

Synthetic Gaze: AI as a Tool of Constructed Spaces in Visual Journalism

Our contribution presents research exploring the use of generative photorealistic imagery in journalism, particularly within the domain of illustrative photography. Combining qualitative interviews, content analysis, and artistic research, it examines how synthetic visuals are reshaping the relationship between visibility, space, and representation in journalism.

Photographic images in journalism have traditionally been perceived as windows onto events, mapping and synchronising dispersed occurrences (Newton, 2020).

However, this spatial anchoring, emphasized by the Barthesian link to referent, has always depended on the material and optical constraints of the apparatus, as well as the selection and framing. Photography is thus a medium that does not create physical space but rather a semantic field in which meanings are formed. Generative models significantly amplify tension between reality and construction, as they combine probabilities, cultural stereotypes, and aesthetic patterns (Hausken, 2024; Ritchin, 2025). The resulting images may appear familiar, yet they are not extracted from any real place, since they have never existed (Nightingale & Farid, 2022).

The advent of AI-generated photorealistic visuals raises new concerns about what images in the news media actually represent (Ditlhokwa et al., 2025) and the threats and challenges they pose to the field of visual journalism (Matich et al., 2025). The resulting image appears credible precisely because it replicates the aesthetic cues of deeply rooted media stereotypes that trigger affective responses (Kennedy et al., 2025). For instance, the case of fake “photographs” of Gaza generated for Adobe Stock (Growcoot, 2003) demonstrates how easily a war-torn space can be fabricated to match cultural expectations of what a “conflict zone” should look like. The resulting image appears credible precisely because it replicates the aesthetic cues of deeply rooted media stereotypes that trigger affective responses (Zelizer, 2010).

However, the presence of photorealistic generative visuals in everyday journalistic practice is typically more routine. Commonly, they appear as illustrative content, accompanying texts without a direct link to specific events (Thomson et al., 2024). However, even traditional illustrative photographs, captured by human photographers, operate within predefined visual schemas that transform images into interchangeable conceptual signs (Machin, 2004; Aiello et al., 2023). These images often serve as visual placeholders that fill the space where an image is expected, rather than conveying meaning (Frosh et al., 2020; Thurlow et al., 2020).

From this perspective, generative imagery does not mark a rupture but rather a logical continuation of a visual regime that has long prioritised genericness over specificity, stylisation over documentation, aesthetic patterns over spatial anchorage.

Methodology

We assume that editorial illustrations for abstract or sensitive topics are a likely entry point for photorealistic AI-generated visuals in journalism. To explore this, we interviewed editors from Czech private and public newsrooms about their use of such images and the challenges and benefits involved. Based on these insights, we identified a set of topics, such as domestic violence, child segregation, alcohol addiction, gender transition, and forced migration, that often rely on generic or symbolic visual placeholders. We then prompted a generative language-image model to autonomously create illustrations for these news topics, followed by a critical dialogue with the system about its aesthetic and narrative choices. This material was then exhibited in a gallery setting, where we collected audience survey responses. The project thus combines interviews and visual content analysis with speculative/experimental image-making as a method of critical inquiry into how generative systems shape, aestheticise, and mediate journalistic space.

Preliminary results

At the level of narrative interaction, the AI model demonstrates strong normative constraints, adhering to widely accepted ethical standards in visual journalism, particularly when depicting sensitive topics such as children or migration. However, it also explicitly acknowledges that these ethical boundaries are a product of its programming rather than autonomous judgment.

Results from interviews reveal that newsroom use of generative tools varies widely. While some refrain from using such technologies altogether, others express keen interest. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that generative images are used primarily as illustrative material, rather than as documentary content. Ethical guidelines also vary, ranging from vague or ad hoc approaches to detailed internal policies, though all participants emphasised the need to label AI-generated material clearly.

Visual content analysis reveals that the generated images are highly generic, reflecting the aesthetic of stock photography and the training data on which the models are based. They tend to be decontextualised, lacking temporal or spatial specificity, and they reproduce persistent gender, ethnic, and social stereotypes. Their representations rely on binary

oppositions and familiar visual tropes, often marked by emotional detachment, vacant gazes, and static mid-range compositions in warm pastel tones.

Drawing on art-based research, surveys suggest that the audience places great emphasis on photography in news media, particularly due to its news values, even when photographs are used illustratively. However, there is no clear consensus regarding the use of AI-generated images in journalism. A considerable part of the audience, though, finds its use acceptable for illustrating undocumented events, most often in topics such as economics, climate reporting, or healthcare. When evaluating AI-generated images in the context of appropriate or ethical illustration, audiences are significantly more critical of what they consider acceptable compared to conventional journalistic production.

Our research suggests that the use of AI-generated images is not unambiguous among media professionals or in audience preferences. At the same time, the stereotypical and simplistic depictions that generative models create in illustrations still pose challenges for contemporary photojournalism, limiting the implementation of these tools in journalistic production and even affecting the acceptability of such images among the audience.

Keywords: Visual Journalism; AI-generated Photorealistic Imagery; Illustrative Images; Art-based Research

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