

Visual Social Media

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The expansion of digital and mobile media, with devices and connectivity becoming increasingly ubiquitous (in the Western world, at least), has led to increased opportunities for such media to be employed for journalistic purposes. These extend beyond the use of popular social media like Facebook and Twitter to provide updates and reports on news stories or commentary on events as they happen. Apps and platforms, originally intended for purposes that had no clear news or political connections, are adapted by news providers, journalists, and by users to engage with events, issues, and media.

Such engagement takes many forms, but this entry focuses on visual forms of social media content and their use within news and journalism contexts. While some popular apps and platforms are predicated on the visual over other forms of content, visual social media appear across platforms, and this also applies to news-related content. From war photography shared on Instagram to live updates by journalists on Snapchat, to GIFs of electoral debates posted to Tumblr to streamed footage of protests, terrorist attacks, and death on Facebook Live, and the use of memes, dank or otherwise, within the communication strategies of unions, politicians, political parties, and “social news” outlets like BuzzFeed, visual social media offer numerous opportunities for engaging with news and providing information.

These developments are extensions of earlier trends involving online communication, the latest updates in capabilities and approaches available to journalists and their audiences. In the early 2000s, the rise of blogging and, in particular, citizen journalism was enabled by improvements and access to cameraphones, mobile telephony, and reduced technical knowledge required to post material online. In addition to the footage captured by journalists, images from the scenes of major disasters and attacks were shared online by amateurs and everyday users. These contributions appeared as reader submissions on professional news sites, and on personal blogs, citizen journalism sites, Indymedia, and other online news-related portals. Such activity saw amateur content augmenting professional coverage, added to their own reporting. As both social media and mobile technologies developed, though, patterns of news consumption and content-sharing meant that going through journalistic intermediaries was less necessary. Smartphones with mobile data meant that posting instantly, live streaming, and other means of sharing visually from the scene (however mundane or extraordinary) is a possibility for many.

In response, then, rather than amateur content coming to traditional, professional news spaces, journalists and legacy media have adapted the popular social media used by their audiences—or their potential audiences—rendering their coverage in

forms suitable to these specific platforms. This has meant newsroom innovation in order to develop strategies for news and Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and more, making their content available where their readers and viewers are. Such strategies also respond to the evolution of the specific platforms and the increased support for visual content, whether images or video, and the algorithmic promotion of such content has led to more engagement with these forms. The “pivot to video” trend, for instance, reflects the apparent preference for users to consume news and information in short, easily understood videos rather than by reading articles, and more pertinently social media platforms’ strategies encouraging such content (Rein & Venturini, 2018).

While visual social media take many forms—with photos and videos foremost among them—this entry focuses first on uses and applications of visual forms and platforms not originally intended for these purposes. The likes of GIFs, memes, emoji, and more are all employed by social media users to respond to news and politics, as well as the mundane and the personal (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). It makes sense, too, that these would be adopted by newsmakers to make their coverage accessible, relevant, and enticing to the casual reader. The second half of this entry examines the challenges and opportunities raised by visual social media and their significance for journalism going forward.

Social media employ visual content which has long been part of the journalistic toolkit, remediated for new platforms: photography, whether through cameras or smartphones, and video productions, featured in print or broadcasts but also shared online. While the means of integrating these formats into organizations’ social media activities are ongoing concerns, this entry predominantly focuses on the adoption of visual social media (and other digital) formats, and associated practices, for journalistic purposes.

“Stories,” for instance, are ephemeral visual media popularized on Snapchat. The format was then adapted for Facebook and Instagram, presenting content in bite-sized snippets which disappear after 24 hours. While perhaps not necessarily the most obvious format for disseminating news and information, “stories” offer different opportunities for presenting this content. By using the affordances of the specific platforms, such as additional stickers, emoji, and captions on top of images or video, the information can be depicted in a way that is accessible to an audience familiar with the conventions and vernaculars of these spaces. “Stories” can also allow for less-polished, fleeting content: raw, live footage, and snapshots from the scene of events, offering a first look ahead of the final, published take. Such practices offer an updated version of previous socially mediated accounts of events as they happen, such as image-sharing on Twitter (Vis, Faulkner, Parry, Manyukhina, & Evans, 2013), of the importance of visual media to social movements, and of documenting actions from protests and demonstrations. They also demonstrate attempts to engage audiences in new ways: adapting news to Snapchat or Instagram is a means of bringing content to youth audiences (in particular), who may not be engaging with news content on other platforms.

The animated GIF, meanwhile, is a visual format with a storied history, which is heavily associated with the design aesthetics of the early Web. Its resurgence first on

Tumblr and Reddit, and then across popular social media platforms, has seen the development of practices mixing news and GIFs. The live GIFfing of major news and media events such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election was carried out in partnership with media companies and providers, by GIF repositories like Giphy. The GIF is also implicated in the development of another form of content delivery: the listicle. Popularized by the likes of BuzzFeed, listicles feature lists of ideas, descriptions, exclamations, and more, without need for surrounding paragraphs or connective sentences. Often, listicles feature illustration for their points, in the form of GIFs and other visual content drawn from other media, making intertextual references and affective expression in the process (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). With the listicle format adopted by traditional media as part of a wider trend toward targeting content at audiences, encouraging sharing and further engagement (clickbait), the GIF has also been added to the tools available to journalists. This includes the same use of third-party media to illustrate tweets about stories and events; however, legacy media also create their own GIFs from their captured footage, providing content that can be added to their social media activity as direct illustration in forms appropriate for their chosen platforms.

Illustrative GIFs can also take other forms, from animated infographics to stand-in imagery depicting events in an easily consumed form. During the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, for example, the International Olympic Committee banned the use of GIFs, Vine clips, and other means of presenting video footage that they had not provided or approved. Given the prevalence of visual content on social media by this point, and the attention this receives, news organizations responded with new innovations to depict events from the Olympics. Despite being restricted in the footage they could use, for instance, *The New York Times* developed animations of key events, remixed as GIFs for sharing on Twitter.

Additional experimentation and innovation is seen in how new platforms are explored for journalistic purposes, even if they do not ultimately become widely used. The short video-sharing platform Vine, for instance, allowed users to create and share clips of a maximum of six seconds in length. Although it was shut down by Twitter in 2017, the platform had been used to share newsworthy clips in addition to the creative content contributed by its users. Infamously, a clip captured by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 2015 of the then-Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott attracted global attention. Showing Abbott eating a raw onion, skin and all, the clip was ideally suited to the short duration and automatic looping of Vine, making an unusual scene weirder through repetition (Highfield, 2016).

The Abbott clip, as with many other weird or unusual content shared online, was the catalyst for further commentary and responses, and as the inspiration for irreverent interpretations. Such visuals may become memes in their own right. Memes are also used to offer different takes on news and current affairs, distilling a story into a form that again might be accessible or humorous to an audience well-versed in the cultures and norms of social media. These are not always successful: the attempts by politicians, journalists, unions, and political institutions to start memes, or to use existing memetic templates, can be seen as trying too hard, missing the point, or

engaging with a topic in a way that is overly frivolous or inappropriate for the accounts in question.

Visuals which become memes take on new meanings and contexts, divorced from their origins (as do GIFs, employed in new settings and with individual significance for the user sharing it). The visual here can become iconic, and this also applies to images which are shared widely and inspire their own remixes and interpretations, without necessarily becoming humorous or irreverent memes. The photograph of the body of Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi on a Turkish beach, for example, was prominently featured in print and broadcast coverage of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. It also became an iconic image through its spread on social media and the various responses to it (Vis & Goriunova, 2015), taking on and affording new meanings and symbolism.

The many forms that visual social media can take also bring forth various challenges and opportunities, news and journalism in these spaces. While journalists might employ GIFs when tweeting about stories, or in response to other user comments, such media are also representative of the “ambivalent Internet” examined by Phillips and Milner (2017): their meanings are multiple, and what is implied by one user is not always apparent to another. Indeed, the use of visual media, originally created in a very different context, to stand in for ideas or emotions can become politicized through this appropriation; see, for example, when organizations and conservative political figures employ GIFs taken from television shows created by people with very different leanings, or the racial dynamics of “digital blackface” (Jackson, 2017). The adoption of Twitter as a public channel for diplomacy, meanwhile, has seen GIFs, memes, and emoji used to create very pointed commentary by official embassy accounts (Robinson & Miltner, 2018).

Context is critically implicated in the use of visual social media from several perspectives. The appropriation of existing media in GIFs and memes, for instance, takes this content out of its original context, while also potentially raising issues of copyright. The loss of context here also means that a particular interpretation or narrative can be promoted, even if this is denied by the full clip. Selective editing, coupled with the potential to spread content widely before it can be verified and the willingness to believe specific framings or stories about particular politicians, has meant that inaccurate information can receive a wide audience very quickly.

This is coupled with explicit hoaxes and misinformation, which may heavily involve the visual, such as the faking of screenshots of tweets, stories, and other posts. As technological capabilities improve, too, the opportunities for convincingly faking images and video increase, taking on new implications within the post-Trump discourse around “fake news.” There are genres of recurring fake images, too; a photograph of a great white shark originally taken off the South African coast is repeatedly claimed to be on flooded freeways, making for easy retweets. Given the ongoing importance of images, including user-generated content, during crises, disasters, and breaking news, such hoaxes play on their apparent believability and the heightened attention given to unfolding events. Questions of accuracy and authenticity are also implicated in the choice of platform for sharing content: the use of filters and other editing for images on Instagram, for instance, has added weight when assessing visuals that theoretically depict a “real” scene (Borges-Rey, 2015).

Visual social media, in its many forms and contexts, also raise questions around ethics of presentation, representation, and reproduction. In addition to ambiguities of ownership and copyright, the use and spread of visual content on social media can have consequences for individuals' privacy, for instance. Ryan Milner (2016) examines this in detail with regards to memetic media (pp. 226–232), but his comments have resonance for visual social media more broadly: the choice to publish, amplify, or appropriate someone else's image is one made by journalists as well as other social media users. This can extend the lifespan of visual content, giving it new visibility and exposure, creating new meanings and contexts. However, it also happens without necessarily having the permission of either the people depicted or who created it, and may take on new legal and political attributes—particularly if the visual inspires new memes.

The politics of visual social media goes beyond any political depiction or comment, though. The platforms used are politicized through their own policies and stakeholders, and this leads to concerns over censorship and platform control. Visual content on popular social media platforms is heavily implicated in community guidelines and notions of what is and is not appropriate, although this has also reflected inconsistencies and varying familiarity with the cultural norms of different user groups. The lack of transparency or clear direction around reporting and flagging, and in taking down content, was also reflected in the protracted processes in which major platforms developed policies for dealing with revenge porn, for example. Visual social media platforms are also implicated in politics in their use by political actors, who can fall foul of these proprietary spaces or be alleged victims of censorship (Bennetts, 2018). Conversely, visual content can also be a creative means for users to bypass censorship; the use of emoji to stand in as homophones for hashtags restricted in China, for instance, highlights the flexibility and opportunities afforded by the visual in new and unexpected forms (Zeng, 2018).

These examples and developments underline some of the myriad ways in which visual social media have become part of everyday communication, political activity, and news coverage. Accompanying these changes is a need for critical engagement with both visual content and the forms these take: understanding the cultural applications and meanings of particular visual formats, for example, is part of the digital literacy required to unpack a topical GIF or meme. As with other social media, the visual is used in ways that are unexpected and not for what they were originally intended, and this includes the use of visual platforms like Instagram or Snapchat for journalistic purposes. The platforms described here will continue to change, and different contexts will see other platforms used, for numerous reasons. However, what remains key here is that the visual is an increasingly important aspect of everyday social media practices—and that platforms, content, and behaviors become widespread and popular, so they become appropriated by new actors. This is part of the evolution of, and challenges facing, news and journalism within digital media contexts; making news accessible and available where the audience may be, in forms which are understandable and appropriate, whether it is with added infographics or GIFs, or presented first as “stories.”

SEE ALSO: Blogs and Bloggers; Censorship; Citizen Journalism; Community Engagement and Social Media Editors; Infographics and Data Visualization; Photojournalism

and Photojournalists; Social Media as Distribution Tool; Social Media as Reporting Tool; User-Generated Content; Verification; Viral Content; Visual Journalism

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Further reading

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