Photojournalism and Violence in the Online Press of El Salvador

Carmen López-Sánchez[1], Norman Noel Alas Trujillo[2], Blanca Ruth Orantes[2] and José A. García del Castillo[3,*]

[1]*Universidad de Alicante (España)*

[2]*Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador*

[3]*Universidad Miguel Hernández (España)*

Abstract: *Introduction:* At present, the significance and the impact that digital photography has in online press is due to its fast dissemination around the world and nationwide. In regards to violence, El Salvador has been considered as one of the countries with the highest homicide rate, mainly because of gangs; throughout the years, this has been reflected in mass media, particularly on the written press and online press.

Methodology: Online press and photojournalism in El Salvador were analyzed via a cross-sectional study; with a random sampling of 384 university students.

Results: In relation to the news published with a high content of violence, 75% of the sampled people said that they had seen them; a low percentage (18.2%) stated not seeing online publications with a high content of violence. More than 69% of participants affirm that all digital media should go through a filter prior to publishing their news articles and photographs. More than 93% stated that social media is the go-to source to be informed on events and facts taking place in El Salvador and the rest of the world.

Conclusions: The dissemination of news with a high content of violence via digital media indicates that the scenes published by this media are too graphic and shocking in all its versions, and this could have a direct incidence in the circle of violence Salvadoreans live in. News articles, especially those with high violent content can exert great influence in the population in a persuasive manner and/or in the dissemination of violence.

Keywords: Photographic impact, Digital press, Violence perception, Self-regulation, persuasion, Dissemination of violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

At present, people live in a globalized world, and tend to change the ways to do journalism by using new technologies. Traditional journalism is visibly decreasing. The online press uses images and illustrations as the main visual support of its news articles in order to interact with the readership.

According to Alas (2015), images represent an impact of the social environment; they help us understand everything we cannot see in first person. Photography portrays real life. An image can be structured by means of photography composition rules in which it represents a concept or an essential idea.

The intention of journalistic photography is to generate impact in line with other elements of the news, potentially generating unexpected effects (Lara, 2021). The current significance and the impact given by a digital picture in online press is due to the fast dissemination it has both worldwide and nationwide, and to the possibility of saving photographic files; this allows people to have an enourmous photo library about a single event.

In like manner, other discussion groups can be generated with users (Bueno, 2020) and with journalists from other parts of the world thus facilitating the availability of the photographic images in the platforms, and enabling an exhaustive analysis of each image, in addition to the impact they have in society.

Although in the beginning text prevailed over audiovisual material in the Internet, with the passage of time, a web model has been implemented in which multimedia content, whether it be in images, audio or video, are of capital importance. The images with the most views include the following characteristics: they are high-quality and contain a high contrast; they have been clipped, not minimized when they have to fit a smaller space; they are easy to interpret and avoid excessive detail; they are closely related to the page content and are highly attractive (Arrazola and Marcos, 2014).

According to Toussaint and García (2017), the publications of text and images in online press are centered in two different paths. Two channels through

*Address correspondence to this author at the Universidad Miguel Hernández (España); Tel: 34608660856; E-mail: jagr@umh.es

which journalism has adapted itself to the the grammar of online media are press webpages and social media.

In its short existence, the digital press has been characterized for constantly making innovations. It is one of those cultural products that has quickly adapted to the newness and the all-changing environment of the web.

The first digital press editions from the mid nineties consisted of a passage, a transfer, from the printed edition with very few modifications made. On the other hand, the current ones contemplate the constant update of information, multimedia content and varied services that interact with the producers/readers of information, thus verifying the power and the dynamism of the sector (Guallar *et al*., 2012).

In parallel, it can be speculated that the interactive resources that identify digital language favor an active participation from the readership and foster the possibility for the public to send photos, videos and all kinds of data to the writing room (Latorre, 2019).

In regards to violence, El Salvador has been considered as one of the countries with the highest crime rates in the world, which is mainly attributed to the gangs (Martínez y Navarro, 2021); this has been reflected in the written press and online press throughout the years.

Urquizar (2020) points out that there are certain tendencies in the press which lead to selecting violent news. In addition to the homicides by gang members, they focus on gender violence; this generates negative ideas around women, as opposed to men. According to the author, digital newspapers show patriarchal traces.

In line with this, Núñez *et al*. (2016) echoed this idea, stating that, in nearly all pages published by the press, gender violence is centerpiece. However, there is the thought that gender violence—despite of the important places that has conquered—continues to be a dim reality.

At present, violence is one of the most relevant and complex social problems. The media disseminate and structure a series of ideas around it, oscillating between two points: on the one side, they present it as something undesirable one has to fight; on the other hand, it is an indispensable ingredient in the production of mass consumer goods (Solís y Gandler, 2016).

The consumers of violent photographic material are those who actually approve of said contents,

sometimes leaving evidence of the lack of a visual culture, mixed with the fascination that an event may have. According to González (2023), the powerful influence exerted by audiovisual content (including photographs), can be high in changing the lifestyle, behavior, opinion and beliefs of people, especially those in the young population.

According to Cabrera (2020), social violence is associated to mental health. The constant exposure to violent content normalizes it and contributes to its increase. In opposition to this argument, Pérez y Prada (2020) suggest that it would be naive today to think that the self-regulation of violent images could significantly reduce violent acts.

In this study, the researchers intended to analyze photojournalism and violence in the online press in El Salvador via a cross-sectional study, and from the perspective of a university.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Design

This study sought to know the consumption preference of online press and the comsumption of news with a high content of violence through photographic images and the texts in journalistic notes, through an observational and transversal study.

2.2. Participants

The selected sample for this stage of the investigation focused on young university students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Communications at Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador, currently studying from their sophomore year onwards, and who are older than 18, from both genders. A random sample of 384 participants was selected; 222 were male and 162 female.

Participation in the study was voluntary; the participants were informed about the objective of the research, and signed an informed consent.

2.3. Instruments

An ad hoc survey was prepared; it contained 24 items distributed in four blocks. The first block contained 6 items covering sociodemographic data to learn about the age, gender, personal situation, residence, major, and level of study of those participating.

The second block had 9 items which focused on learning about online news consumption.

The third block had 5 items that focused on identifying the perception of news with violent content that the population received via online news.

Finally, the fourth block was made of 4 items exploring which internet resources consumers received the violent news from. It was important to know if the use of social media could be used as a means to receive notifications from news online.

In like manner, the structure of the survey fitted the variables and indicators of the study, following the objectives of this research. The survey was validated prior to its administration; this validation was made by both a a panel of experts in the field and a sample from the target group. The necessary adjusments were then made.

2.4. Data Collection

The instruments were administered in the classrooms where the Communications, Public Relations, and Journalism students take their classes at UTEC. Data collection was face-to-face and participants were asked for informed consent. The subjects corresponding to the photography department were also selected; the contents included the following: basic photography, photojournalism, advertising photography, and artistic photography. In the same manner, subjects in the audiovisual and journalism areas were taken into account; these were t.v. production, radio, writing for media, and propaganda, among others.

2.5. Data Analysis

Each of the variables was compared in each item so as to individually analyze the responses provided by the enterviewees, and to group the marks in each indicator; this way, an analysis of the entire amount of answers to the items was made.

24 items out of the 384 surveys were counted as those administered to the selected sample; the anwers were grouped one by one using frequency tables with percentages from each of the marked indicators in the variables. This allowed to statistically obtain an account of the number of anwers in relation to the phenomenon being studied.

The survey was divided in four parts: sample profile, online press consumption, publication of photographs

and news with violent content, and the informatic path through which this information gets to the public.

3. RESULTS

The total sample was 384 participants, out of which 57,8% were female and 42,2%, male. Their ages were between 18 and 40 years old; more than 48% were between 18 and 20; more than 35% were between 20 and 25. More than 63% of the sample were full-time students; nearly 36% of them study and work. Most of the participants (90%) were studying their bachelor's degree.

Regarding online press consumption, more than 57% of the sample stated to be a consumer, over the use of television—which reached 42%. It is interesting to highlight than for more than 72% of those surveyed, information posted online is considered very serious and/or serious.

The analysis showed that online newspapers are read more than the printed ones in El Salvador; it was observed that 76,5% of those who answered the survey are regular online readers. Amongst the online newspapers that are more widely read, there can be mentioned elblog.com, with 37.3%--which showed to be the one preferred. Faro.net came next, with 18.1%, after pagina.com and Diario 1.com.

In relation to the frequency with which people have read or seen these online newspapers, and if they are subscribed to them: this showed that 44% of the surveyed people check online newspapers on a daily basis, while 29.7% does it once a week. A relevant piece of information to highlight is that more than 66% of the sample reported not being subscribed to this type of online newspaper.

In regards to the publication of news articles and photographs with a high content of violence, it can be seen that 75% of the sample manifested having seen them published, while a very low percentage (18.2%), affirms not having seen highly violent content in the publications of online media.

The opinion in relation to the regulation of online media to publish some articles with a high content of violence, was also studied along with the self-regulation these media should use prior to making their informative publications. More than 69% of participants claim that all digital media should have to go through a filter in order to be able to publish their news articles and photographs. On the other hand, in relation to the

self-regulation for publishing news and photographs with a high content of violence, more than 60% of the sample said digital media should indeed use a regulation filter on their content.

In studying whether publishing news articles and photographs with a high content of violence generates more violence in the population, and if these publications are made with no technical supervision or a review by journalism specialists who can regulate their transmission, more than 67% of the sample agreed on the premise that digital media must apply self-censhorship or filters when publishing violent news articles and photographs in order to decrease the intensity of violence that prevails in the country.

Finally, it was observed that according to the sample population, digital media has taken more boom and a higher positioning nowadays as a preferred media by readers, especially young Salvadoreans, given that 79% stated that this type of journalism is gaining ground in the era of informatics in comparison to the traditional press. In the same manner, when asked about the use of social media as a means of information on incidents and events taking place on Salvadorean soil and the rest of the world, more than 93% use them to be informed on the country news and other events generated by them. The most widely used social media is Facebook (65%), followed by Instagram (15.4%), and Twitter (10.2%).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The disemination of news with a high content of violence via digital media indicates, according to the surveyed sample, that the scenes being published in these mass media are too graphic in their entirety; this can have a direct incidence in the circle of violence that exists in the country. All of this relates to the position taken by Zavaleta & Alvarado (2018), who state that it is essential to make an analysis of the relationships between mass media and the different powers, for they respond to unwritten guidelines which are not always legal, located on the border between the illegality of journalistic publications.

The eradication of violence may be related to the lack of agreement between society and the mass media. López (2020) suggests that the difficulties in understanding this phenomenon in itself, make people fear failure in the eradication of violence.

In mass media, messages sent along with news articles—especially those loaded with violence—can

have great influence in the population whether in a persuasive and/or diseminating manner. This aligns with some of the cited authors (Beltran, 2018; Peral, 2018; Rincón, 2018), which affirm that mass media and the textual and graphic messages can generate a tendency to persuade and manipulate the public through the messages that are published.

Therefore, this study provides an opinion over the fact that there should exist a self-regulating system to adequately manage news articles and photographs with a high violent content, with the purpose of restraining the impact this has on the Salvadorean society.

It can be concluded that it would be desirable for the photojournalism practices carried out by digital media-- that includes violent acts and is published in the Internet--, to be presented with less graphic detail in their photo galleries since this tends to be too striking and explicit for the readers of this non-tranditional media, and whose readers are mostly young people.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations in this study was the size of the sample since it would have been better to have had a larger number of participants available.

Another factor was the number of existing digital newspapers taken into account.

Not all surveyed students had access to Internet, or had devices connected to digital platforms in order to check the digital press.

Future studies will be able to compare the content of a number of digital newspapers, and other types of media, from countries overflowed by the alarming after-effect of violence.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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