



## VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF JOURNALISTIC ROLES IN NATIVE DIGITAL MEDIA An Empirical Study of the Spanish Case

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the study is to identify professional journalistic roles in photographs and their relationship with headlines. An original coding sheet was designed for content analysis, applied to 602 news items from five Spanish native digital newspapers. There is basic concordance between images and text. The "interventionist" role predominates over the "disseminator" role, based on "interpretation". In relationships between journalists and power, the "watchdog" role prevails over the "loyal-facilitator" role. Subjective photographic techniques are scarcely used, with images exhibiting low expressiveness. This proposal is original due to the lack of studies on roles focused on photography.*

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## 1. Introduction and State of the Art

The iconic-visual elements gradually incorporated into the news content of online press media have sparked growing interest in the field of communication research. The inherent nature of the digital medium and ongoing technological advancements have significantly contributed to the diversification and enrichment of these components (photographs, maps, drawings, infographics, galleries, etc.), which have acquired their own distinct status, configured as units with autonomous structure and meaning. From these elements, innovative formats or genres have emerged that transcend their role as mere complements to text-based information, achieving narrative, structural, and functional independence; examples include the interactive infographic report or the so-called “grand multimedia report”.

Despite this dynamic, in the daily practice of digital press, there is a predominant tendency to use the simplest iconic-visual resources, particularly for economic reasons, as the production of complex pieces requires specialised, multidisciplinary teams and entails significantly higher development time and costs. The dominant and widespread pattern remains the use of photography in its conventional sense, as an illustration of the news, regardless of its specific weight or communicative contribution.

Photojournalism, its characteristics, and modes of use have garnered increasing interest in communication research, albeit with nuances. In this regard, the work of Acosta Meneses and Lozano Ascencio (2021) is particularly illuminating, highlighting the potential of journalistic photography as a research object and underscoring the multiplicity of thematic and methodological approaches to this iconic element, with the “visual framing” approach—linked to agenda-setting—being particularly prominent. Furthermore, based on MapCom<sup>1</sup> data, these authors identify two significant gaps: most research on informational messages focuses on textual content analysis, neglecting images, and “despite growing social interest in photography and photojournalism, this has not yet translated into an increase in scientific production linked to R&D&I projects” (Acosta Meneses y Lozano Ascencio, 2021, p.402). This implies that in research projects where photography is considered, it is generally treated as a complementary element or approached superficially, rather than as a central, comprehensively analysed content.

Nevertheless, a substantial body of academic and scientific work, largely theoretical and to a lesser extent empirical, focuses on the study of journalistic photography. Among the various aspects of photographic images in an informational context that can be examined, notable areas include documentary analysis, the treatment of events or current or historical-retrospective figures through images, issues related to ethics, credibility, or manipulation, technological aspects (such as the impact of AI), photojournalistic genres or formats, specificities according to the medium (print or digital) or dissemination platform (news portals, social media, etc.), areas of journalistic specialisation, production and professional issues, or studies centred on the theory of “visual framing”, previously highlighted for its growing importance. Often, several of these approaches can be combined complementarily, significantly diversifying and expanding the range of research possibilities.

Following a detailed exploration, no publications have been found that link the content and message of photographic images with the manifestation or realisation of professional journalistic roles, which is the focus of this article. While professional journalistic roles have been a subject of communication research since the 1960s, their study in relation to the photographic message lacks precedents or is only tangentially addressed, making the contribution of this study novel within this field.

The study examines the presence of professional roles at their performative level, that is, in journalistic practice, considering that news content reflects both the roles deemed most important by journalists and other influences stemming from decisions made within the newsroom and resulting from negotiations with other social groups (Mellado, 2015).

Thus, the study draws on Mellado’s (2015, 2021) conceptualisation, which classifies professional roles into six independent typologies or dimensions within three domains: the presence of the journalistic voice in the news, the relationship between journalism and those who hold power, and the way the audience is addressed (Donsbach, 2012; Eide and Knight, 1999; Hanitzsch, 2007).

The first domain concerns the more active or passive stance of journalists in news reporting. Neutrality and distance between the journalist and the facts characterise the disseminator pole, while

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mapcom.es/>

at the interventionist pole, journalists express their viewpoints in texts, including support for ideologies and/or social groups.

The second domain encompasses two journalistic roles indicative of how media relate to those who hold power (political, economic, cultural, etc.). The first role is the watchdog, which monitors these elites, focusing on abuses and irregularities they may perpetrate. This dimension includes questioning, criticism, or accusations in news, as well as investigative reporting, coverage of external investigations, or highlighting conflicts between the media and the powerful. The second role is the loyal-facilitator, where media either cooperate with elites to protect the status quo or promote national prestige and patriotism.

The third domain focuses on different conceptualisations of the audience as citizens, spectators, or clients, resulting in three roles. The service role approaches the public as clients, providing information, knowledge, and advice on goods and services that the audience can apply in their daily lives. The infotainment role addresses the public as spectators. The civic role focuses on providing the audience with information and education about demands, rights, duties, and issues related to the exercise of citizenship (Mellado and van Dalen, 2017).

These roles are not mutually exclusive and can appear in the same news item, allowing for the possibility of combined, intermediate roles (Mellado, 2021).

In the Spanish context, various studies based on textual message analysis allow us to characterise journalism by an interventionist profile, a greater presence of the watchdog role over the loyal-facilitator role, and a conceptualisation of the audience primarily linked to the infotainment role (Humanes and Roses, 2018; Humanes et al., 2021; Humanes et al., 2023). These studies have also revealed differences in the presence of the six roles depending on the media platform, news topic, or editorial line, leading us to hypothesise that a different manifestation of roles may also be found in photographic news content. However, there is a research gap in this area, and this study aims to shed light on the realisation of journalistic roles in photojournalism.

This article stems from the research project “Models of Journalism in the Multiplatform Context. Study of the Realisation of Journalistic Roles in News Content in Spain” (CSO2017-82816-P), (January 2018 to June 2021). It is also linked to an international project, “Journalistic Role Performance”.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Objectives

The primary aim of this article is to analyse the presence and realisation of journalistic roles through the content and capture techniques in photographic images published in news items of the “information” genre by native digital press media, and their correlation with the central textual message. Of the three domains into which journalistic roles are classified according to Mellado’s (Ibidem) denomination and criteria, due to space constraints, this study focuses on two domains and some of their roles, namely: “journalistic involvement in the news” (Domain 1: “disseminator” and “interventionist” roles) and “the journalist’s relationship with power” (Domain 2: “watchdog” and “loyal-facilitator” roles).

Four particular objectives are defined:

1. To identify the visual characteristics, present in images that may serve as potential indicators of the realisation of the main journalistic roles, as well as their correlation with homologous textual message characteristics derived from the headline, thereby establishing an instrumental design basis for their coding and empirical application.
2. To verify whether certain subjective photographic techniques or resources are prevalent over others in determining journalistic roles, to identify them, and to explore possible patterns, causes, and effects.
3. To establish whether certain roles exhibit a clearer or more pronounced tendency for their realisation through the characteristics of the image.
4. In light of the above, to assess the degree of complexity and relevance of photography’s contribution to the identification of professional roles.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journalisticperformance.org/appendices>

### 3. Methodology

Achieving the stated objectives requires the use of a methodology that combines maximum objectivity, systematicity, high descriptive capacity, and ease of result tabulation. For these reasons, the quantitative technique of content analysis was deemed the most suitable and justified, as it enables the collection of a corpus of relevant data aligned with the research goals, which can be statistically processed. This foundation, in turn, supports the derivation of logical and empirically verifiable conclusions.

Given that this study is part of the aforementioned research project, it is necessary to note that within the established protocol for the project as a whole, a specific module was developed to examine the relationship between roles and photographic content. For this purpose, an ad hoc coding sheet was designed, which is applied in the research presented here and will be explained subsequently.

#### 3.1. Sample

The study began with a sample selection that met the basic criterion of representativeness, for which a corpus of news items published in four Spanish native digital general-interest newspapers with significant circulation and a degree of ideological diversity within the existing media context was compiled: *El Confidencial*, *Eldiario.es*, *OK Diario*, *El Español*, and *Huffington Post*.

The selection of news items employed the “constructed week” method. Starting with a Sunday, one consecutive day of the week was selected over six months, from January to June, with two days (Friday and Saturday) sampled in the final month to cover the weekly period, excluding holiday or festive dates to more accurately reflect a “normal news situation”. The time period for the news items spans the semester from 7 January 2018 to 9 June 2018. To ensure maximum consistency, news items published on the same days across all newspapers were analysed, specifically: 7 January (Monday), 5 February (Tuesday), 13 March (Wednesday), 25 April (Thursday), 31 May (Friday), 1 June (Saturday), and 9 June (Sunday).

The unit of analysis was defined as each individual, identifiable news item comprising a block of text and image referring to the same current event. Only news items published in the National, Economy, and Society sections, appearing on the newspaper’s homepage and accessible via a link to their specific page, were included. News items without photographs, with timeless content or no connection to a current event, or illustrated with photomontages (blended images, photos with text inserted in the frame, etc.), clearly recognisable video screenshots, infographics, drawings, cartoons, galleries, or similar were excluded. In news items with multiple photographs, only the first image was considered due to its greater relevance. Based on these criteria, a sample of 602 units of analysis was obtained.

Addressing potential concerns about the time elapsed since the publication of the news items, it should be noted that trends in news treatment in the press change gradually over medium-to-long-term cycles. The systematic monitoring of photographic content in digital press by the authors confirms the ongoing relevance of this study, which is objectively verifiable. Indeed, a smaller-scale replication of the analysis was conducted with a sample of 20 news items published in 2024 by the same newspapers using the same selection criteria, confirming no significant changes in the trends observed in the results.

#### 3.2. Tools

In line with the first specific objective, the study began with the attributes of the textual message corresponding to the professional roles defined in the codebook of the Journalistic Role Performance project<sup>3</sup>, necessitating the establishment of a set of photographic characteristics equivalent to these, which is the core aspect of the research. Therefore, the aim was to link the photographic perspective with the conceptualisation proposed by Mellado (2015), already tested for print media in various studies, both of Spanish media (Mellado et al., 2018) and international media (Mellado et al., 2017; Stępińska et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017).

A table of equivalences was designed to interrelate three dimensions: a) role or specific variant thereof, b) identifying textual message, and c) corresponding photographic message. The latter is the novel semantic vector compared to the general coding manual and previous studies. Its value lies in the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journalisticperformance.org/>

fact that photography is not only significant in itself (what it conveys or indicates per se) but also in the extent to which it gives complete meaning to the news item in which it is included. This provides an integrated view of the news message, in this case focused on determining journalistic roles.

To conduct the most accurate analysis possible of the photographic meaning, it was decided to separately evaluate the two factors present in the image (Alonso Erusquin, 1995): content (what appears in the shot) and form or encoding (how it is reflected or captured). The former refers to the denotative component, that which is captured and clearly and objectively recognisable (situations, locations, individuals, or other elements). The latter pertains to the way the content is represented or recreated through the use of expressive resources specific to photographic language (such as angle, focus, lighting, etc.), offering a distinctive perspective on the event or situation, which adds connotative or symbolic-representative meanings capable of subjectively altering the perception of the content.

The conceptualisation of the variables used, the determination of their values, and the coding criteria are grounded in a compendium of reference works on the analysis of journalistic photography, particularly those by Abreu (2004), Alonso Erusquin (1995), Barthes (1986), del Valle (1999), Gunter & Leeuwen (2007), Joly (1999), Marzal (2009), y Salvador et al (2015) y Vilches (1987) among others. Regarding the relationships or equivalences between the textual and photographic message, guidance was drawn from various studies, including those by Bateman (2008 y 2014), Bünzli & Eppler (2024), Cheema et al. (2023), Eladio Duque (2020), Marsh & White (2003), Otto et al. (2020), etc. Based on the aforementioned premises, the following table of equivalences was constructed:

**Table 1.** Equivalences between roles and textual and photographic content

| <b>Domain 1: Journalist's involvement in the news item</b>                 |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Role: Disseminator: the journalist takes a distance from the event.</b> |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Modalities</b>                                                          | <b>Textual content</b>                                                                                                                               | <b>Photographic characteristics</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Disseminator                                                               | Aseptic message, simply states what, who, or where.                                                                                                  | <u>Content</u> : Neutral. Image that does not clearly emphasise any aspect or does not even contribute anything informative. Normality or naturalness of actions or facts shown.<br><u>Treatment</u> : high level of iconicity, image without distortions with respect to the reality represented.                                                                                                     |
| <b>Role: Interventionist: the journalist is involved in the event.</b>     |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Modalities</b>                                                          | <b>Textual content</b>                                                                                                                               | <b>Photographic characteristics</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Interpretation                                                             | Emphasis on explanatory aspects of the news: context, background or possible consequences. Shows one side of the event without blatant partisanship. | <u>Content</u> : Images of the causal background to the event, or of specific aspects of the event, which are clearly associated with it or can be clearly seen, without being anecdotal or too far-fetched.<br><u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus or composition with very little distortion. Scenography with contextualising elements, such as symbols and others. |
| Opinion                                                                    | Clearly evaluative statements about something or someone.                                                                                            | <u>Content</u> : Situations or scenes that clearly go against or for a party, or that are completely secondary but are given hyper-relevance. In the case of Adjectivation, with this bias more accentuated.<br><u>Treatment</u> : Marked distortions of reality, clearly prioritising or undervaluing something or someone.                                                                           |
| Adjectivation                                                              | Similar to Opinion, but clearly biased.                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Proposal or demand                                                         | Demands made by the journalist.                                                                                                                      | <u>Content</u> : Central protagonism of groups or people who are the beneficiaries of the demand.<br><u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus or composition suggesting praise for the plaintiffs or undervaluation of the defendants.                                                                                                                                      |
| First person                                                               | The journalist is directly and actively involved.                                                                                                    | <u>Content</u> : The journalist or the media appears in the image as an active part of the news event.<br><u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus or composition suggesting praise and a positive view of the journalist.                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Domain 2: Journalist's relationship with power</b>                      |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Role: Watchdog: criticism or opposition to power.</b>                   |                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Indicators</b>                                                          | <b>Textual content</b>                                                                                                                               | <b>Photographic features</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

|                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Questioning                                                                     | Doubts are raised about theses, messages or actions of the powers that be.                                                                                   | <u>Content</u> : Attitudes or situations that call into question elements of power as suspicious, threatening, or with appearances against them. Documentary evidence. Scenes or situations suggesting irregularities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Criticism                                                                       | Negative judgements regarding the thesis or actions of the powers that be.                                                                                   | <u>Treatment</u> : Gestures, framing, angulation, scenography, focus or composition suggesting the above and conveying a negative connotation of actors linked to the powers that be.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Denunciation                                                                    | Public dissemination of irregular or scandalous situations.                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Appeal to investigations                                                        | Own or external investigations, as a probative or incriminating factor.                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Judicialisation                                                                 | Judicial proceedings involving the powers that be                                                                                                            | <u>Content</u> : scenes of arrests, entries or presence in court. <u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus, or composition suggesting concern or belittling of the defendants.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Conflicted relationship                                                         | Message focused on the poor treatment of the media or individual journalists by the government.                                                              | <u>Content</u> : Acts or situations showing a negative attitude towards the media. <u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus or composition suggesting the above, emphasising the power actors from a threatening point of view.                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Role: Loyalist-facilitator: co-operation, praise or alliance with power.</b> |                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Indicators</b>                                                               | <b>Textual content</b>                                                                                                                                       | <b>Photographic features</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Defence of actions, or thesis of the powers that be                             | Positive focus or praise for the intentions or initiatives of the powers-that-be.                                                                            | <u>Content</u> : Images of favourable situations, or of their good effects: inaugurations, agreements or pacts, etc., either of the Power or of their supposed beneficiaries. <u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, angulation, focus, scenography or composition suggesting the above, in one sense or another, with visual representation of positive connotation to the Powers.                                                                                       |
| Positive image of the elites                                                    | Suggestion in a positive tone or with clear praise for the representatives of the Power.                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Success or progress of the country                                              | Emphasis is placed on the protagonist's own nationality as a representative factor of the country.                                                           | <u>Content</u> : Images of favourable situations or their supposed benefits for the country. The national aspect should be reinforced by showing representative and recognisable symbols of the country in the image. <u>Treatment</u> : Gesture, framing, scenography, angulation, focus or composition that suggests the above, especially giving amplified emphasis to the scene, its protagonists and the elements that have symbolic value of the national aspect. |
| Promotion of the image of the country in comparison with other countries.       | The positive or beneficial aspect of a fact is emphasised in comparison with the situation in other countries or by taking testimonies from foreign sources. |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Praise to patriotism or patriotic values                                        | The positive aspect of the event is emphasised as an exponent of national values.                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

Source: own elaboration, 2025

The coding sheet is based on the content and structure of Table 1, breaking it down into quantifiable indicators and values measured on a dichotomous presence-absence scale. This tool has a formal configuration consistent with its instrumental and operational nature. Due to its similarity to the table itself, it was deemed unnecessary to include it, to avoid redundancy.

### 3.3. Encoding

Using a representative selection of the units of analysis, an inter-coder agreement was conducted, yielding a Krippendorff's alpha (Ka) value of .74. Regarding the logic and criteria of the coding, as previously noted, not all journalistic role models are mutually exclusive, meaning that attributes or characteristics associated with different roles can be present simultaneously within a single news item.

Therefore, rather than classifying a news item as belonging to the “interventionist” or “disseminator” role, the presence of characteristics indicative of these meanings is identified and recorded, according to the criteria outlined in Table 1.

Given that, as discussed, photography is evaluated by considering two separate factors—content and photographic treatment or encoding techniques that produce a subjective perspective—there are cases where the image’s content does not clearly correspond to any role, yet connotative features associated with a particular role are present. In such instances, the adopted criterion is to use the textual message as a reference marker, and if it is representative of a role, all observable photographic treatment techniques are considered indicators of that same role. As a general rule, results affecting a minimal number of units of analysis are not considered here, as they are deemed irrelevant, except in specific exceptional cases. The obtained data were entered into the SPSS software for performing calculations and deriving descriptive statistics.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Domain 1: Journalist Involvement in the News Item

#### 4.1.1. Disseminator Role

The “disseminator” role implies that the journalist maintains distance from the news event, limiting themselves to presenting its main aspects without bias. From the perspective of the textual message, the tone is neutral, focused on presenting the news factors objectively, referencing the 5 Ws + 1H (“what,” “who,” “where,” “how,” “when,” and “why”) as outlined in Kipling’s classic paradigm for news writing, without including any form of evaluation, solely providing the facts. Regarding the photographic content, images defining this role are similarly characterised by objectivity, potentially being merely “decorative.” No aspect is clearly emphasised, reflecting the normality or naturalness of the actions or events depicted. It can be observed (Table 2) that the disseminator role predominates in the sample as a whole, both in relation to textual and photographic content, with a very similar percentage for both.

**Table 2.** “Disseminator” role

| Distribution by type of content   |           |            |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Type of content                   | Frequency | Percentage |
| Textual content                   | 346       | 57,2       |
| Photographic content              | 336       | 55,8       |
| Associated photographic resources |           |            |
| Type of resource                  | Frequency | Percentage |
| Neutral lighting                  | 530       | 88         |
| No inclination                    | 511       | 84,9       |
| No deformations                   | 506       | 84,1       |
| Neutral angle                     | 487       | 80,9       |
| Homogeneous or natural focus      | 425       | 70,6       |

Source: Authors’ own elaboration, 2025

With regard to subjective photographic treatment, there is likewise a notable prevalence of images without alterations to the reality they represent. The data clearly show that in the vast majority of shots, no use is made of resources that visually alter reality. A simple vision consistent with natural perception is presented, with hardly any effects of distortion in settings, physical elements, or individuals, and without prominently highlighting or enhancing any of them through angles, focus, lighting, or other techniques inherent to photographic practice.

#### 4.1.2. Interventionist Role

The “interventionist” role implies that the journalist adopts an active stance, engaging with the news event such that the published message carries a more or less evident nuance or bias. Several modalities within this role can be distinguished, ranging from the merely explanatory or interpretive to direct participation in support of or against a particular position. As this study analyses news items of the “information” genre, which by definition should be limited to a factual presentation, it must be noted

that the introduction of evaluations by the journalist constitutes, from an ethical perspective, a fundamental distortion of their role.

#### 4.1.2.1. Interpretation

In this modality, the textual content emphasises the explanatory aspects of the news: context, background, or potential consequences. Analytical elements that may introduce a degree of opinion are incorporated into the basic facts. Another interpretive dimension would involve the news item highlighting or prioritising a specific facet or aspect of the event, but without a clearly biased inclination. From the perspective of photographic content, the criterion for considering an image as interpretive is substantially similar to that of the text: snapshots that reflect causal aspects of the event or effects clearly associated with or derived from it, without being anecdotal or overly contrived. The presence of symbolic elements is also considered, as they provide context. Applying these criteria, the results obtained are presented in Table 3:

**Table 3.** "Interpretation" ("Interventionist" role)

| Distribution by type of content   |           |            |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Type of content                   | Frequency | Percentage |
| Textual content                   | 446       | 74,1       |
| Photographic content              | 417       | 69,3       |
| Associated photographic resources |           |            |
| Type of resource                  | Frequency | Percentage |
| Scenography                       | 313       | 52         |
| Composition                       | 299       | 49,7       |
| Gestuality                        | 241       | 40         |
| Framing                           | 52        | 8,6        |
| Focus                             | 38        | 6,3        |
| Angulation                        | 37        | 6,1        |

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

It is observed that interpretation is equally defined in the textual and photographic components, as the number of photographs whose content is associated with this modality is relatively significant; these include images featuring symbolic elements.

The photographic treatment resources most clearly supporting the interpretive modality are scenography, composition, and gestuality. The scenographic vision offered by the images provides context to the news, particularly highlighting a specific aspect (individuals, objects, etc.), as does composition, which refers to the arrangement and interrelation of the depicted elements. Regarding gestuality, an image is considered associated with this modality when the protagonists display expressions or actions that do not convey a neutral stance or sentiment, yet are not clearly aligned in one direction, appearing discreetly or lending themselves to varied interpretations due to their ambiguity. From this perspective, framing, focus, and angles are employed with the intent to highlight or enhance a particular individual or aspect, but without seeking excessive contrast with other elements present in the shot.

#### 4.1.2.2. Opinion

In this modality, the journalist employs biased statements, either in favour of or against something or someone, doing so clearly, though not necessarily in an exaggerated manner. Likewise, secondary or anecdotal aspects may be highlighted to give them exaggerated relevance or prominence compared to the core of the news item. Regarding the content of the photographs, those deemed characteristic of the “opinion” modality depict situations or scenes that support or detract from a particular stance, reinforcing or lending credibility to the version being prioritised, or the opposite if it is contrary. As with the text, images focusing on entirely collateral or anecdotal details relative to the core of the news item are also included here, to attribute them false relevance, and symbolism also plays a role as an identifying feature. Table 4 shows that the “opinion” modality is expressed through textual content primarily via evaluative statements rather than by highlighting secondary aspects, meaning it is executed in the most direct manner. Regarding photographic content, this variant of the “interventionist” role is less prevalent and follows a different approach from the textual message, as it is more oriented towards highlighting secondary or anecdotal aspects, with minimal emphasis on depicting clearly biased situations or symbolism.

**Table 4.** “Opinion” (“Interventionist” role)

| <b>Distribution by type of content</b>               |                  |                   |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Type of content</b>                               | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
| <b>Textual content: evaluative statements</b>        | 84               | 14                |
| <b>Textual content: highlights secondary aspects</b> | 25               | 4,2               |
| <b>Photographic content: pro/con situations</b>      | 10               | 1,7               |
| <b>Photographic content: secondary aspects</b>       | 21               | 3,5               |
| <b>Photographic content: symbology</b>               | 17               | 2,8               |
| <b>Associated photographic resources</b>             |                  |                   |
| <b>Type of resource</b>                              | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
| <b>Gesture</b>                                       | 33               | 5,5               |
| <b>Angulation</b>                                    | 15               | 2,5               |
| <b>Composition</b>                                   | 14               | 2,3               |
| <b>Framing</b>                                       | 12               | 2                 |
| <b>Focus</b>                                         | 7                | 1,2               |
| <b>Lighting</b>                                      | 6                | 1                 |

Source: Author’s own elaboration, 2025

As observed, the photographic treatment resources associated with this role carry greater specific weight than the denotative content of the images. Connotation outweighs denotation. The basic effects identified include more or less pronounced distortions or alterations of reality (settings, individuals, specific elements, etc.), which clearly enhance or diminish something or someone. Among these techniques, the use of snapshots capturing a person with gesturality that conveys closeness, sympathy, antipathy, detachment, or any other non-neutral emotional characteristic predominates. Gesturality is the most obvious and intuitively comprehensible factor for the general public, which may explain its predominance. Angles, composition, and framing are other techniques capable of visually conveying a favourable or unfavourable opinion, as they can alter the perceived impression, even distorting it, and likewise have a fairly evident impact. Focus and lighting are used to a lesser extent.

#### 4.1.2.3. Adjectival Modality

This modality indicates that the journalist adopts a degree of partisanship or subjectivity that can be described as extreme or excessive, more akin to militant activism than to informational reporting. The textual content is characterised by the presence of qualifiers, and from the perspective of photographic content, this involves images of situations that are clearly biased, marginal, or present a highly partial viewpoint in favour of or against the protagonist or sector being attacked or extolled.

The adjectival modality is manifested to a very limited extent, with a notable difference between its expression through textual and photographic messages, as the former is significantly more prevalent than the latter: 30 cases (5%) compared to 3 (0.5%), respectively. It should be noted that in the few

images associated with this modality, the dominant treatment is clearly manipulative distortion, with highly pronounced deformations or alterations relative to the real referent, which may even border on the grotesque. This occurs in only two cases.

#### 4.1.2.4. Proposal / Demand and First Person

We group under this heading two modalities of the “interventionist” role in which the journalist not only expresses opinions or evaluations in favour or against but becomes a direct and personal participant in a cause. In the first of these, propositional textual content appears in 8 news items, equivalent to 1.3%, and is not recorded in any photographs. Regarding the use of the “first person,” it occurs in only one case, both in the textual and photographic components. Therefore, these are variants with practically no significance.

### 4.2. Domain 2: The Journalist's Relationship with Power

#### 4.2.1. Watchdog Role

The “watchdog” role represents the counterbalancing function that, in the classical conception of political regimes based on freedoms, was attributed to the press due to its critical stance and safeguarding role against potential abuses by authorities, entities, groups, or individuals holding positions of dominance in any sphere of society. Following the criteria of the Journalistic Role Performance project, the “watchdog” role is further subdivided into five indicators, which have been analysed separately, and whose results are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. "Watchdog" role

| Questioning                     |           |            |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Type of content                 | Frequency | Percentage |
| Textual content                 | 98        | 16,3       |
| Photographic content            | 21        | 3,5        |
| Photographic coding resources   | Frequency | Percentage |
| Scenography                     | 27        | 4,5        |
| Gestuality                      | 25        | 4,2        |
| Composition                     | 14        | 2,3        |
| Angulation                      | 6         | 1          |
| Critique                        |           |            |
| Type of content                 | Frequency | Percentage |
| Textual content                 | 42        | 7          |
| Photographic content            | 4         | 0,7        |
| Photographic coding resources   | Frequency | Percentage |
| Scenography                     | 14        | 2,3        |
| Gestuality                      | 12        | 2          |
| Composition                     | 8         | 1,3        |
| Framing                         | 4         | 0,7        |
| Reporting                       |           |            |
| Type of content                 | Frequency | Percentage |
| Textual content                 | 50        | 8,3        |
| Photographic content            | 7         | 1,2        |
| Encoding resources photographic | Frequency | Percentage |
| Scenography                     | 10        | 1,7        |
| Gestuality                      | 5         | 0,8        |
| Composition                     | 4         | 0,7        |

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2025

##### 4.2.1.1. Questioning

The textual content associated with this indicator raises objections or doubts regarding the messages disseminated to the public or the initiatives undertaken by those in power, questioning their certainty, validity, or effectiveness. In terms of photographic messaging, for this indicator as well as the following two (“criticism” and “denunciation”), the image must essentially play a testimonial role, such as scenes

associated with something suspicious, evidence or effects of ineffective management, individuals in attitudes or company that suggest mistrust, or documentary proof of ethically questionable actions, among other possibilities.

The results corresponding to this indicator, presented in Table 5, highlight that this variable is also expressed more prominently through textual messaging than through images. In this regard, in addition to the inherent explanatory limitations of photography, the difficulty of obtaining images that clearly and unequivocally demonstrate the aforementioned situations or their effects must be considered.

With regard to the techniques or resources of photographic capture associated with this variant of the “watchdog” role, they primarily include staging, by showing elements or settings that reinforce considerations about the protagonists of the news, their gestures, and their enhancement or devaluation depending on their placement in the frame and position relative to other actors or objects. Angulation, which can provide a clearly distorted and subjective view, is very rarely used as a technique for questioning.

#### ***4.2.1.2. Criticism***

The textual content oriented towards criticism involves issuing negative judgements regarding the propositions or measures emanating from spheres of power. As this entails a more severe level of oversight or scrutiny than mere questioning, its photographic translation implies a similar but more pronounced orientation of the content, depicting actions or circumstances that incite clear disapproval or suspicion towards individuals or spheres associated with power, and/or showing evidence or appearances against them. Based on these premises, it is observed that the “criticism” indicator is limited to a small number of cases and primarily hinges on textual messaging, with only a marginal presence in photographic content.

The photographic treatment techniques used to define this indicator of the “watchdog” role go beyond the content of the photographs themselves that represent it. In other words, there is a greater emphasis on “how” the facts or situations are presented, rather than the facts themselves, as can be inferred from a comparative analysis of the corresponding results in Table 5. The encoding of staging, gestures, and composition remain the essential factors employed to achieve a critical orientation, with the subjective use of framing playing a lesser role.

#### ***4.2.1.3. Denunciation***

This indicator of the “watchdog” role is associated with textual content focused on exposing dishonest, fraudulent, or scandalous situations carried out by some sphere of power. The photographic content that can be linked to this type of approach includes scenes that suggest or provide evidence of irregularities, or at the very least, indications of them. The highest level of evidential value from an image would be capturing the decisive moment of such an action (commonly referred to as being “caught” or “in flagrante”), although, for obvious reasons, the difficulty of obtaining such photographs is evident, particularly in closed, private, or restricted contexts. Whether due to these or other reasons, we observe once again that the “denunciation” modality is expressed more decisively through textual content than through its photographic illustration.

The encoding of staging is the primary photographic technique employed, which can itself adopt various approaches. For example, depicting a proxemic relationship between individuals from power circles and certain more or less suspicious individuals or entities with whom they may share opaque or illegitimate interests, or whose roles are morally incompatible, in order to visually associate them and create an impression of complicity. Other resources used include showing shadowy or enclosed settings that connote concealment, providing minimal contextual information, as well as incorporating symbols representing ideas, parties, groups, etc. Gestures that suggest complicity or a good relationship between the types of individuals mentioned, or that convey Machiavellianism, perfidy, or malice on the part of the protagonists, would reinforce the notion of dishonesty. Similarly, a composition that creates a “covert” effect, suggesting a surreptitious or non-consensual capture, would also contribute to this. We note that these potential possibilities are used very sparingly in the sample analysed.

#### ***4.2.1.4. Appeal to Investigations***

The textual content of the information focuses exclusively on investigations as evidential or incriminating factors of an irregularity, whether conducted by the media outlet or external sources. This has been identified in 33 cases, equivalent to 5.5% of the sample. The associated photographic component, which would involve the publication of images that demonstrate or align with the textual message, is limited to 4 cases, representing 0.7% of the total. No use of photographic encoding techniques has been observed for this indicator.

#### **4.2.1.5. Judicialisation**

The informational text places central importance on judicial processes affecting individuals within circles of power. Correspondingly, the equivalent photography depicts scenes of arrests, presence, or appearances in court. A total of 63 news items with this textual content are recorded (10.5%), and 10 are illustrated with corresponding photographs (1.7%). The use of photographic treatment techniques is minimal, limited to 2 cases (0.3%), in which the idea is reinforced through scenic encoding.

#### **4.2.1.6. Conflictual Relationship**

The message focuses on revealing incidents, tensions, or inadequate treatment by those in power towards the press or journalists. This is recorded in only two cases and solely at the level of textual content, making it an indicator of minimal significance.

#### **4.2.2. Loyal-Facilitator Role**

This role implies that the journalist adopts a clear position of cooperation with circles of power, openly praising and supporting them, thus becoming a participant in their strategies and actions. It is the opposite of the counterbalancing role theoretically or typically assumed to be characteristic of a free press. According to the guidelines of the Journalistic Role Performance project, the "loyal-facilitator" role is expressed through five indicators, although results are only recorded for three of them, as presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** "Loyal-facilitator" Role

| <b>Defence of theses and actions of power</b> |                  |                   |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Type of content</b>                        | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
| <b>Textual content</b>                        | 65               | 10,8              |
| <b>Photographic content</b>                   | 7                | 1,2               |
| <b>Photographic coding resources</b>          |                  |                   |
| <b>Scenography</b>                            | 59               | 9,8               |
| <b>Gestuality</b>                             | 47               | 7,8               |
| <b>Framing</b>                                | 24               | 4                 |
| <b>Composition</b>                            | 16               | 2,7               |
| <b>Focus</b>                                  | 13               | 2,2               |
| <b>Positive image of elites</b>               |                  |                   |
| <b>Type of content</b>                        | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
| <b>Textual content</b>                        | 58               | 9,6               |
| <b>Photographic content</b>                   | 38               | 6,3               |
| <b>Photographic coding resources</b>          |                  |                   |
| <b>Scenography</b>                            | 98               | 16,3              |
| <b>Gestuality</b>                             | 92               | 15,3              |
| <b>Framing</b>                                | 30               | 5                 |
| <b>Composition</b>                            | 19               | 3,2               |
| <b>Focus</b>                                  | 16               | 2,7               |

Source: own elaboration, 2025

#### ***4.2.2.1. Defence of Theses or Actions of Power***

The textual content of these pieces is characterised by a positive approach or direct praise towards the intentions or initiatives of those in power. Its photographic transposition consists of illustrating the news with images of situations that convey a clearly optimistic or beneficial impression to the reader, aligned with the text. Table 6 presents the results obtained, with the notable finding that the message conveyed by the text has a significantly higher incidence than that of the image.

The data reveal that photography emphasises the defence of those in power much more prominently through the use of encoding techniques with subjective weight than through the content of the images themselves. In this regard, the method of capturing scenic elements stands out, oriented towards positively reinforcing the message indicated by the text, along with gestures that convey the satisfaction or contentment of the main figures, close-up shots to establish a sense of proximity with the reader, and composition and focus centred on highlighting the situations and their protagonists.

#### ***4.2.2.2. Positive Image of Elites***

This indicator places emphasis on flattery towards elites or entities of power in a specific and/or personalised manner, portraying them as “benevolent,” “altruistic,” or even “providential.” The content of the photographs reflects this same optimistic or beneficial vision, depicting situations that convey harmony, kindness, enthusiasm, willingness, or positive action. The manifestation of this variant of the “loyal-facilitator” role through textual and photographic content is presented in Table 6, where it is observed that, once again, the textual content has a greater incidence than the photographic content, although the latter carries somewhat more weight compared to other indicators of this role.

The data obtained clearly show that the “positive image of elites” is underscored far more through the use of photographic capture techniques, which provide connotative and evaluative elements, than through the objective content of the images themselves. It is worth noting that this indicator employs the same techniques, in the same order of quantitative importance, as in the “Defence of Theses or Actions of Power,” with a predominance of scenic encoding, gestures, close-up framing, composition, and focus that respectively convey preeminence, optimism, or proximity, highlight and provide greater clarity to the protagonists in contrast to other elements, all of which positively reinforce their image in the reader’s perception.

#### ***4.2.2.3. Success or Progress of the Country***

This indicator is manifested in only 5 cases, representing 0.8% of the sample, and is reflected solely in the textual content, with no presence in the photographic content.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

In accordance with the objectives outlined, a general trend is observed whereby the “interventionist” role predominates over the “disseminator” role, substantially supported by the “interpretation” modality, which is the most moderate level of this role, and is equally evident in both textual and photographic content. The remaining profiles of the “interventionist” role show significantly less presence than the aforementioned modality and also compared to the “disseminator” role. Therefore, there is broad alignment with previous studies regarding the journalist’s involvement in the news.

Concerning the presence of the “disseminator” role in photographs, it should be noted that, due to their neutral nature, these are the least elaborate and most obvious images, and their capture does not require professional technical knowledge. This could be considered a distorting factor, as the publication of highly simplistic visual content is a growing trend in online journalistic media, relegating the role of the image to a purely ornamental function with minimal or no informational value (Fontdevilla et al., 2016; López del Ramo and Humanes Humanes, 2024). Consequently, it is worth questioning whether the publication of such photographs stems from a deliberate intent for informational neutrality or is merely the result of a simplifying production routine.

From the perspective of the relationship between the journalist and those in power, the “watchdog” role prevails over the “loyal-facilitator” role, consistent with previous research, but with the significant nuance that this is only the case in textual content, not in photographic content, where the latter role carries more weight. This is further reinforced by the use of photographic capture techniques that present a subjective-connotative perspective favourable to collaboration with those in power.

The three most commonly used photographic treatment techniques in defining the majority of roles are staging, gestures, and, to a lesser extent, composition. These are techniques that are more easily and intuitively understood by the average reader compared to others, such as selective focus, for example. This suggests an intent to convey a direct and clear message. Few photographic techniques unequivocally associated with a specific role are employed, and they are almost always the same.

The degree of alignment between text and photography is greater in roles that reflect the journalist’s involvement in the news (Dimension 1 of the study). There is greater disparity in the journalist’s relationship with power (Dimension 2), where the definition of roles relies more on photographic treatment or encoding techniques, which carry connotative features, than on the content itself. In general terms, the roles belonging to Dimension 1 are clearly more defined than those in Dimension 2 and exhibit a greater variety of nuances.

As a final reflection, it can be noted that, quantitatively, the text is more expressive than the image in determining roles, although, broadly speaking, the messages of both elements align in the same direction. In any case, the research presented here has broader potential implications, including the study of roles in correlation with the sections in which news is published, which suggests the existence of notable differences in results depending on the news topics. Likewise, the scope of analysis could be expanded to include a larger number of media outlets and an international media scale. These perspectives are open to development in future studies.

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