

Preliminary Title

The *anti-social* photo. On encounters with press photography of crisis on Instagram.

Christina Tente
University of Gothenburg

Abstract

This work-in-progress paper is related to my ongoing doctoral research at the University of Gothenburg in collaboration with the Hasselblad Foundation. For my dissertation, I research visual cultures of the covid-19 global pandemic through press photography, and I am particularly interested in press photographs (and visual tropes) which have also become *viral* on social media. In this context, I approach the intersection of press photography and the social photo genre as an affective “in-between” genre. A core argument that motivates my research – and this paper – is that the post-photographic condition (Fontcuberta, 2015), in which this in-between genre thrives, is characterised both by hypervisibility / visual abundance, and by invisibility / image fatigue. In this condition, it is crucial to find ways to engage with the photographs critically, discursively, and affectively to activate the *citizenry of photography* (Azoulay, 2008). I argue that, especially in situations of crisis, photographs may be all we have to situate ourselves; this becomes particularly evident, when photographs are inaccessible or censored. I am inspired by Ariella Azoulay’s *civil contract of photography*, and I am intrigued to explore how viewers become active citizens of photography, in post-photographic conditions, how viewers “conquer the world as an image” (*ibid*).

This paper thus departs from my dissertation’s theoretical reflections and contributions, and explores press photographs on Instagram in times of crisis. It is quite common that professional press photographers and photojournalists, working for photo agencies, print and digital media, or freelancers, post their work directly on their own Instagram accounts. In my research, I have observed that photographers covering the pandemic, like Emilio Morenatti (AP) and Go Nakamura (freelancer / Getty Images) would frequently post their photographs on Instagram, while also distributing them via the agencies. In fact, their accounts would often include more material than the photographs distributed by the agencies. I observe that this is also practiced by photographers currently covering ongoing conflicts. For example, Evgeny Maloletka (AP) and Aris Messinis (AFP), reporting from the wars in Ukraine and Gaza respectively, post consistently on Instagram photographs, videos, and direct, unfiltered information on an almost daily basis.

Press photography on Instagram does not differ from “conventional” press photography in terms of aesthetics and rhetoric / discourse. Nevertheless, as it becomes part of an image-based social media ecology, it also incorporates characteristics of the social photo genre (Jurgenson, 2019). In that sense, the Instagram press photo aims to inform and document the exceptional or the newsworthy, responding to “the public’s right to information” (Kennedy, 2019); at the same time, it is an accessible photograph that documents the everyday experience and is made to be seen and shared. As Nathan Jurgenson suggests, social photography’s “central use is more expressive than informational, when the recording of reality is not an end but a means for communicating an experience” (2019, 46). It may thus be argued that the platform in which the press photographs are shared recontextualises their purpose. At the same time, it may be argued that press photographs shared on Instagram nuance the characteristics of the social photo genre, by adding in the platform raw, violent, challenging photographs rather than the banal “Instagramable” everyday shot. In that sense, and departing from Jurgenson, I suggest that this in-between genre is the “*anti-social* photo”.

Photographic coverage of crisis by professional press photographers and photojournalists on Instagram ideally gives direct and raw access from the heart of the field,

usually without time delays, on a continuous feed, and presumably without editorial filters. Being part of the social media economy, Instagram press photography circulates fast and has the potential to reach, inform, and perhaps educate broad and distant audiences. However, there is always the risk that it will get lost in the sea of images or filtered by the algorithmic bias. The algorithm operates as a nonhuman, immaterial mediator who casts their sensor's gaze and decides which images are to be seen and which are to remain unseen. As a result, I suggest that Instagram press photography (or, the *anti-social photo*) is simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible, due to its volume, its continuous feed, and the platform's algorithmic biases. All these characteristics are symptoms of the post-photographic condition, in the realm of which the *anti-social photo* operates.

Additionally, I consider that the contact with the Instagram press photograph is tactile, as much as it is visual. This is also an intimate contact, as the image is mediated by one of our most intimate devices, the smartphone. We keep it close to our bodies, we are in direct contact with it, the device is an extension of our bodies. Encountering the *anti-social photo*, the viewer taps, slides, types a comment, shares – the encounter is thus haptic, affective, the photograph is a potentially *sticky* object (Ahmed, 2004). I argue that this affective dimension of the encounter entails dynamic possibilities for the Instagram press photograph, to become meaningful and *sticky* to the viewer, and to activate the *civil contract of photography*.

The research objective is thus threefold. First, I explore the ontology of the Instagram press photograph, the ways that it operates in the social media ecology and economy, as an in-between genre. Second, I problematise the encounter between viewer and the photograph, its dynamic possibilities, its potential failures, and the interplay between (hyper)visibility and invisibility, influenced by the algorithmic bias. Finally, I reflect on the affective potentials in this encounter, which is tactile as much as it is visual. Methodologically, I use multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen), borrowing some elements from social semiotics (Barthes, Rose). I also utilise Ariella Azoulay's *civil contract of photography* as a method for encountering photographs critically and affectively. The paper wishes to contribute to the scholarly theory on social media and press photography, and to problematise how the viewers and citizens of photography may navigate the post-photographic condition and find meaningful ways of connecting with the photographs in times of crisis.

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Keywords

press photography; social photo; Instagram; post-photography; covid-19