts on various social media platforms through which they disseminate statements directly to the public and, simultaneously, to those covering war news independently.

War journalism is a dangerous and complex task that requires well-trained and well-equipped correspondents to report accurately and objectively in situations where factors such as the use of remote technology play a significant role. Rather than deploying war correspondents in person, the progressive evolution of artificial intelligence linked remotely to drones and robots can now gather information and provide a closer view of conflicts (Tejedor, 2023). This development can reduce the risk to journalists and enable more detailed and comprehensive coverage of conflicts.

Furthermore, trained professionals understand that collaboration with local media ensures more accurate and detailed conflict coverage while also helping local media gain visibility and recognition for their work, thereby providing the responsible journalist with a wealth of information.

During armed conflicts, two types of factors come into play which, according to Pizarroso et al. (2017), are in tension with each other: exogenous and endogenous factors. The latter depend on the professionals themselves, whereas exogenous factors are controlled by the censorship and propaganda apparatus of the armed forces and the various governments involved in the conflicts.

This section provides a brief overview of the evolution of content selection to the present day. In 1970, the hypothesis was put forward that the mass media play an enormously important role in establishing the predominant issues in public opinion with the publication of the agenda setting model developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972). This theory asserts that the media do not have the power to tell society what to think, but rather what to think about.

At that time, the media was the main source of information for citizens, who were able to learn about certain issues through the media that they would not have access to through their personal experience. Therefore, the media's actions are based on selecting the most important news items according to their own criteria (McCombs, 2005). In this way, they shape 'the actors' approach to the social reality of their environment' (Álvarez-Gálvez, 2012, p. 10).

This ability to direct public attention to certain issues is what gives the media the power to set the agenda, known as the agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2005). However, years later, the existence of three interrelated agendas was proposed: the public agenda, the political agenda, and the media agenda. This hypothesis therefore limited the influence of the media on public opinion (Rogers et al., 1993).

The priming theory emerged a few years later. This model suggested that the agenda set by the media influences the way people process information. By activating individual feelings, the mainstream media affect people's judgements. By presenting a scale of importance in the news, this process causes changes in the way people evaluate its relevance (Álvarez-Gálvez, 2012). In other words, if a certain event appears more frequently than others in the media, people tend to believe that it is an important issue.

Framing theory, for its part, examines how the media explains news, its causes and its consequences (D'Adamo and García, 2007). The main premise is that the way the media frames information affects how messages are received by the public. This leads to the conclusion that the effects of the mass media not only define the agenda of relevant issues, but also provide the frame of reference from which events are evaluated.

The emergence of the Internet opened the door for people worldwide to publish their reactions instantly or even to provide information about an event or fact. Regarding this research, there is evidence of the Internet's role since the Balkan War as 'the global network of civic journalism, where the media not only inform, but also contribute to public debate while strengthening deliberative democracy' (Gómez, 2003, p. 122).

The universalisation of social media would not have been possible without the emergence and evolution of smartphones, which accelerated its development. In journalism, the use of mobile phones has become a key element in reducing costs and transmitting information through images and videos from anywhere at any time. This innovation has enabled forms of journalism previously unfeasible, including the transmission of live signals via satellite, thereby empowering the social concept of information.

For Sandulescu and Miranda (2021), progressive advances in digital convergence and the evolution of devices are leading to the immediate emergence of digital television and a new system of organisation on platforms characterised by a multiplication of channels, new treatments and information formats, as well as the progressive evolution of different modes of consumption. These developments directly affect how written and/or verbal information begins to be produced.

Another significant change is the hybridisation of genres. While news is characterised by its objective intent, reporting delves deeper into the events narrated by the news, focusing on the immediate present and interpreting the possible causes and consequences of those events. However, technology is blurring this boundary (Marín, 2017).

With the adoption of new technologies such as mobile phones, digital platforms, social media, and the first prototypes of digital cameras, these tools are evolving towards more abstract concepts such as speed through FTP, the progressive reduction in the cost of increasingly complex devices, and the evolution of the social mindset towards on-site creation on virtual platforms or new ways of obtaining images using MOJO techniques.

Linked to the use of mobile technology, social media has experienced exponential global growth, providing war reporting professionals with an uninterrupted source of feedback from their audience. This phenomenon, examined in recent research, establishes a direct relationship between news stories that spread and endure over time and social audience engagement.

In this regard, the study by Fábrega and Vega (2023) analyses the link between traditional television audience measurement and activity on X, concluding that each television rating point is associated with an increase of 1.5 posts per minute on the official profile of the media outlet, a figure that rises to six posts per minute during prime-time broadcasts.

For freelance war journalists, the events most commented on and shared on social media by the audience are those they choose to turn into news (González, 2020). This choice aligns with the editorial line of the media outlet, taking into account the impact, the messages generated and the virality of their publications when deciding whether to explore a topic further or to discard others that have attracted less attention.

This study focuses on the relationship between news and impact, concentrating on the profiles of freelance war journalists featured in the sample analysis.

2. Methodology

Content analysis is a research method used to study and analyse communications in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner. It is widely employed in communication research because it permits a precise methodology to be followed. This, in turn, is essential for the subsequent interpretation and analysis of data to be empirically valid. Content analysis is a rigorous yet flexible technique, allowing for the establishment of criteria for 'the selection, classification, and analysis of the documents that will form part of the study' (Domas and Marsh, 2006, p. 23). It enables statistical analysis to be conducted, content to be categorised according to different factors, and 'objective and demonstrable conclusions to be drawn' (López Noguero, 2002, p. 169).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), for its part, is applied to the message regardless of its format and determines that language on social media is informal (Alcalde, 2019), grammatically incorrect (Muñoz & Argüelles, 2010) and mediated by technology (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Consequently, it is interpreted within its digital context, which favours language without the filters imposed by the written press and interpersonal communication. CDA does not focus solely on the linguistic aspect of the text, but also on the ideological production it entails and the power relations it reproduces, responding to the context and intentions of users (Van Dijk, 2017).

3. Analysis and Results

To provide a comprehensive perspective on the relationship between journalists and their social audience, the three social networks with the highest number of active users in 2025 have been selected: TikTok, Instagram, and X. TikTok is characterised by its rapid connection with younger users, making it one of the most widely used social networks for short, summarised videos conveying quick messages that have a strong impact on the audience.

Instagram stands out for the primacy of images over text, offering a wide variety of content in photographs, images, and videos through its multiple functions and formats: reels as short videos, extensive posts, as well as stories featuring instant and ephemeral content.

X was selected for its relevance and immediacy as a platform where synthesised information can be found instantly. It allows all users to participate in real-time discussions through specific hashtags and to quickly analyse the most commented topics.

In order to understand the relationship between news, informative content, the use of organic content and content recycling on social media, *El Mundo*, *El País*, *Noticias Cuatro* and *Informativos Telecinco* were selected for the time frame of December 2024, in relation to the area analysed.

Table 1. Content publication variables on TikTok.

	El Mundo	El País	Noticias Cuatro	Informativos Telecinco
Uploads content daily	1	1	1	1
Informative content only	0	0	0	1
Content for social media only	1	1	0	0
Recycle content from other channels	0	0	1	1

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

Table 2. Variables for content publication on Instagram.

	El Mundo	El País	Noticias Cuatro	Informativos Telecinco
Uploads content daily	1	1	1	1
Informative content only	0	0	0	0
Content for social media only	0	0	1	1
Recycle content from other channels	0	0	1	1

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

Table 3. Variables for content publication on Instagram.

	El Mundo	El País	Noticias Cuatro	Informativos Telecinco
Uploads content daily	1	1	1	1
Informational content only	1	1	1	1
Content for social media only	0	0	0	0
Recycle content from other channels	1	1	1	1

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

3.1. Sample

In order to describe freelance photojournalists and audiovisual communicators, a strategic sample was selected comprising photojournalists who have at least one of the three social networks listed below. It is noteworthy that, during this research, several photojournalists analysed, such as Manu Brabo, deleted their personal accounts on X.

To narrow down the sample, only those who have covered war in the past year were included. To select the content for the sample, the most recent war coverage post from each profile was chosen. The impact of the posts was calculated by dividing the number of interactions received by the total number of followers of the profile. The result was then multiplied by 100 to obtain the photojournalists' engagement rate with their followers:

$(\text{No. of interactions} / \text{No. of followers}) \times 100 = \text{Engagement rate}$ (Jiménez et al., 2024).

To explain the units of analysis chosen, it is necessary to refer to the impossibility of accessing anonymous data from Instagram profiles, which could have provided information on the number of times a particular post has been shared or saved.

The photojournalists selected for the sample are listed below, with only their Instagram profiles shown, as not all of them maintain accounts on X or TikTok:

1. Manu Brabo (@manubrabo). Followers: 40,800. (X account deleted). Date of last post: 31 January 2025.
2. Gervasio Sánchez (gervasanchez). Followers: 26,300. Date of last war-related post: 24 October 2024.
3. Laura de Chiclana (@laurachiclana). Followers: 25,000. Last post: 30 January 2025.
4. Diego Ibarra (@diego.ibarra.sanchez) Followers: 20,400. Date of last post: 28 January 2025.
5. Maysun (@maysun_photo). Followers: 11,600. Last post: 8 December 2024.

Table 4. Instagram engagement table.

	Followers	Likes	Comments	Reposts	Engagement rate
@manubrabo	40,800	787	6	8	1.96
@gervasanchez	26,300	3,080	39	141	12.39
@laurachiclana	25,000	309	2	3	1.25
@diego.ibarra.sanchez	20,400	380	1	9	1.91
@maysun_photo	11,600	0	5	0	0

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Social Audience Engagement Rate

When studying the engagement rate of each professional, it becomes evident that a higher number of followers does not guarantee a higher engagement rate. This suggests that the timing of the post is more important than its content.

Of the posts analysed, the one with the highest engagement ratio is by Gervasio Sánchez: a photograph of the Sarajevo Library destroyed by the war in 1993. This image, taken by Sánchez as a war correspondent more than thirty years ago, has managed to capture the interest of his followers to a far greater extent than the other photos posted by his current war colleagues, receiving 3,080 likes, 39 comments and 141 shares.

The next post with the highest engagement rate is by Manu Brabo, dated 31 January 2025, which is contextualised in the fall of Al Assad in Syria, with an engagement rate approaching two points. The list concludes with a post by Maysun, also concerning the end of the Syrian regime, dated 8 December 2024, although the photograph itself dates from 2013.

Table 5. Engagement table on Instagram.

	Followers	Likes	Comments	Reposts	Commitment rate
@manubrabo	40,800	787	6	8	1.96
@gervasanchez	26,300	3,080	39	141	12.39
@laurachiclana	25,000	309	2	3	1.25
@diego.ibarra.sanchez	20,400	380	1	9	1.91
@maysun_photo	11,600	0	5	0	0

Source: Authors elaboration, 2025.

An analysis of the content shared on the photojournalists' profiles reveals that some also post personal material, including awards received, professional projects, and holidays. This is exemplified by the profiles of Gervasio Sánchez and Manu Brabo.

This mixed use of their platforms, combining informative and personal content, indicates that they exercise editorial freedom in their publications without being compelled to maintain strictly rigorous reporting for their followers.

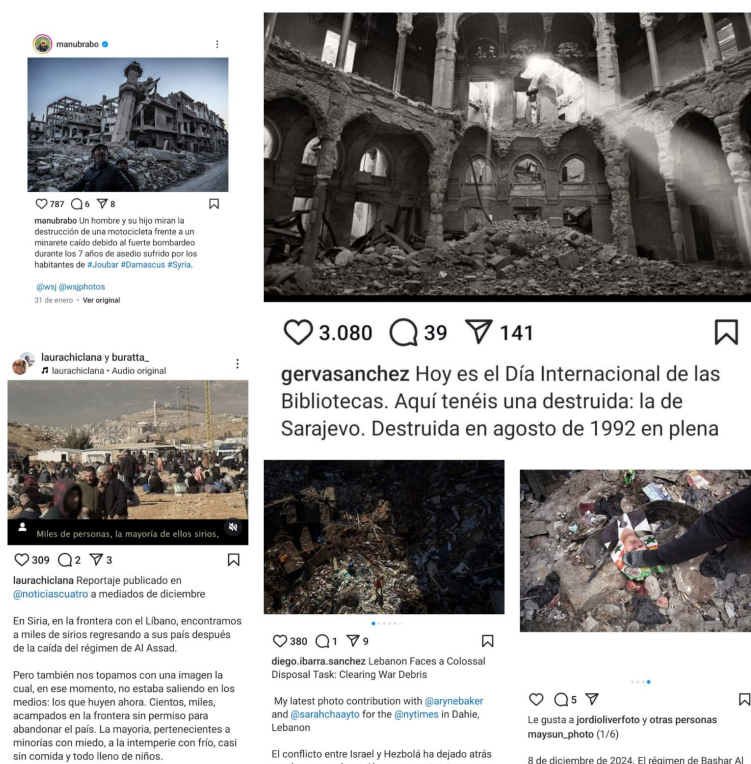
4.2. A Critical Examination of Photojournalists' Discourse on Their Social Media Platforms

Finally, a critical analysis of the discourse of the publications in the sample was conducted to determine their style when addressing their social audience, the lexicon used to describe the images shared, whether their posts link to other articles or news items in the media, and whether they explicitly cite other individuals or institutions related to their graphic content.

The results reveal that the only person who addresses their followers directly is Gervasio Sánchez, using expressions such as 'Today is International Library Day. Here's a destroyed one: the one in Sarajevo' (Instagram @gervasanchez, 24 October 2024).

The most neutral discourse is found in the posts by Manu Brabo and Diego Ibarra, who accompany their photographs with short, impersonal texts written in an informative style.

Image 1. Posts by the photojournalists analysed on Instagram.



Source: Instagram.

For their part, the two female photojournalists analysed employ a more personal style in their texts. Although they do not address their audience directly, they do share their emotions.

In the case of Laura Chiclana, she uses her post about the return of thousands of Syrians to their country to thank her colleagues at *NoticiasCuatro* for their collaborative work: 'Thank you, colleagues, for making our team, @buratta_ and me, part of this great news programme alongside @luisenfoque and @miguel_rodellar_aguilera. Thank you for trusting us' (Instagram @laurachiclana, 30 January 2025).

Maysun, for her part, writes an intimate text reflecting on the pain suffered during the conflict in Syria, conveying a message laden with emotion, 'After almost 14 years of war, loss, ruin, and horror, the butcher has fallen. I am so, SO happy!!' She also expresses hope and wishes, 'I can only hope and wish that the Syrian people will stop suffering, be able to rebuild their devastated country and find peace, although I wish there would also be justice...' (Instagram @maysun_photo, 8 December 2024).

With regard to digital language features such as links, quotes, and hashtags, the photojournalist who makes the most effective use of these resources is @laurachiclana. She cites her colleagues at *Noticias Cuatro* with their respective Instagram profiles and even references the news programme itself (@noticiascuatro), thereby ensuring the post is directed to the programme's account.

Contrary to this, the use of hashtags is very limited across all cases analysed.

5. Conclusions

War photojournalism is currently experiencing a convergence in communication, resulting from recent transformations brought about by the digitisation of communication and accelerated by the speed of the Internet. In news reporting, immediacy is paramount. Digitalisation is becoming increasingly concentrated, and access to information is becoming easier.

However, this advantage, closely linked to immediacy, also presents certain disadvantages for journalism. In many instances, there is a lack of rigour in the treatment of information. The pressure to be the first to break a story sometimes leads to information being unchecked or sources remaining unverified.

On the other hand, the audience is becoming increasingly involved in reporting events as they occur. The Internet operates according to its own rules, making it necessary to work in line with specific patterns. Monitoring, or the automatic tracking of processes, is one of the most complex tasks and requires consistent daily effort.

Among the metrics and variables indicating engagement with social media news are visits, interactions, and the ways users engage with content. These factors are used to evaluate reach and frequency, thereby influencing the decision-making of those who propose topics and those who decide whether to publish them in their media.

The immediacy of news offers new possibilities through mobile journalism. Indeed, it has developed to such an extent that it could become the new standard model in journalism, as it fulfils three principal objectives: reporting news from anywhere, providing continuous updates, and, above all, reporting directly from the scene.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the absence of specific hashtags used to group posts under a personal tag. When hashtags are employed, their use appears arbitrary, lacking any intention of creating a trend to categorise photographs or videos. This scarcity of hashtags and links to other profiles or pages suggests that the photojournalists analysed do not consider these tools essential for increasing the visibility of their posts. This stance is understandable for those who have already attained a high level of social audience; however, it is advisable for those still building their digital identity as war photojournalists.

This analysis leads to the conclusion that war photojournalism produces content likely to remain of interest decades after each conflict, as it forms part of recent war history. An example is the photograph by Gervasio Sánchez, which, despite being taken in 1993, continues to engage the social audience.

Finally, it should be noted that the engagement rate analysed above relates to the number of followers each photojournalist has, reflecting the degree of relationship and trust with their audience. Nevertheless, this should not be regarded as a journalistic objective but rather as a commercial strategy to facilitate offering their coverage to the media.

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