

Veloso Da Silva Admilson[®] – Muratalieva Aizhamal[®]

Stories of Afghanistan Beyond the War: Visual Mobile Communication Via @everydayafg on Instagram

Afghanistan has been depicted in traditional Western media as a violent place due to wars and conflicts, but visual mobile social media, such as Instagram, may contribute to changing its depiction by diversifying the content and narratives. Hence, this paper analyses how Afghanistan is presented by collective photographers on @everydayafg, based on three aspects: what/who is visually depicted, what actions/issues are discussed, and what associations are made in the posts. Applying netnography and content analysis, we systematically sampled and coded the first monthly photo since the account creation (2014/2021, N = 76). Results demonstrate that @everydayafg deviates from representations of violence in at least three ways: 1) depicting Afghanistan with human agents; 2) covering more favourable and uplifting topics, as for tourist destinations; and 3) associating the country with a “place of living” and with its “cultural richness”. However, some narratives still raise significant issues, such as human rights and labour conditions in the region. Hence, Instagram is used to challenge prevalent perspectives in the media while generating awareness of relevant local problems.

Keywords: Afghanistan, visual frames, visual mobile communication, documentary photography, Instagram

1. Introduction

Mobile communication has impacted how we register, share, and make sense of visuals online in the past two decades (Nyíri 2003; Ling 2004; Villi 2010; Serafinelli – Villi 2017). Simultaneously, throughout these years, Afghanistan has been depicted in traditional Western media as a violent region due to the war declared by the United States and NATO allies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) against the Taliban regime, which was accused of hosting al-Qaeda terrorists – post September 11, 2001, attacks in the USA (Zelizer 2005; Wilson 2014; Campbell 2017). However, the popularisation of visual mobile social media, such as Instagram, can contribute to changing the depiction of a group, event, or geographical location (Serafinelli – Villi 2017; Rosa – Soto-Vásquez 2022; Béni – Veloso 2022). By way of illustration, an international and collective initiative of visual storytellers called The Everyday Projects has been working with

photography to “challenge stereotypes that distort our understanding of the world”, including a page about Afghanistan on Instagram (@everydayafg). The project brings together several visual storytellers – documentary photographers, journalists, artists, etc. – to produce images with the aim of broadening the public’s perception of specific topics/regions. Thus, photography becomes collective (Chippendale et al. 2009) in two ways, simultaneously: it is created by multiple agents, and it offers diverse angles on a subject.

This paper seeks to answer the question of how Afghanistan is presented by the collective photographers on Instagram, taking three main aspects into the analysis: what/who is visually depicted, what actions/issues are discussed, and what associations are made in the posts. We expect that by exploring the contribution of @everydayafg to the portrayal of the country via mobile social media, we can contribute to the studies about how these platforms can challenge negative stereotypes and support the rise of more diverse narratives about places and cultures.

From a methodological approach, the study applies netnography (Kozinets 2010) on the page and content analysis (Krippendorff 2004) to evaluate a sample composed of every first monthly photo posted since the account creation (2014/2021, N = 76). The material was double-coded with the support of a codebook based on categories from previous studies (Heck – Schlag 2013; Campbell 2017; Kearns 2017). Additionally, an in-depth semi structured interview was conducted with the page creator and curator to further explore their objectives and intentions, offering further insights into the analysis.

The results demonstrate that @everydayafg tries to deviate from mainstream representations of violence as the main topic, thus promoting a more diverse coverage of everyday life. This is done by depicting Afghanistan with human agents, mainly children and young women posing for the photos, covering topics connected to the everyday lives of people, from local geographical perspectives. In addition, the country is associated with a “place of living” and with its “cultural richness”, while other frames referring to the effects of the war, such as “place of struggle”, only appear in third place. Moreover, the country is also shown through its beautiful landscapes, highlighting it as a “tourist destination”. However, textual narratives accompanying visuals raised and discussed serious and significant issues in the region such as human rights, poverty, and labour opportunities that demonstrate the complexity and multi-layered nature of the general depiction of Afghanistan.

In this sense, visuality on Instagram created by collective photographers – as for @everydayafg – can be a tool to challenge established perspectives transmitted via traditional media and help generate new perspectives. Nevertheless, the platform itself also contributes to shaping these narratives by boosting or limiting the content reach. This logic has been understood by the page curator (and the project in a broader sense), who plays with the algorithm and Instagram affordances with the intent to outreach their content dissemination online.

2. Visual mobile communication: Instagramming (new) narratives

The popularisation of mobile devices connected to the internet in the first two decades of the 21st century has impacted the ways we engage in interpersonal communication (Nyíri 2003; Ling 2004; Villi 2010), how we share information online (Ling – Horst 2011), and even on experiencing events, as the phones became a common way to register/mediate daily activities (Serafinelli – Villi 2017). More recently, social media platforms developed primarily for smartphones, such as Instagram and TikTok, have further fomented the spread of visual mobile communication (Manovich 2016; Russman – Svensson 2017; Veszelszki 2019). In this section, we present an overview of how these two aspects (phones and social media) interconnect and their implications for the ways our societies communicate nowadays.

Ling (2004) explains that although mobile communication started to spread globally in the 1990s, the turn of the 21st century represented an increase in device consumption, which happened due to the reduction in their cost, the development of new technologies, such as the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM), and investments in infrastructure for mobile internet connection. Thus, these devices became almost indispensable items in contemporary life, enabling not only calls as the previous phones but functioning as portable computers with a camera that allow the production and sharing of images, which encompass location-based information (Ling 2004: 11). Evidence of these devices' popularisation can be noted by recent market report data indicating that, by 2023, 5.44 billion people were using mobile phones globally, which represents 68% of the world population (Kemp 2023).

Among the characteristics that helped in mobile phone popularisation is the insertion of Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS). Nyíri (2003) points out that this technology was able to integrate graphics with spoken and written words in synchronous-complementary communication, which represented a potential for a higher level of cohesion than when used separately (Nyíri 2003: 184). For Villi (2010), visual mobile communication is defined by its capacity to mediate presence (communication over space) through the instant exchange of visuals (synchronous or instantaneous), thus generating a ubiquitous visual connection via the internet from a personal device.

One of the consequences brought by the possibility to quickly snap and share routinary events online is that mundane experiences, daily events such as eating a meal, became photo-worthy. Likewise, Serafinelli and Villi (2017) defend that visual mobile communication impacts the visual relationship that people maintain with their environment. "With smart mobile devices, photography has become so ubiquitous that the existence of events, people, and objects seems to be directly connected with being photographed" (Serafinelli – Villi 2017: 3). In the case of Instagram, content may be registered with professional cameras, but when shared on social media it enters a new environment where its consumption and circulation are still primarily mobile.

Over the past two decades, many websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms were created to facilitate image production and sharing. The specific subject of this research, Instagram was developed in October 2010 as a mobile app; later in 2012 it was bought by the Facebook Group (currently Meta Platforms), and by

2023 it already accounted for two billion users globally, based on the market reports (Kemp 2023). Although, over time the platform became accessible via browsers on desktops/computers, most of its functions are still mobile based (such as snapping and sharing content while using internal features). Instagram's popularity has even been reflected in language, including a specific verb for its usage: "to Instagram something" (Serafinelli – Villi 2017: 9).

According to Russman and Svensson (2017), visual social media platforms have added multimodality and multimedia to visual communication, allowing for the simultaneous use of videos, hashtags, emoticons, text, etc. Moreover, users may strategically frame, filter, and edit images before sharing them with their audiences, transforming how the sender can elaborate on their visual presentation. For Manovich (2016), Instagram reflects a contemporary image culture that has developed around technological media and that are defined not only by their technological aspects or how people use them, but also by cultural "languages" – systems of conventions and techniques that define the subjects, narratives, editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing, and other image characteristics (Manovich 2016: 18).

This research focuses on Instagram as a platform for visual mobile communication and how it enables new narratives to be disputed by local actors in contrast with traditional media narratives, mostly Western perspectives. For example, previous research (Rosa – Soto-Vásquez 2022) demonstrated that the portrayal of migrants on Instagram was mostly shaped by non-migrants (people who sympathise with the cause), which creates an "aesthetics of otherness". The study analysed two hashtags (#caravanamigrante and #migrantcaravan) and found out that, when migrants do dispute their depiction, they focus on showing their reasons for migrating, justifying it with the hashtag in their language (#caravanamigrante).

Smith (2021) explains that visual mobile social media, such as Instagram, have generated a specific motif for travel photography, making popular a style called "the promontory witness". These images usually depict a traveller on a cliff or elevated position observing the landscape, in contrast to what would be "the classic shots of a smiling tourist pictured facing the camera" (Smith 2021: 604) and reflect a style that comes from paintings used in imperial travel writing to denote the monarch power over its colony, "where to see a landscape from above was in a sense to dominate it" (Smith 2021: 608). Furthermore, the author argues that Instagram is in sync with the contemporary tourism industry and significantly influences "how tourists imagine and interact with destinations" (Smith 2021: 606). This can be perceived on three levels: the platform affects the *habitus* of tourists and foments a predominant aesthetic; the visual performances are connected to the scalability of their narratives; and the possibility to generate financial outcomes from posts instigates a general understanding of the branded self.

From a different perspective of Smith (2021), who analysed visibility on the platform on a general level, Béni and Veloso (2022) studied how #Africa is visually depicted on Instagram by analysing content automatically classified as Top Posts on its Explore page. The study evaluated visuals posted under the hashtag in the African Union's six official languages (Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Kiswahili) and pointed out that it tended to present new frames while also reinforcing

existing narratives about the continent. For instance, Africa was portrayed by its rich natural wonders via images of tourists, which at the same time indicated its potential as a travel destination, but also reinforced imagery of wilderness worthy of being discovered by the outside world (e.g. when associated with animals). Furthermore, the researchers revealed that Instagram reinforced visual themes that are popular on the platform on a general level, such as travel photography and images showing fashion and beauty.

The next section will be dedicated to discussing narratives about the representation of Afghanistan in media. This will contribute to the understanding of how the country is depicted by traditional media and establish a background for comparison with its portrayal on Instagram. Additionally, it offers the social-cultural context of the region to better comprehend the communicative practices from the project *Everyday Afghanistan* (@everydayafg), which is also explained further in this article.

3. Debating Afghanistan: online and offline media narratives about a country “in war”

Throughout the years, Afghanistan has been depicted in traditional Western media as a violent region (Griffin 2004; Zelizer 2005; Wilson 2014; Campbell 2017). The country reached the headlines of international news in the late 1970s due to its political instability, civil war, and, more recently, the post-9/11 attacks occupation. Studies on the visual representation of Afghanistan indicated that its portrayal has been limited to conflict and war-related images, often depicting the country as a backward and dangerous place.

Western media has played a significant role in shaping the global public perception of Afghanistan and its people. Pictures taken by professional photographers and journalists of the leading media outlets mainly focused on foreign military forces struggling on the front line, the Taliban, or Afghan civilians suffering from war, refugees, and war consequences (Campbell 2017). The conflict became the main topic for describing the country, while images were influenced by the narratives of war, political instability, and security threats; often overlooking the diversity and complexity of its culture, history, and people. Additionally, Western media is criticised for perpetuating stereotypes and orientalist views of Afghanistan.

The phenomenon is referred to as “embedded journalism”: when reporters were linked to the military units to deliver news from the front line. The problem with that approach is that it narrows down the focus and shows episodic events without context (Campbell 2017). Hence, embedded journalism became the frame itself that refers to familiar interpretations, and narratives consistent with military strategies of states having troops in Afghanistan. However, the experience of independent reporters depicting the events from the same aspect demonstrated how the frame of militarism is deeply rooted in public discourse.

According to Zelizer (2005), visibility plays a crucial role especially during wartime when it serves as a justification for “eyewitness” and gives a sense of what is happening. In this sense, visuals capture the essence of the conflict and large-scale

crisis to evoke emotions and reactions and promote action. Therefore, images that grab public attention are more valued by editors and publishers. Butler (2016) discussed that the media often frame war in a way that the lives of some people appear to be more valuable than others, which, in turn, shape people's response, reactions, and political opinions.

Furthermore, a study of the BBC coverage of the Afghan refugees in 2001 (Wright 2004) revealed that the "refugee crisis" was "inflated" and shown dramatically. Despite the unlimited coverage of topics, the issues were disconnected from each other, thus, failing to discuss Afghanistan from a wider perspective and provide a solid background for the viewers. Another research from Griffin (2004) about American news photographic coverage demonstrated that the depiction of Afghanistan and Iraq mostly focused on US troops, soldiers, war hardware, and the portrayal of the powerful US leader. The narratives were supporting the US position of "war on terrorism" instead of providing unique information and a different perspective.

More recently, a study led by Bergman and Liu (2022) reinforced the overall criticism with an argument that Western media supported the official narratives and used an Orientalist frame when covering news. By glorifying the army, justifying the war, and emphasising the goal of liberating Afghan women, the media not only validated the dominant narrative but also reinforced stereotypes about Afghanistan. The media was also criticised for failing to include the voices of refugees who are often replaced by NGO representatives, experts, and officials. Likewise, the absence of an Afghan perspective is defined as one of the main problems in depicting Afghan women (Mitra 2020).

The research on Afghan women's portrayals takes a major place in the literature on the country's visual representation (Falah 2005; Stabile – Kumar 2005; Fluri 2009; Mitra 2020). The studies showed that the depiction of women is influenced by the Orientalist frame (Stabile – Kumar 2005) and is limited to the stereotypical images of women in burqas or hijab, usually shown as an element of oppression. The depiction of women in Western media follows gendered scripts where females are shown as submissive and oppressed while men are represented with aggressive motives (Fluri 2009). Hence, Afghan women are often posed in ways that emphasised their vulnerability, and their image is largely associated with war, violence, and poverty.

Contrastingly, Fahmy's (2004) research proposed a different perspective. The content analysis of the photographs made by Associated Press during and after the fall of the Taliban regime demonstrated that the general portrait of Afghan women is more complex: they are shown as more involved, interactive, and equal to the viewers, but at the same time are being confined to traditional and restrictive roles. Falah (2005), who conducted a content analysis of 500 pieces published in daily American newspapers, suggested that the portraits of Muslim women, in general, reinforce Muslim society as "Other", which differs culturally, politically, and morally from Western societies.

However, the visual representation of Afghanistan on social media can deviate from the dominating frame of the war. With the rise of social media platforms and, mainly, Instagram, photography stopped being an exclusive feature of mainstream media. Thus, independent creators obtained the opportunity to speak for themselves, provide an inside perspective and shed light on routinary events of ordinary people.

Documentary photographers and independent journalists can use Instagram to showcase their work, share their perspectives, and raise awareness about important issues without the necessity to meet the agenda and editorial requirements of the official narrative from media outlets. Additionally, Instagram's features, such as hashtags and geolocation tags, allow photographers and reporters to easily categorise their work, while also making it more manageable for people to discover new visual content.

Despite the increasing use of Instagram, there is a noticeable lack of research on the visual representation of Afghanistan on social media platforms. The gap in the literature highlights the need for a further investigation of the visual narratives and images associated with the country. The next chapter will focus on one of the projects on Instagram that accumulated the works of documentary photographers from Afghanistan to challenge the stereotypical representation of the country by showing various aspects of everyday life.

4. Documenting the world through images: The Everyday Projects and @everydayafg

The page Everyday Afghanistan (@everydayafg) is part of a larger initiative named "The Everyday Projects". According to its official website (everydayprojects.org), its endeavour "uses photography to challenge stereotypes that distort our understanding of the world" (n.d.) and seeks to use "imagery to combat harmful misperceptions and to rise above persistent inequality" (n.d.). The non-profit enterprise facilitates the connection between a community of visual storytellers – documentary photographers, journalists, artists, etc. – with audiences by offering multiple perspectives on cultural portrayal.

We believe in amplifying local voices and in shifting power away from monolithic narratives dominated by a Western, top-down approach to storytelling. We work toward a future of photojournalism and visual storytelling that is inclusive and anti-racist. (The Everyday Projects 2023, n.d.).

The movement started in 2012 with the Everyday Africa page on Instagram, created by Peter DiCampo and Austin Merrill to depict life on the continent in a more accurate and contextualised way while raising awareness about traditional media's unbalanced representation. The success of this first initiative spawned other similar pages around the world and, in 2014, they exhibited collectively in Brooklyn, New York, forming the Everyday Projects, which today has an audience of over 1 million people on social media.

In this sense, a set of principles and values are indicated by The Everyday Projects to guide their community around the world, which are: Truth in storytelling; Context; Diversity, equity, inclusion, and representation; Community; Shifting power; Education; and Ethical conduct. Moreover, the organisation participates in photography exhibitions internationally, maintains a podcast called "Re-Picture"

to discuss photographic practices and visual storytelling, and works directly with schools to elaborate visual literacy curricula.

The Everyday Projects initiative embodies the concept of “collective photography” that can be interpreted on at least three levels. Firstly, the notion of mass photography covering one subject in a specific time (e.g. the coronation of a king/queen) as discussed by Pollen (2015), with vast photographic collections that encompass mainly amateur content about the event. Secondly, Chippendale et al.’s (2009) understanding of collective photography as an [meta] image that combines millions of other online photos to depict the same object/space (193), which can be achieved mainly with geotags (location-based technology). While Pollen’s (2015) analysis is interested in the shared memory and social constructs of the visuals, Chippendale et al.’s (2009) focus on the technical aspects facilitating content production. Thirdly, and as a combination of both previous ideas, the project brings together several photographers to produce images with the aim of broadening the public’s perception of specific topics/regions, such as Afghanistan. Thus, photography becomes collective in two ways, simultaneously: It is created by multiple agents, and it offers diverse angles on a subject (including technical elements, e.g. geotags and hashtags).

Taking this context of collective image production and sharing, the specific Instagram page dedicated to Afghanistan was founded in 2014, and by the time of this publication (2023) accounted for almost 63 thousand followers and had made 1769 publications. As explained in the methodology section, our research sampled a smaller part of its content (N = 76) up to August 2021, when there was a short gap in its publication due to uncertainties brought by the rise of the Taliban to power. They had 1617 published posts by then; after that, they made two publications in November 2021 and got back to regularly publishing from February 2022.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the page contains a description informing that it is a “network for photojournalism in the build-up: Photographers portraying a country amid war and survival” (n.d.). Hence, although it promotes a more diverse depiction of Afghanistan (see the *Results* section below), the page still reflects/addresses the issues brought by the war. Besides sharing single photos, @everydayafgposts carrousel (collection of several photos in a post), Reels (videos), reposts from other Everyday Projects pages, and some other types of visuals, such as screenshots of quotes, news, and informative materials. Their content is usually followed by a caption that tells the story behind the image, providing contextual information about the depicted events, credits for the photographer, and hashtags. Additionally, they encourage people to participate in the visual narratives by submitting images on Instagram with the hashtag #everydayafghanistan. The page also includes a collection of Highlights (Instagram Stories) about topics such as streets, art and culture, and community.

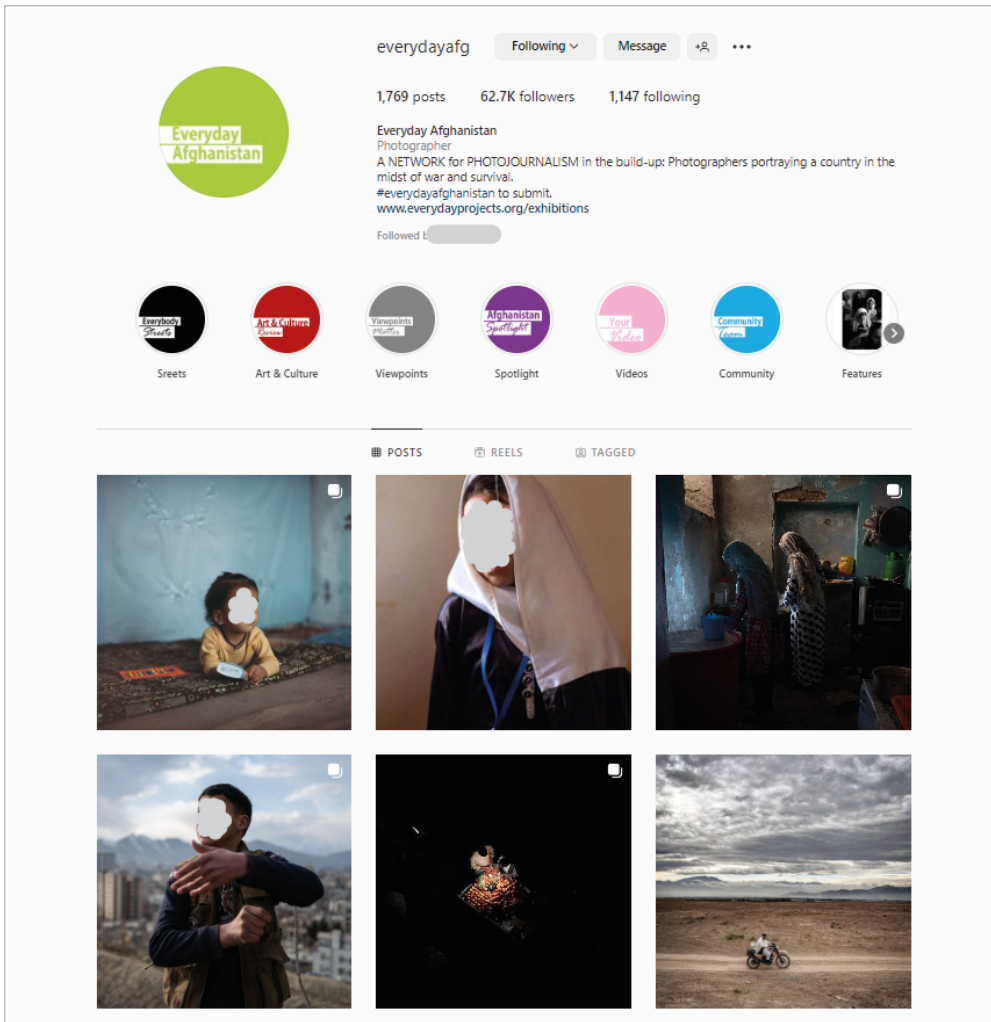


Figure 1: Screenshot from the page Everyday Afghanistan (@everydayafg) on Instagram
 Source: Instagram

5. Methodology: sampling, coding, and analysing the narratives from @everydayafg

This research was based on a mixed-method approach (Morse 2003). By using multiple qualitative and quantitative techniques we aimed to obtain reliable results and minimise the interpretative approach’s shortcomings. The research was divided into three main stages, applying netnography (Kozinets 2010), content analysis (Krippendorff 2004), and an in-depth semi-structured interview (Smith 1995) with the creator of the page @everydayafg.

Since the main goal of the study is to analyse the image and representation of Afghanistan by Afghan collective photographers on social media, first, we decided to focus on Instagram as the most popular platform of self-representation. By early 2023, there are over two billion active users on the platform globally (Kemp 2023). Hence, it becomes useful to dispute narratives, particularly for those minority groups who usually do not have access to mainstream media and thus, use social media to share the inside perspectives of their group, culture, etc.

Moreover, Instagram provides an opportunity to show different aspects of one topic and tell personal stories. The main question of the research was: How is Afghanistan represented in collective documentary photography on Instagram? For answering that question, we decided to focus on three main aspects: what/who is visually depicted, what actions/issues are discussed, and what associations are made in the posts.

5.1. Netnography

Netnography is a methodology designed by Kozinets (2010) based on traditional ethnographic research, which utilises computer-mediated communication as a data source to gain an understanding of a cultural or communal phenomenon. It combines elements such as participant observation, interviews, descriptive statistics, archival data collection, extended historical case analysis, etc. (Kozinets 2010: 60). In this research, it was used as an approach to deciding upon the specific object (@everydayafgh) and to explore how it worked for further data collection.

By simple pre-search of the accounts on Instagram sharing posts under the hashtag #Afghanistan, we realised that most of the publications were made by the public page @everydayafgh dedicated to the representation of the country and was part of the “The Everyday Projects”. The overall review of the posts revealed that the page was curated, and the content was created by various documentary photographers, which meets the criteria and the goal of the research to analyse the image of Afghanistan broadcasted by non-mainstream media.

At the time of the research (2021–2022), the page had 1617 published posts. The data collection was based on systematic sampling: every first monthly photo for the period of 7 years (2014–2021) has been chosen for the analysis. The final sample consisted of 76 photos published since the account creation, which were copied via screenshot and uploaded to a shared Google Drive folder. Additionally, an Excel table was created to retrieve textual information about each post (e.g. caption, hashtags, etc.) and the link to access it on Instagram.

Furthermore, this initial general analysis of the posts revealed the various types of content that should be analysed and included in the research. Most of the photos were accompanied by captions, geolocation tags, and hashtags that helped convey a story. The main language of the page was English, however, in some cases, the author used Arabic and Arabic hashtags. The overall analysis of the Instagram page, the context, general information, type, and content style enabled us to ask more specific questions and start a coding process.

5.2. Content analysis

Content analysis (CA) is a research technique that can be used to make replicable and valid inferences, based on coding specific patterns from texts or other data sources, thus enabling researchers to describe communication content systematically and objectively. According to Krippendorff (2004), it involves specialised procedures that provide new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, and can inform practical actions (Krippendorff 2004: 18).

Following the netnography phase and based on previous literature, a codebook was created to support the coding process based on content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). Since the main goal of the analysis was to investigate objects, their actions, and narratives associated with the country, we developed six main categories for analysis in the format of questions.

1. V1: What: the main object of the image
2. V2: Who: if there is a person/people, identify
3. V3: Where: location/ place based on geotag/hashtag/text
4. V4: Action: what are objects doing?
5. V5: Issue: the main issue/topic of the story
6. V6: Afghanistan: the image of the country

The categories were developed in this way so that both photos and text could be analysed. Each variable had 5-10 codes. Overall, the codebook revealed the objects, actions, associations, style of the photographs, and other variables such as the period when the photo was published (date), geotags, and hashtags. If there were links to other pages, accounts, or the author of the photo, it also was indicated in the table. One of the important categories was the type of image that was also included as a category of the analysis. The material was double-coded: there were two coders who in the first stage analysed the material separately, then discussed and recoded again the posts based on the discussion and remarks given to each other. Thus, the probability of the subjective interpretations was reduced.

5.3. Interview

Smith (1995) argues that semi-structured interviews (SSIs) are convenient methodological tools that enable researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' attitudes toward issues and topics (Smith 1995: 9). However, the author also indicates that the interviewer should ask impartial, clear, and open-ended inquiries to promote a meaningful discussion and avoid bias. We followed the researcher's recommendations when designing the interview guide for this study.

Therefore, the in-depth SSI was the last stage of the research design. The main goal of the interview was to obtain insights from the creator of the project, by exploring its history as well as discussing the motives and intentions of the endeavour. Moreover, the structure of the questions also aimed at revealing the ideas and stories behind

the photographs that could either challenge the results obtained from the content analysis or accompany them and validate the data.

The interview was organised with the @everydayafgh Page Director, Aryan Musleh, and took place online on July 3, 2022. The researchers used the Microsoft Teams platform to record the data and transcribe it afterwards. The discussion included 12 main questions about the goals and objectives of the page, the scope of its audience, content, contributors, and the image/representation of Afghanistan. The interview lasted for 1 hour and 18 minutes and samples from it are used alongside our content analysis results in this paper.

5.4. Ethical considerations and limitations

One of the main limitations of the research is the size of the sample and the choice of one public page which does not allow for extrapolation of the results. However, the present research could be a starting point and a sample that provides a methodological framework for future studies in the communication field. Another obstacle is the need for more transparency from Instagram regarding the algorithms and content classification that could hide photographs from other public pages, thus, making the content choice less explicit. As a good research practice recommended by Kozintes (2010), we contacted the page curator for the interview and informed them about the investigation. We also talked with the photographers who authored the images shown in Figure 1 and received authorisation to reproduce them in the study.

6. Results: sharing stories of Afghanistan beyond the war

The results of the study demonstrate that @everydayafg tries to deviate from mainstream representations of violence. This is done in at least three ways: 1) depicting Afghanistan with human agents, mainly children and young women; 2) covering ordinary lives of people and demonstrating tourist destinations, from a local geographical perspective; and 3) associating the country with a “place of living” and with its “cultural richness”. Other frames demonstrating the hardships of living in Afghanistan, including some consequences of the war, such as “place of struggle”, only appear in third place. However, textual narratives accompanying visuals also raised and discussed serious and significant issues in the region such as human rights, poverty, and labour opportunities that demonstrate the complexity and multi-layered nature of the general depiction of Afghanistan.

The data analysis shows that @everydayafg deviation from the violence representation is achieved by showcasing Afghanistan through the perspectives of individuals who are not actively involved in the war (e.g. children instead of soldiers). This can be perceived when comparing the proportion of images that contain humans (89.5%) with those that only register an inanimate object or location without people in it (10.5%). Moreover, the depiction of humans (Figure 2) has a specific focus: mainly

children (30%), young men (22%), and young women (18%), while elderly (13%) and mixed adults (5%) represent a smaller proportion, as it can be seen in Figure 2.

Who is depicted

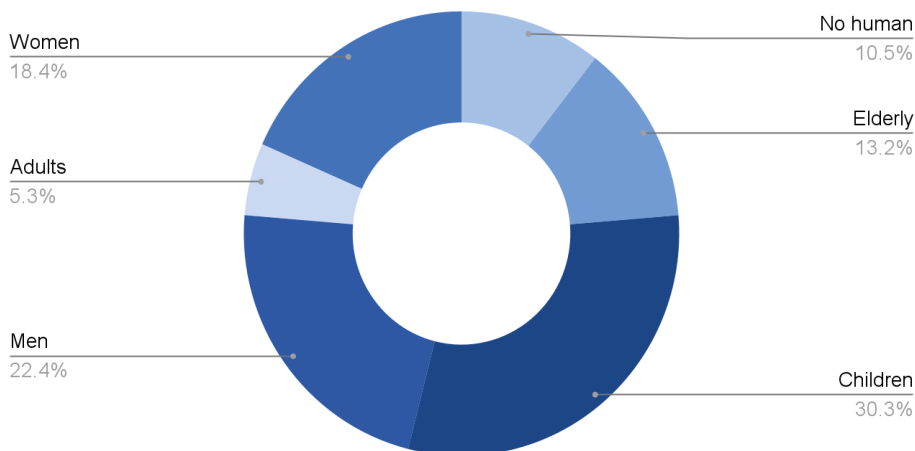


Figure 2: Visual data according to “who” is depicted in the images from @everydayafg
Source: compiled by the authors

Additionally, many of the posts refer to specific local places (24%), such as a market; a small proportion is connected to broader regions or the country as a whole (20%); or to international locations, as for another country (4%). When analysing the main actions in the images, most agents are posing for the photos (28%), followed by working (25%) and playing (14%), with the remaining percentages shared in small proportion by several other actions (e.g. studying, walking, sitting).

Hence, these findings suggest that the studied page attempts to create a different perspective of Afghanistan in the eyes of the international public compared to traditional media that focuses on military forces and civilians suffering from war consequences. Despite the explicit positioning of “the portrayal of the country in war and survival”, the page constructs a more complex portrait of the country redirecting attention from a singular narrative of violence to the inherent potential and diversity of its people. By focusing on younger generations, they emphasise the capacity of the country to progress, while the strong presence of females can be seen as an attempt to break the traditional gender stereotypes associated with Afghan women or with violent males in the war. This is reinforced by the page curator, Aryan Musleh when clarifying the objectives of their page:

“The image that I’m trying to portray through the platform is a fuller picture of the country. What is being reported or shown in the media is also part of the country, it’s happening here, we can’t deny that, but it’s not the complete picture. That’s one of the reasons I created a page to give the audience something that is missing in the headlines of

the newspapers. [...] I'm focusing mainly on human subjects, mostly women and children in Afghanistan, who are not much in the spotlight of the media."

A closer observation of the frames (Figure 3) generated via the content analysis helps us understand what is in the focus of their lenses. Afghanistan is associated with a "place of living" (25%), by portraying people's ordinary lives and their routines, which includes images of children playing with kites or exploring an outdoor playground. Furthermore, we can see the country's "cultural richness" (17%) shown in local cultural accessories and traditional objects (e.g. pottery or tapestry). The country is only framed as a "place of struggle" in third place (16%), which can be seen in photos of labour and healthcare conditions. A frame closer to the conventional media representation, as a "country of war" (13%) is not as prevalent as the other frames, while still showing human faces and the stories behind those agents (e.g. portraits of soldiers).

Afghanistan Frames

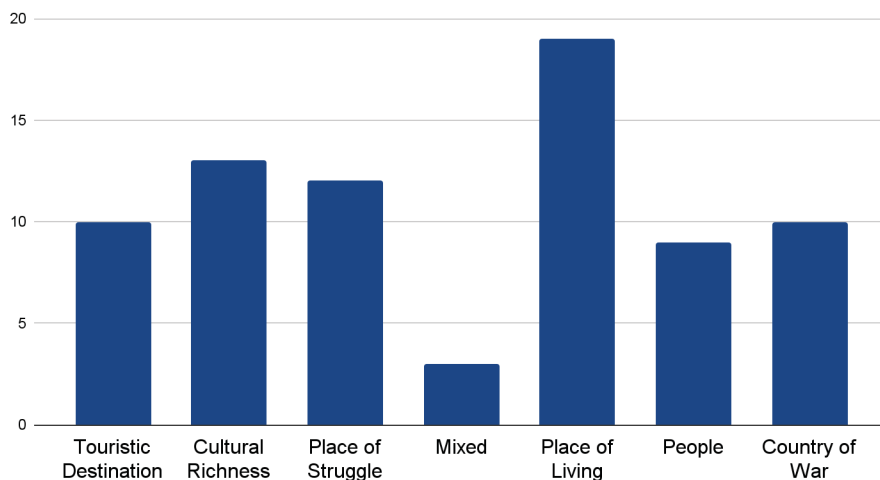


Figure 3: Afghanistan frames depicted by the Instagram posts from @everydayafg

Source: compiled by the authors

Although the posts primarily focus on the daily existence of Afghan people, showing the country's cultural richness, and tourist sights, there is still a debate about complex local realities in the images and captions. We delved into the two categories that depicted the struggles and war to analyse what issues and topics are discussed in the publications (Figure 4). In this matter, we identified that many of the narratives cover serious matters in the region such as labour opportunities (35.3%), lack of human rights (14.7%), the need for women empowerment (14.7%), and basic needs and infrastructure (8.8%). Likewise, part of the content is related to the hardship of life in Afghanistan, usually showing situations connected to healthcare system problems

(8.8%) or the struggles of being displaced by conflicts (e.g. refugees represented 5.9%). More direct representations of the war and violence (e.g. images of soldiers with guns) appear in a small proportion (11.8%) when compared to all the other categories together. Therefore, although it is still present in some images, the depiction of struggles and of the war itself is done mostly via its consequences on the life of Afghan people, and not only as a main isolated topic.

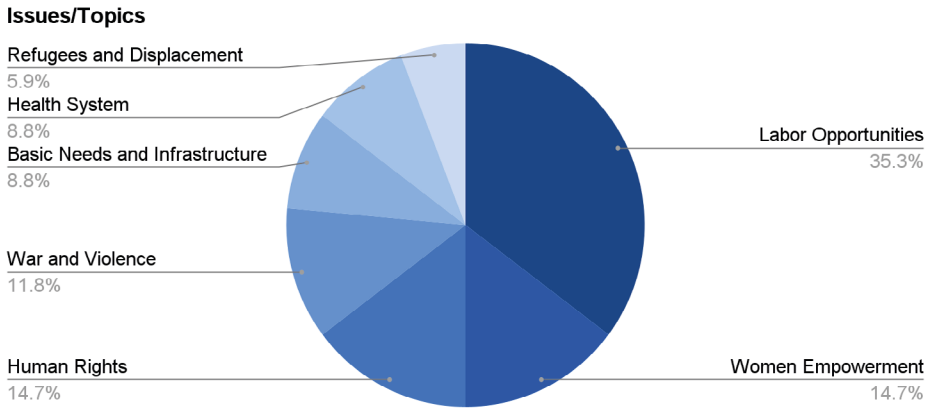


Figure 4: Data distribution according to the “issues” of the war and struggle narratives discussed in @everydayafg
Source: compiled by the authors

The page curator, Aryan Musleh, informs that he also looks at ways to attract a broader audience to their content by appropriating the platform’s logic. One of the strategies adopted is sharing images that they consider to be seen as visually appealing by Instagram users on a general level, usually topics that are trendy on social media, such as travel photography. We can notice this decision reflected in the analysed images, with the frame “tourist destination” connected to 13% of the studied content. Usually, the publications depict outstanding landscapes, tourist places, or historic monuments (architecture), and in many cases, they also include human agents posing in the photos (an example can be seen in Figure 4).

The first image (left) posted on February 2, 2020, shows a landscape from an upper angle. The picture reveals a person standing on the edge of a snowy cliff while looking over the water in the valley, with mountains in the background and something that resembles steam in the air. The post tags a specific location called Bamyán/Bamiyan, in Central Afghanistan, and the caption and hashtags provide further insights into the season. The second image (right) shows two young men posing on a cliff while a child takes a photo of them via a mobile phone. In the background, a lake and a rocky hill are seen, while other people enjoy the weather in paddle boats. The geolocation tag and caption refer to the Band-e-Amir National Park, in the same region as the first photo. This style of image composition (person standing on a cliff by the landscape), common in travel photography on social media, is named *promontory witness* (Smith 2021).

It became a popular pose for Instagram users when travelling to such destinations, with eight images in the analysed sample adopting this or a similar style.



Figure 5: Afghanistan framed as a “tourist destination” on the page @everydayafg

Source: screenshots of @everydayafg / photos by Neman Noori (L) and Farshad Usyan (R)

Moreover, at least three inferences can be made about the publications, according to their visual/textual elements and composition. Firstly, they directly associate Afghanistan with traveling on two levels: the style of the images and the landscapes they depict, indicating the country as a tourist destination that can be discovered by other people. Secondly, both photos go beyond the visual perspective of the country shown in the media (of violence and war) and show calm locations in the middle of nature, where the traveller is undisturbed by anything in sight. Thirdly, the textual and visual content works to complement each other: The snow in the left photo is a sign of the season, which is confirmed by the caption “the Winter chapter of Bamiyan”, using the word *chapter* as a reference to a book/story that could also have a Summer, Spring, and Autumn chapters to be discovered/seen. The right-side image, captions, and tags demonstrate how the youth enjoy their free time (traveling to a national park) and also include a technological device (smartphone) in a meta photo process – or the register of an image *in the make*.

The diversity of topics, visuals, and textual information covered by the page is also pointed out by its curator, Aryan Musleh, in the interview as a strategic decision and a main factor that differentiates their coverage from conventional media’s depiction of the country.

“The main difference between our platform and traditional media is that here you see the routine, we have everything from Afghanistan, from every walk of life, a wider range of issues [while the media selects specific/limited perspectives]. And that’s one of our main goals, to share as much as I can about Afghanistan.”

Finally, a summary of the six evaluated variables, based on the most prevalent categories, could be explained as V1: What is the main object of the image? (Person, 89.5%); V2: Who: if there is a person/people, identify? (Children, 30.3%); V3: Where is the location/place based on geotag/hashtag/text? (Local, 24%); V4: Action: what are objects

doing? (Posing, 28%); V5: Issue: What is the main issue/topic of war and struggle narratives? (Labour opportunities, 35.3%); V6: Afghanistan: How's the country framed? (Place of living, 25%).

7. Conclusions

Our research has demonstrated that visually on Instagram created by collective photographers – as for @everydayafg – can be a tool to challenge established perspectives transmitted via traditional media and help generate new understandings. Nevertheless, the platform itself also contributes to shaping these narratives by boosting or limiting the content reach, while also fomenting specific aesthetics in photography (e.g. *promontory witness*). This logic was recognised by the page curator, and the project in a broader sense, who plays with the algorithm and Instagram capabilities to outreach online distribution of content.

Moreover, this study found that Instagram content on @everydayafg presents a complex range of uplifting topics such as place of living, tourist destinations, and cultural richness; as well as topics related to the hardship of local realities (e.g. health-care and labour conditions). When depicting the war, visual elements and narratives accompanying them showed the impacts of the conflict on average people's lives and its consequence for human rights.

Ultimately, we noticed that Instagram page curators who are willing to challenge mainstream narratives about a location, culture, or people have to understand and play with the platform's logic. In the case of @everydayafg, this process is done by sharing content that would be visually/algorithmically appealing (e.g. travel and tourism) on the platform on a general level, thus increasing the chance of reaching a bigger audience. However, although this decision may favour changing a viewpoint on the covered issue, it presents the problem of creating new perspectives that are still limiting to what a topic (in this case, a country) means visually due to social media aesthetics and operations. Finally, we encourage further research comparing how this phenomenon happens across different social media platforms.

References

- Alper, Meryl 2014: War on Instagram: Framing conflict photojournalism with mobile photography apps. *New Media & Society*, 16/8: 1233–1248. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813504265>
- Brothers, Caroline 1996: *War and Photography: A Cultural History (1st ed.)*. London: Routledge. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203709382>
- Béni, Alexandra – Veloso, Admilson 2022: Debating Digital Discourse: The Impact of User-Generated Content on the Visual Representation of #Africa. In: Mammadov, Azad – Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, Barbara (eds.): *Analyzing Media Discourse: Traditional and New*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 179–209.

- Bergman, Taber – Liu, Fangyuan 2022: The Western Media on the War in Afghanistan: Still Mirroring Official Views. In: Hearn-Branaman, Jesse Owen – Bergman, Taber (eds.): *Journalism and Foreign Policy*. London: eBook. 164–179. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003162964-11>
- Butler, Judith 2016: *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London – New York: Verso Books.
- Campbell, David 2017: How Photojournalism has Framed the War in Afghanistan. In: Simmons, Jon – Lucaites, John Louis (eds.): *In/Visible War: The Culture of War in Twenty-first-Century America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 27–47. Online: <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813585406-002>
- Chippendale, Paul – Zanin, Michele – Andreatta, Claudio 2009: Collective Photography. In: *2009 Conference for Visual Media Production*. London: IEEE. 188–194. Online: [10.1109/CVMP.2009.30](https://doi.org/10.1109/CVMP.2009.30)
- Cressman, Gwen 2019: Documentary Photography and the Representation of Life on the Streets in Two Works by Martha Rosler and Jeff Wall: Ethical and Aesthetic Considerations, *IdeAs*, 13 May, 2019. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.5233>
- Curtis, James 2003: Making Sense of Documentary Photography. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, 6 June, 2003. Online: <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/> [03/09/2023]
- Fahmy, Shahira 2004: Picturing Afghan Women: A Content Analysis of AP Wire Photographs during the Taliban Regime and After the Fall of the Taliban Regime. *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)*, 66/2: 91–112. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016549204041472>
- Falah, Ghazi-Walid 2005: 12 The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers. In: Falah, Ghazi-Walid – Nagel, Caroline (eds.): *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion, and Space*. New York – London: The Guilford Press. 300.
- Fluri, Jennifer 2009: The Beautiful 'Other': A Critical Examination of 'Western' Representations of Afghan Feminine Corporeal Modernity. *Gender, Place & Culture* 16/3: 241–257. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690902836292>
- Griffin, Michael 2004: Picturing America's 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan and Iraq: Photographic Motifs as News Frames. *Journalism* 5/4: 381–402. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884904044201>
- Haight, Michel 2014: Afghanistan War Coverage More Negative over Time. *Newspaper Research Journal* 35/3: 38–51. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/073953291403500304>
- Heck, Axel – Schlag, Gabi 2013: Securitizing Images: The Female Body and the War in Afghanistan. *European Journal of International Relations* 19/4: 891–913. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111433896>
- Hellman, Maria – Wagnsson, Charlotte 2015: New Media and the War in Afghanistan: The Significance of Blogging for the Swedish Strategic Narrative. *New Media & Society* 17/1: 6–23. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813504268>
- Kearns, Matthew 2017: Gender, Visuality and Violence: Visual Securitization and the 2001 War in Afghanistan. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19/4: 491–505. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2017.1371623>

- Kemp, Simon 2023: The Changing World of Digital in 2023. *We Are Social Report, Digital 2023*. 26 January, 2023. Online: <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2023/01/the-changing-world-of-digital-in-2023/>
- Kozinets, Robert 2010: *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Los-Angeles – London – New Delhi – Singapore – Washington D.C.: Sage Publications.
- Krippendorff, Klaus 2004: *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology (Second edition)*. Thousand Oaks – London – New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Ling, Rich 2004: *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*. San Fransisco: Elsevier, Inc. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1029383.1029381>
- Ling, Rich – Horst, Heather A. 2011: Mobile communication in the global south. *New Media & Society* 13/3: 363–374. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810393899>
- Manovich, Lev 2016: Instagram & Contemporary Image. *Manovich.net*, 2016. Online: <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>
- Mitra, Saumava 2020: Picturing Afghan Women'for Western Audiences: The Afghan Perspective. *Journalism*, 21/6: 800–820. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919849359>
- Nyíri, Kristóf 2003: "Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication". In: Kristóf Nyíri (ed.): *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag. 157–184.
- Pollen, Annabella 2015: *Mass Photography: Collective Histories of Everyday Life*. London: I.B. Tauris. Online: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755603701>
- Rosa, Fernanda – Soto-Vásquez, Arthur 2022: Aesthetics of Otherness: Representation of #migrantcaravan and #caravanamigrante on Instagram. *Social Media + Society* 8/1. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103622>
- Russmann, Uta – Svensson, Jakob 2017: Introduction to Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges. *Media and Communication* 5/4: 1–5. Online: <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i4.1263>
- Serafinelli, Elisa – Villi, Mikko 2017: Mobile Mediated Visualities An Empirical Study of Visual Practices on Instagram. *Digital Culture & Society* 3/2: 165–182. Online: [10.14361/dcs-2017-0210](https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2017-0210)
- Shim, David – Stengel, Frank 2017: Social Media, Gender and the Mediatization of War: Exploring the German Armed Forces' Visual Representation of the Afghanistan Operation on Facebook. *Global Discourse* 7/2: 330–347. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2017.1337982>
- Smith, Jonathan A 1995: Semi Structured Interviewing and Qualitative Analysis. In: Smith, Jonathan A. – Harré, Rom – Van Langenhove, Luk (eds.): *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*. 9–26. London: Sage. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221792.n2>
- Stabile, Carol – Kumar, Deepa 2005: Unveiling Imperialism: Media, Gender and the War on Afghanistan. *Media, Culture & Society*, 27/5: 765–782. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443705055734>
- Smith, Sean 2021: Landscapes for "Likes": Capitalizing on Travel with Instagram. *Social Semiotics* 31/4: 604–624. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2019.1664579>

- Veszelszki, Ágnes 2019: Az Instagram-képek meggyőzőési stratégiái a borkommunikációban. *Marketing & Menedzsment* 2019/4: 13–23. Online: <https://doi.org/10.15170/MM.2019.53.04.02>
- Villi, Mikko 2010: *Visual Mobile Communication: Camera Phone Photo Messages as Ritual Communication and Mediated Presence*. Finland, Jyväskylä: WS Bookwell Ltd.
- Wilson, Ross 2014: Sad shires and no man's land: First World War frames of reference in the British media representation of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. *Media, War & Conflict*, 7/3: 291–308. Online: [10.1177/1750635214557987](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635214557987)
- Wright, Terence 2004: Collateral Coverage: Media Images of Afghan Refugees, 2001. *Visual Studies* 19/1: 97–112. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586042000204870>
- Zelizer, Barbie 2005: Death in Wartime: Photographs and the “Other War” in Afghanistan. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 10/3: 26–55. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X05278370>

Admilson Veloso da Silva is a professional journalist (BA) with an MBA in Digital Communication, a master's degree in social communication, and currently pursues a Ph.D. in Communication Science at the Corvinus University of Budapest. Additionally, Veloso lectures several subjects to BA and MA students at the Institute of Marketing and Communication Sciences from Corvinus, including crisis communication, PR and Marketing Communication, and Conflict and Cooperation. His main research interests are social media studies, youth self-presentation, and visual communication. E-mail: veloso@uni-corvinus.hu

Aizhamal Muratalieva is a Ph.D. Candidate in Communication Science at the Corvinus University of Budapest, currently teaching BA and MA students at the Department of Media and Communication. She is a communication practitioner with a background in journalism and internal communications with a scientific interest in public discourse, migration, and minority studies. She holds her MA in Integrated Communication from the Higher School of Economics (Russia) where she researched migration coverage in the Russian media and the xenophobic discourse. E-mail: aizhamal.muratalieva@stud.uni-corvinus.hu, muratalieva.a@gmail.com