Volume 14 Number 8 October 2026

DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Special Issue: Visual Journalism in an AI Age: Contested Realities and Evolving Impacts

Routledge

Digital Journalism

ISSN: 2167-0811 (Print) 2167-082X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rdij20

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To cite this article: Ellie Macdonald (11 Oct 2026): Too Much or Not Enough? The Decline of the Iconic News Image and the Adaptive Challenges of Visual Digital Journalism, Digital Journalism, DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2026.2744880

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2026.2744880

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Published online: 11 Oct 2026.

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DIGITAL JOURNALISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2026.2744880

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Too Much or Not Enough? The Decline of the Iconic News Image and the Adaptive Challenges of Visual Digital Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Iconic news images have traditionally played a central role in journalistic praxis and public discourse, transcending news cycles and forming shared visual narratives. However, in contemporary digital media ecologies, single images struggle to gain traction amid multimedia storytelling, divergent editorial priorities, and dynamic platform affordances. To investigate the adaptive context of this shift, this article presents a case study of photographic reporting on the Israel-Palestine conflict from October 2023 to March 2024, analysing lead images from Al Jazeera English, The Guardian, and BBC News. While some unifying themes were evident, the outlets tended not to republish single images, instead favouring a high volume of imagery alongside multimedia content. In contrast, the viral circulation of a related AI-generated image indicates the continued importance of symbolic condensation within contemporary visual discourse. As such, the widespread circulation of this image illustrates how adaptive behaviours within a complex system can incite visual coherence outwith journalistic production. The image therefore signals a potential risk: in the absence of effective journalistic adaptation, the civic function of iconic news photographs could be displaced by epistemically synthetic imagery; loosening the connection between iconic visual symbolism and photographic witnessing.

KEYWORDS

Photojournalism; complexity theory; Israel; Gaza; Palestine; photography; adaptation

Introduction

Photographs have long been central to how journalism communicates the stakes of war and crisis, offering visual focal points that can inform public understanding, moral response, and political discourse (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017; Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai 2025; Zelizer 2010). Yet in the current digital journalism environment, the capacity for any one image to stand apart is increasingly constrained. The volume, speed, and fragmentation of online circulation make it difficult for photographs to sustain the cultural traction once associated with iconicity

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(Dahmen, Mielczarek, and Perlmutter 2018). This article examines the implications of that shift through a case study of photojournalistic coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict from October 2023 to March 2024. Drawing on lead images published by Al Jazeera English, BBC News, and The Guardian, the research identifies recurring compositional motifs but finds that these repetitions do not result in the symbolic consolidation associated with iconic images. These findings align with existing scholarship that attributes the shift in ecology and value of iconic photojournalism to a complex interplay of editorial practices, platform logics, and networked audience behaviours (Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017); unsettling the previously stable visual hierarchies that enabled certain images to endure.

As such, rather than treating the decline of iconic single news images as the outcome of any one technological or institutional disruption, this research conceptualises visual journalism as a complex adaptive system in which actors such as photographers, editors, platforms, and publics interact to produce emergent outcomes. Within such systems, locally rational adaptations made by different actors can generate system-level consequences that are not necessarily intended (Cilliers 1998; Davis and Sumara 2009). This perspective, contextualised through scholarship on both complexity theory (Mitchell 2009) and adaptive journalistic praxis (Perreault, Bélair-Gagnon, and Henrichsen 2025), provides a framework for understanding how contemporary routines of digital journalism may collectively disperse visual salience across multiple images rather than allowing a single photograph to consolidate symbolic authority.

The research concludes that the corpus of images ($n = 465$) shows output-level adjustments consistent with emergent adaptive behaviours (multimedia packaging, divergent editorial framings, and self-censorship) but finds that collectively, these adaptations appear to inhibit the cross-outlet repetition that historically supported iconic consolidation. In contrast, within this same complex system, an AI-generated image known as All Eyes on Rafah emerged as a symbolic visual focal point within the wider media discourse surrounding the conflict. In turn, this generated a feedback loop, resulting in adaptive behaviours that led to the image itself becoming a news item (Roberts 2025). Though differing from photojournalistic images in both provenance and mode of circulation, its rapid uptake across public discourse and news outlets provides a useful indicator of how symbolic visual condensation can emerge within wider digital media ecosystems, and how actors beyond news organisations adapt to contribute to the formation of visual symbols adjacent to journalistic discourse. Ultimately, this research mobilises insight from complexity theory to supplement developing discourse on adaptive trends in visual reporting and networked meaning-making.

Literature Review

Iconic Images: Definition, Emergence, and Sustainability

Iconic news photographs have traditionally played a central role in how journalism constructs public memory, civic discourse, and political affect (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017; Zelizer 2010). Throughout the "Golden Age" of photojournalism, spanning the 1930s to 1950s, photographs gained prominence

for their news value, perceived truth status, accessibility, and emotional resonance (Hadland 2025). During this time, growing visual literacy - buoyed by the popularity of illustrated magazines and newspapers (Hadland 2025) - helped audiences recognise news photographs as meaningful representations of world events. Such images, argues Zelizer, therefore provide publics with the capacity for discourse around news stories that constitute "unsettled events" (2010 p.26); combining an artefact ontologically related to the event (a photograph) with the public's capacity to imagine the activities immediately following or preceding that image. This, argues Zelizer, encourages emotional interaction with news images (2010), which Hariman and Lucaites explain causes them to function as "calls to civic action, sites of controversy, vehicles for ideological control, and sources of rhetorical intervention" (2003 p.54). Therefore, because of growing public interaction with visual news, certain images transcended their immediate contexts to become cultural touchstones; widely reproduced, recontextualised in political and artistic discourse, and used as mnemonic anchors across time and space (Mortensen, 2017).

Correspondingly, Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that iconic photographs are not inherently special at the moment of capture; instead acquiring their cultural status through repetition and appropriation that affirms their symbolic potential. In the context of traditional print and broadcast media ecologies, the conditions required for news images to become iconic are well established: broad recognition, representation of historically significant events, emotional resonance, and sustained reproduction across multiple contexts (Dahmen, Mielczarek, and Perlmutter 2018). Historically, such conditions were facilitated by a relatively stable top-down journalistic environment in which editorial hierarchies and limited media outlets ensured certain images could dominate the visual field for a sustained period (Boudana, Frosh, and Cohen 2017). Photographs such as Kevin Carter's *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993), for example, gained traction through editorial repetition, consolidating its metonymic power over time and having a significant public impact (Hadland 2025).

In contemporary media environments, the conditions that once supported iconic news imagery are increasingly difficult to sustain. The paradigmatic shift associated with digital journalism has fragmented visual dialogue, accelerated news cycles, and blurred boundaries between producers and audiences (Westlund and Färdigh 2015). As Dahmen et al. note, "while the elite news media … can still create defining images, audiences also have unlimited opportunities to create, seek out, receive, and share/repost imagery *via* digital news, mobile phones/tablets, and social media" (2018 p.266). Mortensen, Allan, and Peters (2017) argue that these conditions alter but do not entirely erode the creation and maintenance of iconic news images. Instead of a linear environment in which editors consistently publish and republish a single image, publics can now circumvent traditional editorial pipelines; interacting with, remixing, and republishing images themselves, ensuring they remain newsworthy, even when news cycles move on (Mortensen 2017; Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017). In this context, editors no longer hold exclusive control over which photographs achieve prominence, as publics increasingly compete with news organisations to shape circulation and significance of images.

However, while such interactions broaden participation in visual discourse, by circumventing linear editorial processes, they also fragment institutional authority.

The result is not the disappearance of iconic imagery but its transformation into a more unstable, networked, and contested process. As Mortensen, Allan, and Peters (2017) demonstrate in their analysis of the photograph of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, even globally resonant images now circulate through politicised contestation, social media debate, and appropriation, rather than editorial gatekeeping alone. Consequentially, these shifts paradigmatically alter the conditions within which photojournalism operates. The increasingly platform-specific praxis of digital journalism - which often aligns news platforms with affordances driven by the user experience of social media platforms - has the capacity to both undermine and bolster the conditions of iconicity, through technological affinity with both ephemerality and virality over editorially managed symbolic condensation (Helberger 2019). Yet it is important to note that viral content is not synonymous with iconic imagery; its circulation is rapid, but its capacity for enduring cultural imprint or collective resonance remains precarious. As Mortensen, Allan, and Peters (2017) conclude; it is meaningful actor interaction (in this case public and journalistic) across a dynamic networked system, rather than mere virality, that has the capacity to transform an image into an icon. Although it is not explicitly characterised as such, Mortensen, Allan, and Peters (2017) research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that understands journalism as a dynamic, networked process involving multiplicitous actors both from within and outwith the profession. It is within this conceptual paradigm that this research is situated.

Networked News: Complex Systems and Journalism

Scholarship increasingly characterises contemporary journalism as dynamic, networked, and participatory, with journalists and audiences collaboratively producing meaning within hybrid media ecologies (Amit-Danhi et al. 2025; Anderson 2025; Chadwick, 2017; Reese and Shoemaker, 2016). In parallel, a growing body of literature examines adaptive praxis within journalism, in which routines are adopted or discarded as their perceived benefits change under platform and organisational pressure (Perreault, Bélair-Gagnon, and Henrichsen 2025). Although these strands differ in scope, they share epistemological frameworks with social systems theory (Luhmann 1995); in which "structure follows function" (Scholl and Malik 2019: p.2). As such, these theories converge around the notion that the structures which underpin journalism dynamically adapt in the service of journalism's perceived societal functions.

Across social sciences, established systems theories such as Luhmann's (1995) are being extended by the application of complex adaptive systems theory (complexity theory) (Loubser 2014). Complexity theory provides oppositional insight into Newtonian epistemologies in which objects of study are reduced to their component parts which, once understood, account for the function of the larger whole (Heylighen, Cilliers, and Gershenson 2006). In contrast, complexity theory is the study of systems composed of heterogeneous actors whose local interactions produce emergent, adaptive, and often nonlinear macro-level behaviours (Davis and Sumara 2009). Crucially, it is the interactions between the component parts (actors) that provide epistemological insight in complex systems. As such, complexity theory understands complex social

phenomena through the adaptive behaviours generated through interactions between system actors, rather than the sum of their constituent parts.

Due to its abstract epistemological nature, complexity theory can prove difficult to clearly define. Instead, scholars mobilise a common set of attributes of complex systems, which are as follows:

- Complex systems are characterised by various independent actors whose interactions with one another (often nonlinear and typically localised) make up the output of the system, which itself is dynamic.
- Complex systems are open systems but are typically characterised by an environment, that provides input and gives the system its identity.
- Complex systems are adaptive; emergent behaviours ensure the continued function of the system, and stagnation is seen as a threat (Cilliers 1998). Adaptive behaviours arise through feedback loops occurring among actors within a system or between the system and its environment. Feedback is not necessarily constrained by hierarchical structures; minor interactions between seemingly peripheral elements can generate substantial effects across the system (Macdonald 2022). As such, complex systems exhibit distributed rather than centralised control (Cilliers 1998; Mitchell 2009).
- Complex systems have a specific history, which is integrated into the system. As such, a system can continue to be influenced by its own history. This is referred to as "path dependency" (Macdonald 2022).

A complexity lens therefore reframes journalism from a fixed top-down pipeline into a dynamic complex adaptive system. Editors, reporters, photographers, publics, and platform mechanisms all operate as actors whose interactions shape what becomes visible, credible, and durable. This orientation is consistent with research on hybrid media systems and co-creation. Anderson (2025) foregrounds how engaged journalism reconfigures power and material conditions through relational work with communities. Amit-Danhi et al. (2025) show how platform-shaped repertoires alter the circulation and interpretation of political visuals. Chadwick (2017) theorises hybrid media dynamics in which legacy organisations, platforms, and publics converge. Reese and Shoemaker (2016) conceptualise levels of influence that move beyond the individual to the organisational, social-institutional, and cultural. Perreault, Bélair-Gagnon, and Henrichsen (2025) demonstrate that journalists adapt by adopting new routines and deprioritising others when their perceived value changes. Together, these contributions align with a complexity-informed stance that treats routines, formats, and framings as adaptive choices that persist or recede through feedback loops, within a specific environment.

Picturing Palestine

Photographic reporting on conflict is an ethically charged, politically delicate practice requiring careful negotiation between witnessing, representation, and potential harm (Allan 2025; Linfield 2010). However, in contemporary journalistic environments the

political power of photojournalism is increasingly diluted and eroded through the volume and velocity of competing imagery, coupled with increasingly distrustful audiences (Carlson 2019), and the diffusion of journalistic content over a variety of digital platforms. This has led to a condition characterised as the "postphotographic age" (Kennedy 2015 p.159), in which photojournalism has lost some of its historical epistemic authority. As such, the potential emotional and political power of news photography increasingly stems both from the image itself but also from the dynamic interplay between photojournalists, citizen documentarians, editors, publics, and platform logics (Mortensen 2017). In the 2023–2025 escalation of the Israel–Palestine conflict, this interplay is further complicated by the exceptionally hazardous environment for media workers, making visual journalism both critical and precarious. This is the deadliest conflict for journalists in modern memory, with over 210 media workers, many of whom were Palestinian, killed in the line of duty (Omer 2025). Palestinian journalists, caught between the personal burden of survival and the public responsibility of bearing witness, are simultaneously endangered and structurally marginalised (Bishara 2006), while their evidentiary credibility as journalists is questioned or overlooked - as was the case when British Foreign Secretary David Lammy opined "There are no journalists in Gaza" (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2024).

While this article seeks to contribute to broader discussions regarding complex systems theory and visual journalism, its empirical focus is rooted in the 2023–2025 escalation of the prevailing conflict between Israel and Palestine. This context was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, although this conflict has roots in the early twentieth century, it has sustained several well-documented escalations. The most recent escalation of violence in Gaza, following the October 7th 2023 attacks by Hamas on Israeli civilians and military targets, remained in the news cycle for upwards of 18 months, with many news organisations dedicating a specific area on their websites to the story. This therefore represents a sustained news item; generating a significant visual corpus and ensuring ongoing public and journalistic attention. As such, photographing the Israel-Palestine conflict presents specific challenges that complicate the emergence of iconic imagery. Israel's restriction of international press access to Gaza has placed the burden of representation largely on Palestinian journalists (Allan 2025) many of whom are working under siege conditions, facing infrastructural collapse, personal risk, and deliberate targeting that extends to their personal networks (Allan et al. 2024). Despite this, images produced by Palestinian photographers often face limited global reach. As Bishara (2006) notes, Palestinian journalistic labour has long been instrumentalised while remaining editorially marginalised. Western outlets tend to sanitise Palestinian suffering and favour images that conform to expectations of professional detachment, often privileging rubble or political symbolism over bodily trauma (El Damanhoury and Saleh 2025). Meanwhile, platform moderation mechanisms such as shadow-banning and automated censorship compound these effects, curbing the circulation of graphic or emotionally affective imagery (Are 2024). Together, these dynamics contribute to a media ecology related to this conflict that is saturated with images yet structurally resistant to the emergence of a single visual symbol. It is within this ecology that this article examines how photojournalistic representation unfolded across three major outlets during the initial five months of the present conflict.

Methods

Sampling

This research employed a purposive sampling strategy to collect lead homepage images from BBC News, The Guardian and Al Jazeera English from 7th October 2023 to 9th March 2024. This timeframe covers the initial five months of escalation following the 7th October 2023 attacks - during which time coverage was both intensive and sustained, therefore providing a considerable corpus of images. The outlets were selected for their global reach, agenda-setting influence, and because they represent distinct journalistic traditions. The BBC reflects a public-service broadcast ethos traditionally regarded as a benchmark of impartiality within Western media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The Guardian embodies a UK-based liberal tradition of investigative journalism with significant international readership (Seaton 2010). Al Jazeera English emerged as a global network rooted in Arab media traditions, and its interventions in international news flows, often described as the "Al-Jazeera Effect", disrupt Western dominance of conflict reporting (Figenschou 2013; Miles 2005). Together, these organisations represent diverse media systems, making them analytically valuable for comparative research. Analysing their adaptive editorial strategies therefore offers insight into how visual hierarchies are constructed across different institutional contexts; expanding on El Damanhoury and Saleh's (2025) research on editorial framing in relation to the 2021 Israel-Palestine conflict and providing insight into a variety of local adaptations within a complex system of specific conflict reporting.

Data were collected using Internet Archive's Wayback Machine; an online archive of webpage captures, organised by timestamp. Each outlet's homepage was accessed at approximately 3 pm GMT each day, a time selected based on research indicating heightened user traffic and editorial activity (Makhortykh et al. 2021). Where multiple or unsuitable captures (articles without lead images) were found, the capture most aligned with the sample inclusion criteria, closest to 3 pm was used. The resulting dataset comprised a corpus totalling 465 images (155 days x 3 outlets) and corresponding contextual metadata (URL, headline, strapline, caption, date). The inclusion criteria were as follows: the article covered any aspect of the 2023 escalation of violence between Israel and Palestine, the article was published within the 7th October 2023 to 9th March 2024 timeframe, the lead visual element of the article was a single image and was coupled with an editorial unit *via* headline/strapline, the article was published online by one of the three outlets and remained in the public domain during data collection. Articles that led with moving image or multimodal content -therefore unsuitable for research that focuses on single-image photojournalism - were excluded from the corpus. Once identified, each image was labelled and saved alongside its metadata to preserve reference to editorial framing, and to ensure ongoing access to the contextual environment of the article. The corpus was then imported into NVivo for analysis.

Coding and Analysis

The empirical analysis employed a mixed methods design in which qualitative coding, supported by descriptive frequencies, examined how visual motifs were framed across

outlets. A codebook was developed in NVivo, informed by literature and built iteratively across at several coding passes. Coding was undertaken by a single coder (the author). As analysis required interpretive judgement, intercoder reliability testing was not applied. Instead, coding categories were derived from established literature on visual framing (Wells 2015) and iconic imagery (Zelizer 2010; El Damanhoury and Saleh 2025) to ensure conceptual consistency.

The codebook was organised around five parent coding categories: "subject matter", "composition", "emotional register", "news values", and an adaptation of Zelizer's (2010) "about-to-die" typology. These codes served an organisational function, grouping related secondary codes together. Secondary codes were applied to images as binary values, in which only "yes" values were recorded, generating frequencies. Secondary codes were developed and applied iteratively, drawing on established frameworks (where available) and extending them inductively where the content of the images required further distinction. For example, within "subject matter" and "composition", established frameworks for visual content analysis in crisis reporting informed codes such as "aid workers", "military actors", and "political figures" (Young and Omosun 2025), alongside techniques for analysing photographs such as "angle", "framing", and "gaze" (Wells 2015). Within "emotional register", codes were informed by scholarship on iconic news imagery (Zelizer 2010), comprising "distress", "grief", "joy", and "resistance". Within "about-to-die", secondary codes adapted the typology mobilised by El Damanhoury and Saleh (2025), also based on Zelizer's (2010) scholarship and comprising "explicit death", "implied death", and "explicit injury". Within "news values" codes drew on Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill (2017), and included "relevance", "proximity", "impact", "negativity", "superlativeness", "timeliness", and "elite actors". Further sub-codes were applied throughout to delineate the appearance of either Palestinian or Israeli actors. Each image was additionally assigned to NVivo cases for date and outlet, and coding queries were used to compare patterns systematically across outlets and over time.

The frequencies generated by coding were then used descriptively, to highlight the recurrence of themes and to identify clusters, divergences, and absences within the corpus that warranted further analytic attention. Flagged images were subsequently re-examined qualitatively as complete editorial units in which image, caption, strapline, and headline were analysed within the context of one another, with comparative reading across outlets forming the basis for findings related to editorial framing, symbolic potential, and narrative contextualisation.

Case Selection

The latter section of this article mobilises an AI-generated image as a comparative case to further contextualise the findings of the research. The image was posted to Meta's Instagram platform in May 2024, and as such falls outwith the sampling timeframe of the original corpus. Instead, it was selected according to two criteria, derived from the corpus analysis. Firstly, this was the only image related to the studied period of this conflict that was published by all three outlets; achieving the cross-outlet

circulation that no photograph within the corpus attained. Secondly, its emergence as a news item within the complex system under study renders it an observable output of that system. The inclusion of this image therefore permits comparison between the conditions that inhibited iconic consolidation within the corpus and those under which symbolic condensation occurred, albeit outwith journalistic provenance.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed three interrelated factors that collectively fostered an environment of multiplicity, rather than iconicity. Firstly, increasingly divergent editorial priorities present competing framing that makes distilling narratives into single images unlikely. Secondly, the volume and variety of photographs generated by pan-journalistic actors (journalists, civilians, military and/or aid organisations) and encouraged by developments in digital journalism engendered an adaptive shift from single-image storytelling to multiplicitous visuals. Thirdly, the adaptive displacement of evidentiary authority from individual photographs to a networked ecology of mixed media was accompanied by editorial reluctance to publish overtly graphic content, resulting in subtle self-censorship that arguably muted impactful imagery.

Divergent Editorial Priorities

The three outlets displayed contrasting emphases in visual framing of the conflict, limiting the possibility of a single image resonating across publics. For example, BBC News depicted Israeli grief and civilian distress more than both other outlets. Further, while BBC News did also depict a high volume of Palestinian suffering, this was frequently accompanied by editorial packaging that foregrounded Hamas's responsibility. For instance, Figure 1 depicts a distressed Palestinian child in Jabalia refugee camp,

Figure 1. Palestinian child in Jabalia refugee camp. Source: BBC News, *Israel says Hamas stages hit-and-run attacks from tunnels*, 3rd November 2023. Photograph: Reuters.

	Palestinian Grief	Israeli Grief	Palestinian Distress	Israeli Distress
Al Jazeera	16	0	27	0
BBC News	13	9	43	10
The Guardian	10	1	41	10

Figure 2. Frequency of "distress" and "grief" emotional register coding across BBC, Al Jazeera, and the guardian.

with the caption "The UN says at least 20 people were killed in an explosion in the Jabalia refugee camp" noting civilian deaths but the headline ("Israel says Hamas stages hit-and-run attacks from tunnels") arguably framing this as adjacent to Hamas activity.

Al Jazeera English, in contrast, consistently focused framing on Palestinian suffering. Across the corpus of Al Jazeera images ($n = 155$), Israeli presence appeared almost exclusively in political or military contexts. Notably, across this corpus, Al Jazeera did not publish images of Israeli civilian grief or of the hostages taken by Hamas on October 7th 2023. This absence is striking given the prominence of hostage coverage elsewhere and suggests a deliberate editorial framing that centres Palestinian victimhood while omitting Israeli civilian suffering.

The Guardian adopted a comparatively balanced approach, showing both Palestinian and Israeli suffering while also featuring political and military figures from a variety of nations. Its captions often contextualised suffering with reference to humanitarian conditions (e.g., aid and food shortages) rather than attributing blame directly to either Hamas or Israeli military activity. The frequency of divergence in framings related to Palestinian and Israeli grief and distress (both potent editorial narratives), can be seen in Figure 2.

These findings resonate with those of El Damanhoury and Saleh (2025), who through analysis of a corpus of Al Jazeera Arabic and Fox News coverage of the 2021 conflict between Israel and Palestine demonstrated that geopolitical proximity often shapes visual repertoires and narrative treatment. In this instance, observable divergent editorial priorities contribute to the fracture of the symbolic field, meaning no single image achieved consistent cross-outlet framing or resonance. Through the lens of complexity theory, editorial priorities can be understood as emergent adaptive behaviour amplified by feedback loops negotiated by journalists and publics. Specifically, these findings indicate path-dependence, as established editorial ideologies have continued to influence framing, even when that framing appears to be at odds with the connotations of the chosen images. In this context, such adaptations optimise each outlet for its own audience, which indicates locally successful adaptive behaviours. However, the observable aggregate effect across the wider system of reporting on this conflict is desynchronisation across the field and suppression of the conditions in which a news photograph might become an iconic image.

Multiplicity as Authority: Motif Repetition and Distributed Editorial Control

Beyond divergent framings, the dataset revealed an environment saturated by recurring motifs rather than consolidated icons. Across the corpus ($n = 465$), only five images

	Date	Caption	Strapline	Headline
	29.10.23	Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [Abir Sultan Pool/Reuters]	The Israeli PM deletes post that pointed the finger of blame for the October 7 attack on intelligence services.	Netanyahu apologises for blaming Israeli security chiefs for Hamas attack
	18.11.23	Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a press conference in the Kirya military base in Tel Aviv, Israel, on October 28, 2023 [File: Abir Sultan/Pool via Reuters]	*From families of Hamas captives to politicians in his own government, Netanyahu's popularity is at an all-time low.*	'A lot of discontent': Netanyahu alone as Israel turns on wartime PM

Figure 3. Al Jazeera English, *Netanyahu apologises for blaming Israeli security chiefs for Hamas attack*, 29th October 2023; photograph: Abir Sultan/Pool via Reuters. Figure 3 also reproduces the same image as used by Al Jazeera on 18 November 2023 in *'A lot of discontent': Netanyahu alone as Israel turns on wartime PM, photograph*: Abir Sultan/Pool via Reuters.

were repeated. Al Jazeera reused two images of Netanyahu across its own coverage (Figures 3 and 4), while The Guardian repeated an image of Palestinians atop an Israeli tank waving a Palestinian flag (Figure 5). Cross-outlet repetition was equally limited. Al Jazeera English and The Guardian both published the same AFP image from al-Shifa hospital with differing captions, straplines, and headlines on consecutive days (Figure 6), and The Guardian and BBC both used an Israeli Defence Force (IDF) supplied image of soldiers inside al-Shifa hospital on November 17th 2023 (Figure 7). Viewed through the lens of scholarship on both iconic imagery and adaptive journalistic praxis, the repeated images failed to attain iconic status for several reasons. Firstly, their recurrence lacked the intensity and breadth of replication typically required to embed an image into public consciousness (Hariman and Lucaites 2007). Instead, the few repeated images appeared sporadically, isolated within temporally constrained coverage.

Secondly, the content of the repeated images did not lend itself to symbolic condensation. For instance, the two repeated images of Netanyahu depict him isolated against a backdrop of Israeli flags, with an emotionally neutral expression. The tight composition, absence of action, and Netanyahu's impassive expression offer little to galvanise the emotional engagement necessary for impactful news photography (Zelizer 2010). The repetition of these images within Al Jazeera's coverage thus appears to function less as an attempt to consolidate symbolic meaning and more as a descriptive cue aligned with the outlet's framing of Netanyahu as a

	Date	Caption	Strapline	Headline
	04.12.23	Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyah [File: Abir Sultan/Pool via AP Photo]	*An emergency order from Israel's justice minister following the events of October 7 had put the case on pause.*	Corruption trial of Israeli PM Netanyahu resumes
	21.01.24	Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeated his opposition to an independent Palestinian state, saying his country needs full security control over the Palestinian territories [File: Abir Sultan/EPA]	*Israeli PM rejects Palestinian sovereignty over Gaza and the occupied territory, rebuffing US President Joe Biden's push for two-state solution.*	Israel's Netanyahu doubles down on opposition to Palestinian statehood

Figure 4. Repeated use of a Benjamin Netanyahu photograph by Al Jazeera. The same image was published on 4th December 2023 in *Corruption trial of Israeli PM Netanyahu resumes* (photograph: Abir Sultan/Pool via AP Photo) and on 21st January 2024 in *Israel's Netanyahu doubles down on opposition to Palestinian statehood* (photograph: Abir Sultan/EPA).

politically embattled figure. Similarly, The Guardian's image of Palestinians atop an Israeli tank, although symbolically potent, was temporally distanced from its moment of capture in its second appearance. Its re-use nearly seven weeks after its initial publication decontextualised its affective impact, transforming it from a vivid moment of resistance into a generic visual of defiance. This supports Zelizer's (2010) argument that iconicity requires careful negotiation between affect and context - something that temporal displacement and aesthetic repetition can diminish.

Thirdly, even the most affectively charged repeated images, such as those of injured Palestinians from al-Shifa hospital, were subject to editorial and institutional interpretation that fragmented their discursive function. While The Guardian focused on the suffering of displaced Palestinians and the failure of medical infrastructure, Al Jazeera English positioned the same visual as an indictment of Israeli aggression (Figure 6). This reinforces Mortensen (2015) and El Damanhoury and Saleh's (2025) arguments about interpretive pluralism, underscoring the notion that, even when images are shared, the meanings ascribed to them remain contingent upon framing, editorial voice, public engagement, and platform conventions.

The remaining images ($n = 460$) each appeared once across the corpus. Consequently, instead of repeating single images, the outlets drew upon a repertoire of visual motifs. The frequencies of these motifs (Figure 8) were recorded through a deductive "Subject

	Date	Caption	Strapline	Headline
	07.10.23	Palestinians wave their national flag on top of an Israeli tank east of the Khan Yunis border crossing. Photograph: Yousef Masoud/AP	Israel responds after Palestinian Islamist group launches surprise attack and incursion	Hamas and Israel at war: what we know so far
	28.11.23	Palestinians celebrate on top of a destroyed Israeli tank at the Gaza Strip fence east of Khan Younis on 7 October. Photograph: Yousef Masoud/AP	Officer who reviewed intelligence considered risk of big attack 'an imaginary scenario', leak suggests	Israeli intelligence leak details extent of warnings over Hamas attack

Figure 5. Repeated use of an image of Palestinians standing on a captured Israeli tank by The Guardian. The same photograph was published on 7th October 2023 in *Hamas and Israel at war: what we know so far* (photograph: Yousef Masoud/AP) and on 28th November 2023 in *Israeli intelligence leak details extent of warnings over Hamas attack* (photograph: Yousef Masoud/AP).

Matter" parent code, with the most popular motifs being civilians ($n = 257$) - particularly Palestinian children, urban ruins ($n = 120$), flags ($n = 81$), political figures ($n = 75$), and vehicles ($n = 63$) - although these were typically military vehicles operated by the IDF.

These frequencies indicate a shared but muted lexicon of motifs, in which visual tropes are repeated across contexts without consolidating into a singular icon. This repetition effectively neutralises the potency of individual images and rather than anchoring established motifs of war in personal impactful stories (as is typically the case in iconic imagery), consolidates the conflict into a more neutral "war-as-tragedy" narrative that is variously mobilised across conflict reporting (Fahmy, Taha, and Karademir 2022).

While the parameters of this research limit insight into causality associated with this phenomenon (further, complexity theory is typically epistemologically opposed to linear causality), the mirrored behaviour across all three outlets of a muted repertoire of visual motifs, could be viewed as the adaptive outcome of a complex system. In fast-moving but sustained news events such as this, simultaneous coverage by many photojournalists produces abundant, overlapping visual material. Similarly, news organisations often respond by asserting authority through triangulation, contextual packaging, and the publication of multiple frames that collectively signal verification (Carlson 2019). In system terms, editorial authority is therefore distributed; enacted at the repertoire level in which outlets stabilise visual output around legible motifs that cohere into packages and timelines. The resulting pattern is consistent with emergent adaptive behaviour, where multiplicity functions as an authority-bolstering

	Date	Caption	Strapline	Headline
	11.11.23	Patients and displaced people inside al-Shifa hospital, where a baby has died due to a lack of oxygen supplies, accordingly to the Palestinian health ministry. Photograph: Khader Al Zanoun/AFP/Getty Images	Al-Shifa chief says Israeli troops firing at complex, which has no medical supplies, power or water for thousands trapped inside	Middle East leaders hold emergency summit amid siege on Gaza hospital
	12.11.23	Patients and internally displaced people are pictured at al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City on November 10 [Khader al-Zanoun/AFP]	The hospitals in northern Gaza are under heavy assault by the Israeli military, making it difficult to document casualty figures.	How are Gaza casualty updates affected by Israeli attacks on hospitals?

Figure 6. Repeated use of a photograph of patients and displaced people at al-Shifa Hospital by The Guardian and Al Jazeera. The same photograph was published by The Guardian on 11th November 2023 in *Middle East leaders hold emergency summit amid seige on Gaza hospital* (photograph: Khader Al Zanoun/AFP/Getty Images) and by Al Jazeera on 12th November 2023 in *How are Gaza casualty updates affected by Israeli attacks on hospitals?* (photograph: Khader al-Zanoun/AFP).

adaptation in conditions of urgency and contestation, but ultimately reduces the likelihood of consolidation into a single iconic image.

Adaptive Self-Censorship and Multimodal Triangulation

Much like similar sustained news events, such as the Syrian refugee crisis (Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017), the escalation of violence in Gaza, latterly categorised by the UN as genocide (Desai et al. 2025), has generated an enormous volume of photographic imagery. As previously discussed, the human cost of this imagery has been high, not just in terms of the victims it depicts, but in the context of the treacherous conditions faced by the (primarily Palestinian) journalists and civilians responsible for generating such images. Working on the frontlines, and without the boundaries of editorial codes of conduct (Allan 2025) many of the images created by these actors are explicit depictions of violence and mortality (Are 2024). However, despite the frequency of graphic images present on the social media channels of several prominent Palestinian photojournalists (Are 2024), explicit depictions of bodily harm were

	Date	Caption	Strapline	Headline
	17.11.23	An IDF-supplied photo shows Israeli soldiers inside the al-Shifa hospital complex in Gaza City	It is now days since Israeli forces entered al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, and what appears to be happening on Friday is that they are continuing their search for evidence of this being a key Hamas command centre.	Bowen: Ceasefire demands will grow without proof of Hamas HQ at al-Shifa
	17.11.23	A picture released by the Israeli army on 15 November reportedly shows Israeli soldiers inside al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City. Photograph: IDF/AFP/Getty Images	Israel's attack on Gaza's al-Shifa hospital has sparked accusations of war crimes – but Israel says it falls within the boundaries of international law	Can hospitals be military targets? What international law says

Figure 7. Repeated use of an IDF-supplied photograph of Israeli soldiers inside al-Shifa Hospital by BBC News and The Guardian. The same photograph was published by BBC News on 17th November 2023 in Jeremy Bowen's *Bowen: Ceasefire demands will grow without proof of Hamas HQ at Al-Shifa* (IDF-supplied photograph) and by The Guardian on 17th November 2023 in *Can hospitals be military targets? What international law says* (photograph: IDF/AFP/Getty Images).

relatively scarce throughout the dataset. Using a coding framework informed by Zelizer's (2010) "about-to-die" typology (which indicates that moments directly preceding the death of a subject increase the chance of that image achieving iconic status), images were classified into three categories: explicit death, explicit injury, and implied death. Very few ($n = 18$) of the 465 images depicted explicit death and these were largely sanitised, featuring wrapped bodies, grave markers, or funerary scenes rather than visceral images of casualties. Figure 9 shows the relatively low frequencies of images coded at Zelizer's about-to-die framework.

This restrained approach aligns with broader editorial and ethical frameworks grounded in notions of "decency" or "privacy", in which anticipated public outcry prevents the publication of graphic images (Zelizer 2010). In the digital age, platform moderation intensifies this caution; content marked as graphic is often blurred, demoted, or "shadow banned" (intentionally suppressed within a cycle of content), especially if that content originates from Palestinian sources (Are 2024). Within the corpus, only one image (published by Al Jazeera English) overtly depicted graphic

	Al Jazeera	BBC News	The Guardian	Total
Bombing	13	7	6	26
Protests	16	7	17	40
Violence	3	2	1	6
Aid Workers	5	7	8	20
Civilians	77	89	91	257
Landscape	19	10	10	39
Refugee Camp	11	8	7	28
Ruins	33	45	42	120
Flags	35	19	27	81
Starvation	6	11	8	25
Hostages	0	22	11	33
Home	7	0	1	8
Hospital	12	12	3	27
State Building	19	5	4	28
Journalists	3	4	1	8
Medical Staff	10	5	5	20
Military Actors	17	23	14	54
Political Figures	35	17	23	75
Vehicles	19	22	22	63

Figure 8. Subject matter coding frequencies.

death, and this was partially digitally censored at the point of publication. In this case, adaptive digital censorship therefore converges with adaptive editorial avoidance of graphic content, limiting the presence of images capable of instilling powerful symbolic meaning. In complexity terms, the sustained practice of self-censorship could be viewed as a "path-dependent" adaptation, in which actors within a system are influenced by established behaviours predicated on professional ethical codes. It could also be understood as adaptive behaviour influenced by platform-specific content moderation, which increasingly mirrors censorship strategies adopted by social media platforms (Perreault and Nelson 2025).

Although the corpus excluded interactive or moving image visual data, it was noted during data collection that these mediums were prominent and often favoured visual anchors across outlets. Seemingly, to navigate the sensitivities of reporting

	Al Jazeera	*BBC News*	*The Guardian*
Explicit Death (Palestinian)	9	4	4
Explicit Death (Israeli)	0	1	0
Explicit Injury (Palestinian)	14	11	11
Explicit Injury (Israeli)	0	0	0
Implied Death (Palestinian)	25	36	23
Implied Death (Israeli)	1	11	4

Figure 9. Coding frequences for "about-to-die" framework.

graphic events without publishing overtly graphic images, all three outlets embedded photographs within broader digital storytelling formats. This included data visualisation, moving image, and illustrative graphics. This adaptive strategy also appeared to be mobilised in contexts when images appeared to lack clear editorial authority, with multimodal visual journalism serving to triangulate images of precarious editorial providence. Indeed, Israel's refusal to permit international correspondents inside Gaza has forced global outlets to rely heavily on local freelancers, agency imagery, and content supplied by citizens. These include drone footage, screenshots, and personal photographs of hostages or the displaced. Mortensen describes this as "connective witnessing" (2015 p.1393), in which publics, journalists, and digital platforms co-construct visual testimony.

The collective effect of these adaptations is a diffusion of the evidentiary burden from single images to multimodal visual reporting. As such, gathering data for this research frequently proved challenging. Lead articles typically favoured moving image reports rather than single images, and in-depth analysis often included multimodal interactive visual data such as an interactive photomontage (Figure 10) from a 2023 BBC News article covering urban destruction in Gaza. Though it can arguably be understood as a form of triangulation deployed as an adaptive response to diluted editorial authority, this multimedia diffusion disperses the visual narrative across storytelling formats, reducing the likelihood that any single photograph might endure as an icon. As Matich et al. note, "as digital technologies have evolved, so have storytelling approaches that imbue visual news with epistemological complexity and practical heterogeneity" (2025 p.4).

The above observations, although not aligned with cause-and-effect determinism, are indicative of adaptive praxis generated by a complex system. Editorial framing has been a critical factor of the economy of journalism (Damanhoury and Saleh 2025) and the explosion in volume of visual material follows well-trodden paths of technological determinism as well as providing a means of triangulation or verification when editorial authority is challenged (Carlson 2019). Similarly, developing practices associated with platform affordances (such as multimedia visuals and censorship) all indicate system level adaptations that have arisen out of the interplay of technology, publics, and professional praxis (Perreault et al. 2025). However, whilst locally rational,

Figure 10. Screenshot of a section of a BBC News article showing an interactive satellite visualisation of destruction in Beit Lahia published by BBC News. The visualisation was published on 1st December 2023 as part of *Nearly 100,000 Gaza buildings may be damaged, satellite images show* by Dominic Bailey, Erwan Rivault and Daniele Palumbo (BBC Visual Journalism and BBC Verify), using satellite imagery to compare the built environment before and after the conflict. Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review. Interactive photograph: Planet Labs.

none of these adaptations appear to be conducive to the conditions required for an iconic image to emerge.

All (AI)Eyes on Rafah: A Feedback Loop

As discussed, the conditions needed for the generation of an iconic news image are well established (Boudana, Frosh, and Cohen 2017). Although these conditions have been paradigmatically disrupted by digital media, Dahmen, Mielczarek, and Perlmutter (2018) argue that digitality alters, rather than disinhibits the generation of iconic images; democratising the process by softening the distinction between roles such as audience, producer, and editor (Westlund and Färdigh 2015). As such, whilst technological determinism might alter both the way in which photographs achieve iconic status, and the likelihood of them doing so, the purpose of iconic news images remains largely unchanged: the symbolic condensation of a particular news story into a single image that has the capacity to generate and sustain public interest, discourse, and action (Mortensen 2017; Zelizer 2010).

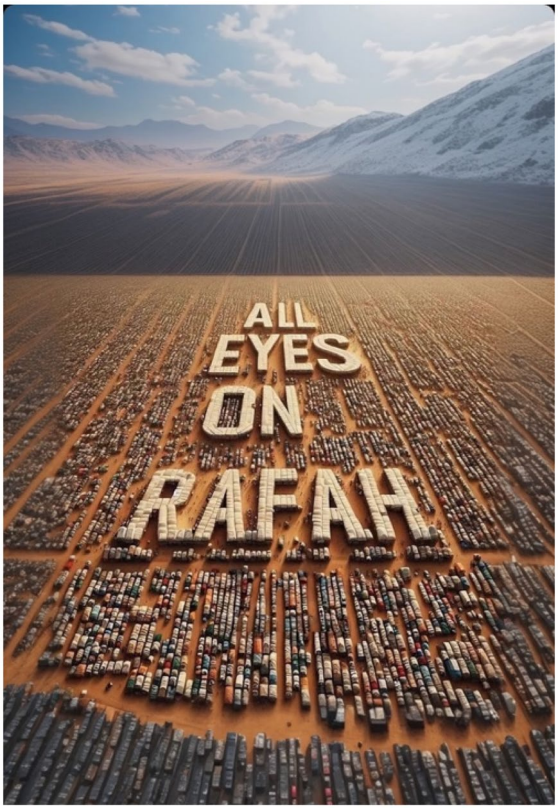

Figure 11. Viral 'All Eyes on Rafah' AI-generated image first circulated on Instagram in May 2024. The image was first shared as an Instagram story by user @shahv4012 and subsequently circulated widely across social media and international news coverage. Its authorship has not been independently confirmed.

This research has demonstrated that within this corpus of images, the various editorial approaches to single image photography cumulatively diminish the likelihood that any one image could become iconic. However, though it was not collected as part of this corpus, one image, initially published to social media and latterly published by all three outlets, arguably fulfilled many of the requirements of an iconic image. Notably, rather than a piece of photojournalism, that image was generated by artificial intelligence. Posted on Meta's social media platform Instagram in May 2024 by the user "@shahv4012", the image (Figure 11) depicts an aerial view of an encampment whose tents spell the phrase "ALL EYES ON RAFAH" – a directive originally coined by World Health Organization representative, Dr Richard Peeperkorn (Mahroof and Mehmood 2024). Within days of its publication, the image was reposted by celebrities, politicians, and campaigners, entered the news cycle, and circulated across social media platforms (Fahad and Oscar 2024; Shamim 2024), amassing upwards of 47 million platform interactions (Mahroof and Mehmood 2024). Its formal properties – adjacent to, yet demonstrably divergent from photographic aesthetics, made it unusually accessible. Through borrowing ontological connotations of photography as

a truth-telling medium (Hadland 2025), but by overtly declaring itself as synthetic (through the textual element), the image represented a moral stance that travelled with low friction, without asking viewers to parse complex, potentially disturbing graphic scenes. In this regard, it acted as a marker for participation and discourse, fulfilling the primary civic function of iconic news images as vehicles of cultural, political, and emotional engagement (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Mortensen, Allan, and Peters 2017; Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai 2025; Zelizer 2010).

To reiterate - the AEOR image differs from other images in the corpus in both provenance and initial means of dissemination - it is not photojournalism and was not originally published by a news outlet. Similarly, the popularity of the image was largely facilitated through social media platform affordances designed to encourage virality. In this case, the image was uploaded as part of a sharing template launched by Instagram in 2021 known as "Add Yours" which "allows other users to re-share the photo with just a couple of clicks" (Davies 2024). As Mortensen, Allan, and Peters (2017) point out, virality alone does not equate to iconicity, however the image subsequently featured in international news cycles (Fahad and Oscar 2024), where it was discussed both in the context of its synthetic nature as well as the escalation of the conflict (Davies 2024; Robins-Early and Paul 2024; Shamim 2024).

From the perspective of complexity theory, the circulation of the AEOR image can be understood as an observable outcome of interactions among actors within the wider visual communication system surrounding the conflict. In this context, publics' adaptive behaviours generated a feedback loop that elevated AEOR to a portable emblem, inserting it into a news story whose visual corpus had previously relied on photojournalism, moving image, or data journalism – none of which appeared able to achieve iconic status. In this instance AEOR supplied symbolic coherence, which the professional photographic repertoire did not produce in the research period, and it did so with very low costs of attention and participation (Davies 2024).

While being indicative of adaptive behaviour, the AEOR image also exposes an epistemic and ethical tension within the same complex system. Specifically, the image mimics photographic witnessing while being epistemically synthetic. In doing so, it risks displacing the evidentiary labour of photographers, many of whom are Palestinian, who produced difficult images at great personal risk (Allan et al. 2024). Importantly, this observation does not suggest that AI-generated imagery is likely to replace photojournalism. Indeed, as Matich et al. argue, the challenges posed by generative AI extend long-standing tensions in visual journalism concerning misinformation, objectivity, and labour rather than inaugurating entirely new ones (2025). As such, photojournalism remains anchored in the practice of witnessing that has ontologically strengthened the civic authority of news images (Hadland 2025; Zelizer 2010). What the AEOR case illustrates, however, is how symbolic visual anchors can emerge elsewhere within digital media ecosystems when such visual condensation does not occur within journalistic output. Within the corpus analysed here, visual salience was dispersed across many images whose repetition and framing differed across outlets. In this context, the circulation of AEOR can be understood not as a replacement for photographic witnessing, but as an instance in which a synthetic image temporarily occupied the symbolic role that iconic photographs have historically played in structuring visual discourse around major events.

AEOR therefore highlights a structural challenge within the evolving visual news ecosystem. Journalistic adaptations such as motif repetition, multimedia packaging, and a resistance to publish graphic content arguably work to bolster credibility and boost circulation across platforms. Yet these same adaptations can disperse visual salience across multiple images. Within such conditions, the AEOR image illustrates how symbolic visual anchors may increasingly emerge beyond the boundaries of journalistic production, raising questions about the future relationship between iconic imagery, photographic witnessing, and visual authority within digital journalism.

Limitations

This research has several methodological and conceptual limitations. Firstly, although grounded in news events, it is important to reiterate that the AEOR image is not journalism. Rather, it is epistemically synthetic and therefore ontologically distinct from conceptualisations of photography as a witnessing medium (Hadland 2025). It is used here as a comparative indicator of observable system behaviour, not as an exemplar of photojournalistic practice. However, it should be acknowledged that the boundary between journalism and AI-generated visuals is becoming more porous. As recent work suggests, generative AI intensifies longstanding tensions in visual journalism around verification, objectivity, and labour rather than replacing "straight" photojournalism; AI images increasingly circulate within the wider ecosystem that surrounds journalistic imagery (Matich, Thomson, and Thomas 2025; Taylor 2025).

Secondly, the methodological design limits wider universal inferences. The corpus comprised lead homepage photographs from three outlets, sampled at approximately 15:00 GMT and limited to a defined timeframe. This excluded a substantial volume of multimedia content. Although this was by design, it limits wider conclusions regarding editorial framing and platform affordances within multimodal digital storytelling. Similarly, as the analysis is output-focused; it does not include interviews with editors or photographers, audience analysis, nor platform analytics, so internal motivations, audience sentiment, and distributional dynamics are not directly assessed. Coding decisions, while guided by established frameworks, therefore involved interpretive judgement from the author.

Finally, complexity theory is not designed to deliver linear causal explanations or prescriptive solutions (Scholl and Malik 2019) - instead, complexity is better understood as a discourse rather than solution-oriented paradigm (Cilliers 2000). Within these parameters, the findings should be read as case-bound observations that illuminate how, in this period and setting, visual journalism and publics within the same system adaptively constructed and participated in discourse.

Conclusion

This article examined how three agenda-setting news organisations represented the Israel–Palestine conflict between October 2023 and March 2024, ultimately asking what these practices reveal about adaptive praxis in visual digital journalism. Across

a corpus ($n = 465$) of lead images, no single photograph accumulated the cross-outlet recognition historically associated with iconic news imagery. The analysis suggests that this is not simply a matter of technological change or of editorial failure, instead reflecting a pattern of reactive adaptations among actors, that are locally rational, but cumulatively unfavourable to the emergence of a shared symbolic anchor grounded in journalistic ideals.

Throughout the data, three recurrent adaptations were observable. The mobilisation of multimodal digital storytelling appeared to redistribute evidentiary labour across formats and actors, while improving legibility within increasingly platform-optimised environments. Adaptive self-censorship, and avoidance of overtly graphic imagery was present, potentially mobilised in anticipation of platform moderation and audience sensitivities. Finally, stacking of common visual motifs, framed according to established relationships and expectations shared by outlets and publics. Viewed through the lens of complexity theory, these adaptations can be read as an emergent response to precarity, platform logics, and the growing participation of pan-journalistic actors in meaning generation (Anderson 2025). Cumulatively however, these adaptations dispersed attention, muted shock pathways to salience, and fragmented the visual field; lowering the probability that any single image would achieve wider public recognition.

Conversely, the viral success of the All Eyes on Rafah image can be read as audience-led adaptation that produced a feedback loop evident within the news cycle. Though this image was not produced within the context of news gathering, it was subsequently published by all three outlets (Davies 2024; Robins-Early and Paul 2024; Shamim 2024), therefore becoming part of the visual corpus associated with reporting on this conflict. Crucially, it represents an observable public-led reactive adaptation to current events, and thus aligns with several news values, including timeliness, proximity, negativity, and conflict (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Further, the image provided portable symbolic condensation at low friction and travelled easily across platforms and communities. Its traction does not prove audience credulity, rather it demonstrates the capacity for publics to adaptively compensate across visual fora when newsrooms appear to undersupply a unifying emblem that can carry moral focus and incite considerable civic discourse. The potential impact in terms of journalism practice is epistemic. When the most visible symbol of a crisis is fabricated, the labour of witnessing performed by photographers and local journalists is displaced by imagery that cannot witness at all.

As such, the contribution of this article is threefold. Conceptually, it offers an operational vocabulary for observing emergent adaptations in visual discourse through complexity theory. Empirically, it provides corpus-based evidence that local adaptations were present in the period studied. Normatively, it reframes the "missing icon" as a question of how visual coherence is complicated under platformisation, visual saturation, and increasingly contested publics, rather than as a simple erosion of traditional editorial hierarchies. Although these observations do not indicate tangible damage to journalistic integrity or praxis, they do indicate the convergence of a series of adaptations with potentially disruptive impact. As technological paradigm shifts have blurred lines between journalists and publics, AI images, bolstered by social media platform logistics have demonstrated a capacity to mirror the function

of iconic photography. Therefore, what is at play is consistent dynamic adaptation that indicates the primacy of function over structure - but what is at stake remains to be seen. As Perreault et al. point out, it is necessary for "journalists to reassess their routines and norms to fulfil the purposes for which they were created" (2025 p.698). As such, the question is not whether journalism can return to a mid-century model of top-down editorial pipelines and single-image storytelling; it is how can journalism adapt proactively to preserve meaningful visual coherence without sacrificing evidentiary standards and diluting the civic impact of news photographs? Whether future adaptations will restore the conditions necessary for the creation of impactful iconic photographs or further entrench the inclusion of synthetic proxies, remains an open question.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Ellie Macdonald**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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