

From actors to context: visual gatekeeping in convergent newsrooms

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Abstract

In contemporary digital news environments, photography plays a central role in attracting audience attention and shaping editorial storytelling. Image selection is increasingly embedded in convergent newsroom workflows involving multiple actors, platforms and constraints. This article examines how visual gatekeeping operates in such contexts through ethnographic observations and interviews conducted in five French-speaking daily newspapers in Belgium, France, and Switzerland. Our findings show that visual gatekeeping is a distributed and negotiated process involving multiple actors whose roles are variably defined within newsroom organizations. Beyond individual preferences or traditional news values, image selection is shaped by contextual influences linked to the temporality of news production, the publication medium (print or web), and anticipated audience engagement. We argue that visual gatekeeping is best understood as a context-driven and situated process, in which selection criteria vary depending on temporal, technological, and platform-specific conditions. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of visual gatekeeping as a situational and organizational mediated process in contemporary journalism.

Keywords

Visual gatekeeping; photojournalism; newsroom ethnography; news values; contextual influences; journalism roles; audience influence

Introduction

Images have become a central component of online news articles, playing a key role in attracting attention. In practice, this seemingly simple expectation structures daily newsroom routines and influences how stories are edited, prioritized and displayed across different platforms. Visual journalism has received growing scholarly attention these past few years, but the internal processes through which photographs are selected within newsrooms remain less well understood. This gap is particularly significant in a context marked by the acceleration of the news cycle, the integration of web and print workflows, and the reconfiguration of editorial hierarchies, all of which have transformed how images are selected and used in daily news production.

The digital transformation of journalism has not only expanded the circulation of images but also reshaped internal newsroom routines, workflows, and forms of coordination. Rather than

fundamentally transforming editorial decision-making, as early accounts of participatory journalism suggested (Allan, 2013), these changes have primarily reconfigured how decisions are produced within news organizations (Nilsson & Wadbring, 2015). In increasingly convergent environments, editorial processes involve a growing number of actors, tools, and constraints.

Photography's role in this evolving environment has been particularly affected. The rise of online publishing and multi-platform news production has unsettled traditional divisions of labor in visual work (Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016; Láb & Štefaniková, 2017). Image selection has become a more complex, multi-actor process embedded in these evolving organizational arrangements. In many cases, it is no longer the sole domain of photo editors, where such roles still exist. Today, the role of the visual gatekeeper is diffused across actors ranging from photojournalists, journalists and editors to social media or exposure editors. As de Smaele et al. (2017), Nilsson (2017), and Schwalbe et al. (2015) point out, the widespread availability of digital photographic sources means that many (not only dedicated photo staff) can and do influence image selection. This influence is rarely the result of a single decision-maker, it emerges from a layered process where multiple actors, technological constraints, and platform logics intersect.

Drawing on gatekeeping theory, models of influence, and news values research, this study examines how visual gatekeeping is organized and negotiated within converging newsrooms. Based on ethnographic immersions in five French-speaking daily newspapers in Belgium, France and Switzerland, it identifies the actors involved in image selection and analyzes the contextual factors shaping their decisions. The findings show that visual gatekeeping operates as a distributed and situational process. The study addresses two main questions: who participates in visual gatekeeping processes within newsrooms, and which contextual factors influence image selection decisions.

Background

Gatekeeping theory provides a framework for explaining how information passes through a series of "gates" before reaching audiences. That is the process by which certain items are selected while others are excluded (Tandoc, 2018). Initially framed through White's (1950) functionalist lens, the concept evolved as scholars highlighted the influence of newsroom socialization (Bro, 2019) and shared news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), paving the way for multi-level models that integrate individual, organizational, and societal factors. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) identify five: the individual, the routines, the media organization, the institution, and the wider social system. Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) place the organization at the center of these interactions, arguing that all other influences act through organizational culture and decision-making structures. Firmstone (2023) similarly emphasizes the interplay of norms, values, and role perceptions, alongside ethics, audiences, organizations, and sources, with technology and culture operating as transversal forces. These perspectives highlight that gatekeeping is shaped by organizational logics, technological affordances, and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Indeed, in the digital era, this once-linear process has been reshaped by new technologies, active audiences, and platform logics, prompting a redefinition of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) introduced the "audience channel" to capture the fact that users can now redistribute or even originate news. Bruns (2005) described these actors as "gatewatchers," filtering and amplifying content without necessarily producing it. The gatekeeping extends beyond the point

of publication. Singer (2014) describes a two-step gatekeeping process where the audience act as a “secondary gatekeeper” capable of influencing the visibility of the news. Hermida (2020) introduced “post-publication gatekeeping”, emphasizing how news circulation and visibility are shaped by interactions between publics, platforms and technologies. Building on this, conversational gatekeeping highlights how journalists and audiences jointly negotiate norms and meanings through interaction on social media (Salonen et al., 2023). At the same time, web analytics can be understood as gatekeeping actors in their own right, as they translate audience behavior into measurable signals that inform editorial decisions across multiple levels (Belair-Gagnon, 2022).

Visual gatekeeping and visual influences theory

Studies show that image selection is rarely the prerogative of a single actor (de Smaele et al., 2017; Nilsson, 2017). de Smaele et al. (2017) outline five steps in visual gatekeeping: selection of the news item, search for a relevant image, initial selection by photo editors, consultation with other editors, and final decision. At each stage, different actors influence the outcome. Seelig (2005) describes photo editors as part of an “elite visual” group, balancing aesthetic merit with journalistic meaning. On the web, the process is more fragmented, with overlaps in responsibilities and a greater variety of decision-makers.

Digital technologies have also disrupted control. Schwalbe et al. (2015) describe newsroom actors as “gatecheckers” rather than traditional gatekeepers: they still select and verify images but no longer fully control distribution, given the sheer volume of visual content. Gatecheckers now act as rights protectors, marketers, and educators in visual literacy. External contributors can bypass editorial filters entirely, while active audiences sometimes perform informal gatechecking by questioning or verifying visuals online. Salonen and Laaksonen (2023) show that visual gatekeeping also extends into post-publication environments, where audiences engage with and reinterpret news images, contributing to the circulation, evaluation, and meaning-making of visuals. Such developments place visual gatekeeping at the intersection of internal negotiations, external content flows, and platform logics. These transformations are further intensified by the rise of artificial intelligence which raises additional concerns regarding authenticity, manipulation, and the potential displacement of professional practices (Thomson & Thomas, 2024). However, Matich et al. (2025) argue that these threats “must be understood principally as a political-economic problem rather than a narrowly technological one” (p.2413). Publishing a picture results from multiple intersecting influences, including both structural transformations and enduring editorial routines.

A central routine in both textual and visual selection is the application of news values, criteria of newsworthiness (Sumpter, 2009). While traditional lists of news values differ across studies, they remain critical to understanding editorial practice. Bednarek and Caple (2012, 2017) adapt the concept to news photography, identifying three analytical components: content, composition, and capture. They align these with ten news values, including aesthetic appeal, consonance, elite status, impact, personalization, positivity/negativity, proximity, superlativeness, timeliness, and unexpectedness. Seelig (2005) finds that photo editors combine traditional values with aesthetic considerations, especially among “visual elites”. Beyond newsroom-centered approaches, scholarship in visual culture emphasizes that the meaning of images cannot be reduced to editorial decisions alone, but emerges from situated practices of looking, power relations, and interactions between producers, subjects, and audiences (Cartwright, 2012). de Smaele et al. (2017), Bednarek and Caple (2017) and Harcup and O’Neill (2017) all consider that news values are context sensitive. What constitutes a “good image” is

thus negotiated at the intersection of internal newsroom norms and external pressures, varying across outlets and situations.

Roles and perceptions in the gatekeeping process

As it is clear that the visual gatekeeping role is distributed among multiple actors in newsrooms, analyzing how these actors perceive and perform their roles can help to better understand the visual gatekeeping process. Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) four role types: normative (what journalists think they should do) and cognitive (what they want to do), forming role orientations; and enacted (what they do) and narrated (what they say they do), forming role performance. Normative roles shape cognitive roles, which influence enacted practice; narrated roles feed back into normative and cognitive understandings. Role enactment is mediated by material and contextual constraints (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Journalists often cannot fully realize their role conceptions due to technological, organizational, or economic pressures. In digital environments, audience feedback constitutes an additional layer of influence, as audiences are able to express their expectations of journalists through digital means and, in doing so, alter journalism's role orientations (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019). Moreover, actors' perceptions of their own roles and those of colleagues influence collaboration and negotiation. In visual gatekeeping, these perceptions determine not only who takes the lead in image selection but also how conflicts are resolved and compromises reached.

Despite the extensive scholarly attention devoted to gatekeeping theory, the visual dimension of gatekeeping remains relatively underexplored. While some studies have addressed aspects of visual gatekeeping, they have not fully examined the range of actors involved in image selection within newsrooms. For instance, de Smaele et al. (2017) conceptualized their visual gatekeeping model primarily from the perspective of photo editors, while Schwalbe et al. (2015) incorporated audience influence and external pressures but did not account for the diversity of professional roles within newsrooms, often grouping them under the broad category of journalists. Salonen and Laaksonen (2023) applied the concept of "post-publication gatekeeping" to the visual dimension but without accounting for intra-newsroom dynamics.

This study addresses this gap by examining both the actors involved in visual gatekeeping and the contextual influences shaping their decisions within convergent newsrooms. By analyzing the roles, negotiations, and power dynamics among different professional categories, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how image selection decisions are produced in everyday newsroom practice. In this context, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are the actors of visual gatekeeping? What are their roles, and how do they negotiate image selection decisions?

RQ2: How do contextual factors shape visual gatekeeping decisions?

Method and material

This study examines the actors involved in visual gatekeeping and how they negotiate image selection processes through an ethnographic approach (Robinson & Metzler, 2016) and in-depth interviews. The research was conducted in five leading newsrooms across three French-speaking countries: Belgium (*Le Soir*, *La Libre*, and *L'Écho*), Switzerland (*Le Temps*), and France (*Le Monde*). The methodological framework combines five weeks of newsroom ethnography with semi-structured interviews involving key stakeholders. This study is part of a broader investigation into the role and value of photography in contemporary journalism, focusing on editorial strategies and professional practices. By analyzing image production,

selection, and publication processes, it highlights how photography is integrated into newsroom workflows and the factors influencing its use in news content (Zecchinon, 2024).

The selected news organizations occupy leading positions in their respective national media markets. *Le Monde* and *Le Temps* are widely considered reference newspapers, while in Belgium the study includes the three main French-speaking national dailies: *Le Soir*, *La Libre*, and *L'Écho*. Although these outlets differ slightly in editorial orientation and revenue structures, they share similar profiles as quality daily newspapers. In addition, all selected newsrooms operate within convergent organizational settings, where print and digital production are integrated. While media convergence is a multifaceted concept (Küng, 2016), this study adopts a more operational definition, referring this integration of workflows within newsrooms.

Newsrooms also function within different media systems and regulatory environments in France, Belgium, and Switzerland, which shape journalistic practices and newsroom organization. While media organizations remain embedded in these national contexts (Standaert, 2022), this study does not aim to compare media systems; rather, the countries serve as research sites for examining newsroom practices across comparable types of news organizations. This approach allows us to identify both shared dynamics and specificities beyond individual organizational contexts (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). In line with Livingstone's (2012) argument for a transnational approach, the analysis focuses on professional practices that extend across national boundaries rather than on systemic differences between media systems.

The fieldwork took place between March 2022 and February 2023, with each newsroom observed for one week. While each visit was limited in duration, this multi-sited design (Marcus, 1995) formed a coherent fieldwork setting given the comparable nature of the newsrooms. The study adopted a participant-observer stance (Seim, 2021), privileging attentive, mobile observation of actors and interactions while limiting active participation to avoid bias and protect field access. Drawing on Nicolini's (2009) “zooming-in/zooming-out” approach, the research alternated between close observation of situated practices (e.g., photo selection processes) and broader reflections on how these practices shape organizational dynamics. Data were gathered through observations, in-depth interviews, and think-aloud protocols. A digital field journal was kept throughout, combining field notes and reflexive observations. No audio recording was used; instead, key insights and verbatim statements were written in real time to preserve immediacy and relevance.

In addition to these observations, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals holding key roles in image production and selection processes. The interview sample includes a range of editorial and visual roles across newsroom hierarchies. The interviews explored their perceptions of photography's role in editorial strategies, the constraints imposed by economic pressures, and the challenges arising from the increasing convergence between print and digital platforms. This multi-perspective approach enabled us to compare stated professional discourses with observed practices (Paterson & Domingo, 2008), to analyze how professionals make sense of their decision-making processes (Ryfe, 2020), and to identify variations in editorial attitudes toward photography across different newsroom structures and professional roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

To ensure anonymity, interviewees are referenced using the masculine form, and their functions are categorized according to a hierarchical classification. For each quote from our interviews or newsroom observations, we indicate only the newsroom name and the professional level of

the individual, as classified below. Since job titles vary across newsrooms despite similar functions, we established a three-tiered classification based on hierarchical importance, distinguishing photography-related roles in levels 2 and 3. Level 3 includes operational roles (journalist, print/web editor, graphic designer, photo editor, photographer). Level 2 consists of mid-level positions with managerial responsibilities (section head, department head). Level 1 represents senior management roles (editor-in-chief, deputy editor-in-chief).

Findings

Our analysis reveals three main dimensions structuring visual gatekeeping processes in converged newsrooms: the distribution of roles among multiple actors, the negotiation of visual authority within newsroom hierarchies, and the contextual factors shaping image selection decisions. To better understand these dynamics, we interpret our findings through the lens of role theory and news values, examining how they are enacted and negotiated in practice.

Distributed actors in visual gatekeeping

Photographers determine which images are made available for further selection, as they pre-select and transmit pictures to the newsroom. Photographic production is typically guided by assignments, editorial expectations, and anticipated uses across platforms, which frame what can be captured and how. Within these constraints, photographers exercise discretion by selecting which images to submit, influencing the range of options available to other actors involved in the selection process. *“I choose what I make available to the newsroom, and then they manage from there. If I’m not satisfied with some images, I simply don’t submit them”* (visual level 3, *Le Soir*). This reflects their enacted role in the gatekeeping process (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), as they effectively delimit the range of visual options available to other actors.

Picture editors play a central role in the selection process, as this is their primary function. They have the time, resources, and expertise to make the best possible choices. *“We need dedicated professionals who have a keen eye for images. This allows for a more refined selection than what journalists might make”* (level 2, *L’Écho*). Picture editors have in-depth knowledge of available image sources and are sometimes the only ones in the newsroom with access to them. Their roles vary depending on the newsroom. In some (*La Libre* and *Le Soir*), picture editors primarily act as “image researchers”, responding to specific requests from journalists or editors without making editorial decisions. *“Our job is to find the most appropriate illustrations for different sections of the newspaper (...) when the choice is difficult for the editor or journalist”* (visual level 3, *Le Soir*). They integrate these standards both normatively and cognitively but do not seek to make editorial decisions themselves.

In other newsrooms (*L’Écho*, *Le Temps*, *Le Monde*), picture editors have a more editorial role. This is reflected in their cognitive identification with their function: they actively contribute to defining the artistic direction and selecting images, aiming to add meaning and enhance the informational content through visuals. *“The iconographic department makes editorial image choices. The goal is to add content through the image rather than simply responding to journalists’ specific requests”* (visual level 2, *Le Temps*). This editorial role is sometimes misunderstood by other actors, prompting picture editors to defend their role and highlight their contributions, particularly through captions or by explaining the journalistic value of their selections. *“Photo editors are not journalists. Therefore, they must provide journalistic added value through their explanations, which is why they talk a lot about what they do”* (level 2, *Le Monde*). Their role, whether editorial or focused on “image research”, also affects negotiation

and collaboration dynamics within the newsroom. The more editorial their function, the more they are involved in the selection process in consultation with others, and the more their expertise is recognized and integrated. This variation reflects different configurations of visual gatekeeping authority across newsrooms, depending on how their roles are institutionally defined.

In convergent newsrooms, **journalists** are increasingly involved in selecting images, often from the initial search stage in web-first workflows. This shift is largely driven by efficiency and resource allocation. Convergence has led to a need for greater versatility among journalists (Nygren, 2014; Spyridou & Veglis, 2016). This additional skill can be seen as a form of re-skilling within the profession. However, from the journalists' perspective, some view this as de-skilling, feeling that it detracts from their core responsibilities. Many struggle to reconcile this task with their professional identity, arguing that they lack the necessary expertise, time, and resources to select images effectively.

Both picture editors and newsroom managers often point to journalists' lack of visual literacy as a key issue. *"Our journalists are all brilliant. But they are visually illiterate. They understand the value of images, yet struggle to interpret them"* (visual level 3, *Le Monde*). For journalists, image selection is not fully integrated into their normative or cognitive roles, creating a mismatch between what they believe they should do and the enacted expectations imposed by newsroom routines. They do not see it as part of their job, nor are they inclined to take on this responsibility. It creates challenges in incorporating this competency into their professional practice. This tension illustrates how convergence redistributes visual gatekeeping beyond specialized actors. Nevertheless, journalists remain key interlocutors due to their subject expertise.

Graphic designers play a limited role in the photo selection process, primarily during a consultative stage when images are placed in the print newspaper or integrated into digital templates. Their expertise in visual balance and coherence is recognized and often appreciated, although it can also generate friction, as they and picture editors do not view pictures through the same lens. In practice, they often work in proximity and designers may be more closely involved in specific sections or projects. This relatively constrained role also reflects broader structural limitations of digital design. As Lucca (2025) points out, the increasing standardization of layouts and user experience conventions, combined with technological and resource constraints, tends to limit designers' capacity to intervene beyond predefined templates, particularly in everyday news production.

In print newsrooms, the term "editor" covers several functions. **Editors** act as filters before publication, verifying and, if necessary, modifying image choices. With print/web convergence, their role has expanded to adapting content across platforms while ensuring visual consistency. The selection of web images, often left to editors, presents a challenge, as few have been trained for this skill. *"We are not asked to have any knowledge of photography, nor is it a skill we are really expected to develop as editors. But with experience, we end up acquiring it"* (level 2, *Le Soir*). We identify two roles emerging in digital environments: **web desk editors** and **exposure editors**.

Web desk editors handle breaking news under strong time constraints, producing short web articles and selecting images with minimal consultation. *"If I spend twenty minutes looking for a photo, I'll be behind on all my work. So often, we settle for 'if it's not too bad, it'll do'"* (level 3, *La Libre*). Photo selection is fully integrated into their role in all its dimensions (normative,

cognitive, practical, and discursive), both by others and by the editors themselves. However, their conception of photography and its function differ from that of photo editors. They tend to see images more as a display tool or a “hook”, influencing how they approach the skill of choosing a photo and the news values they apply in doing so. In the selection process, web desk editors handle the initial image search. *“If the options are too limited, I can ask the photo team for help. But that’s a last resort because, in an urgent situation, they don’t respond fast enough, and their search is not quick enough for us”* (level 2, *L’Écho*). The consultation stage is often skipped, as the speed required for this type of news does not allow time for discussion. *“We never ask for opinions on which images to use. We don’t engage in a debate about a photo like we might for a headline. Pictures are seen as less problematic”* (level 1, *La Libre*). Under these conditions, gatekeeping becomes routinized and time-constrained, privileging efficiency over deliberation.

Exposure editor, by contrast, adapt content presentation across platforms, deciding what to publish, where, and when. While editors primarily make these decisions, web edition chiefs, web editors-in-chief, and distribution managers are also involved in most newsrooms. For example, *Le Monde* has editors responsible for the layout and distribution of articles based on their display format. These are called *home editors* because one of their main tasks is managing the homepage of the newspaper’s website and app. They pay close attention to headlines (for SEO purposes) and images (for homepage visual harmony and article visibility based on image size). Their work is guided by audience metrics and visibility logics aimed at maximizing attention, traffic, and subscriptions. Although these tools provide limited insight into photographic content, audience expectations regarding images remain a key concern, particularly when selecting or adjusting visuals.

At *Le Monde*, a home editor observed an overrepresentation of white men in ties on the homepage and attempted to diversify postures and subjects. He acknowledged struggling to find suitable alternatives and emphasized that selecting meaningful visuals is a professional skill, not merely illustrative. He describes his search process as “*basic*” and expresses reluctance to replace the images with ones that are out of context. After an X user criticized the homepage for male dominance, the home editor consulted the web picture editor, who suggested alternative images for Ukraine coverage. This situation highlights the interplay between different gatekeeping actors and the situational redistribution of visual authority. While the home editor initially identifies an issue related to visual representation, he ultimately defers the decision to the picture editor, acknowledging the limits of his own expertise. This illustrates how gatekeeping decisions remain negotiated and contingent, even in digital environments characterized by real-time audience feedback. At the same time, the episode reflects how audience visibility on social media can trigger moments of reflexivity within the newsroom, without fundamentally altering the underlying division of labor. Rather than transforming gatekeeping, such interactions tend to reinforce the need for specialized expertise in visual decision-making.

While the study does not aim to systematically compare media systems, some differences emerged across newsrooms. French and Swiss outlets (*Le Monde*, *Le Temps*) tended to maintain stronger editorial roles for picture editors, whereas Belgian newsrooms more frequently relied on journalists and web editors for routine image selection, reflecting variations in organizational structures and resource allocation. These differences, however, did not fundamentally alter the distributed nature of visual gatekeeping observed across all cases.

Negotiation process tested by visual authority and hierarchy

Within the newsroom, the authority of picture editors in the image selection relies less on formal hierarchy than on recognized expertise-based legitimacy. The presence of a picture editor tends to increase discussions and interactions between actors, whereas in their absence, decisions are made more expediently. These discussions generally focus on technical or contextual criteria rather than on the meaning of the image itself. The degree of editorial responsibility assigned to a picture editor directly shapes their influence in these negotiations. When they hold a more editorial role, their authority in both consultation and final decision-making becomes more pronounced. This supports Seelig's (2005) characterization of picture editors as "visual elites", whose expertise allows them to arbitrate between aesthetic and informational values. In practice, even when other actors challenge an image choice, it is often the picture editor who ultimately proposes an alternative.

This authority does not operate through formal hierarchy but through professional recognition, reflecting a form of negotiated gatekeeping grounded in visual expertise. *"There's no hierarchy here. We argue, in fact. And there's a kind of education to the image that must happen on our side"* (visual level 3, *Le Monde*). These negotiations may also involve differing conceptions of what constitutes a "good" image, with aesthetic considerations becoming a point of discussion between actors with different visual expectations. *"I often share and explain my image choices to build trust. People expect clichéd visuals – blue sky, white sand, palm trees – and those are easily accepted. But I try to propose something different, for instance showing shadows on a beach instead, to open perspectives and offer another way of seeing"* (visual level 3, *L'Écho*).

Picture editors can also intervene at a later stage through post-publication monitoring, correcting images selected without their involvement. *"We try to keep an eye on the website, but instead of being in an active mode where we'd choose a photo for every published article, we mainly keep an eye on things and correct the major mistakes"* (visual level 3, *L'Écho*). This illustrates how gatekeeping extends beyond initial selection and operates as an ongoing, iterative process. In cases where negotiation does not lead to consensus, or when high-stakes content is involved, hierarchical actors (e.g., editorial boards or department heads) may intervene. Although they often lack specific visual expertise, they exercise final authority as guarantors of editorial coherence. This is particularly evident in front-page decisions, where formal validation can override prior selections and reopen the gatekeeping process.

News values and contextual influences

While multiple actors participate in visual gatekeeping, their decisions are also shaped by contextual constraints linked to the organization of news production and the environments in which images circulate. We distinguish two main dimensions influencing photographic selection: the content of the image itself, encompassing what is depicted, its composition, and technical features, following Bednarek and Caple (2017), and the context, referring to the environment and practices surrounding the use of the photograph, as defined by de Smaele et al. (2017). While most studies focus primarily on visual content, our combined interviews and ethnographic approach highlight the equally crucial role of context in shaping selection decisions. In this study, we show that image selection cannot be understood solely through content-based news values, as these are always mediated by contextual influences. Previous research has highlighted how economic pressures, newsroom convergence and visual culture can also shape the production and use of pictures in journalism (Zecchinon, 2025). While these broader structural factors form an important part of the visual news ecosystem, this article focuses specifically on three contextual dimensions that structure visual gatekeeping practices:

the temporality of news production, the publication medium (web or print), and the influence of audiences and platforms.

- Temporality of news

Across the five newsrooms studied, picture selection practices are closely tied to the temporal rhythms of news production. These temporal dynamics vary across different types of online content. While breaking news and web desk production often require rapid image selection under strong time pressure, other forms of digital journalism, such as long-form features or multimedia investigations, allow for more deliberate visual choices. In the newsrooms observed, however, these formats remained relatively marginal compared with the volume of fast-paced news production. Moreover, when such projects did occur, they were often associated with in-house reporting and frequently accompanied by print publication, which typically involved more careful visual selection. This reinforces the distinction between publication environments discussed below where standardized formats and production workflows favor speed and efficiency over more resource-intensive visual work (Lucca, 2025).

For immediate, fast-paced news, web editors often worked under intense time pressure, prioritizing speed over deliberation. We observed that decisions were frequently based on headlines rather than a full reading of the article, and images were typically drawn from the first results of agency feeds. As one web editor at *Le Soir* put it, when editing a short online piece on Brussels tourism, *“I won’t waste too much time on this. It’s a small web piece... I’ll just pick one of the first agency shots of Mini-Europe”*. This reliance on immediate agency results reinforces a preference for recent, literal images matching the headline (reflecting the news values of consonance), with selection typically favoring one of the first images in the feed (usually the most recent). Such practices reflect a Google-like trust in the search tool and reinforcing the central news value of timeliness: the closer the image is to the event and the more recent it is, the more likely it is to be chosen. Moreover, immediacy leaves little room for careful assessment of each available image or its technical and aesthetic appeal. *“We take the first decent photo that comes along... when the news is very hot, we don’t have time to ask if it’s really the best”* (level 1, *La Libre*).

This contrast highlights how the temporal organization of news production shapes visual gatekeeping practices. When news is produced under tight deadlines, image selection tends to prioritize speed and availability, whereas slower production cycles allow for more deliberate visual choices and greater collaboration between newsroom actors. In slower news cycles, typically associated with in-house reporting and print-oriented work, actors as the picture editors describe more reflective practices. They can anticipate coverage, browse alternative sources, and collaborate with graphic designers to test images in page layouts. *“When I see something nice, I download it so I can use it later... I double-check for new options but often go back to those earlier selections”* (visual level 3, *L’Écho*). This extra time allowed for the inclusion of more informative or aesthetically distinctive images, signaling to the reader that the article represented substantial journalistic investment. While speed has long been a central value in journalism, our observations show that the digital organization of news production transforms how this temporal pressure affects visual gatekeeping. In fast-paced online news production, image selection is frequently delegated to web editors or journalists working under strong time constraints, reducing opportunities for consultation with picture editors and redistributing visual gatekeeping responsibilities across newsroom roles.

- Type of medium

The medium in which the news will be published – print or web – exerts a strong influence on visual gatekeeping decisions. In print, the scarcity of visual space and the premium placed on page design encourage careful, deliberate picture selection. Editors often reserve images for lead stories on a page and seek visuals with both informational and aesthetic value. “*Since we have fewer images, the ones we use are chosen with great care*” (level 1, *Le Temps*). Print pictures can afford to be subtler, privileging aesthetic appeal over literal representation.

On the web, by contrast, the presence of a picture is seen as essential for visibility, particularly on social platforms and aggregators. The absence of an image risked reduced exposure by algorithms. Consequently, a picture’s presence often matters more than its content. In all newsrooms observed, editors or picture editors sometimes justified a choice with comments such as, “*It’s not a good photo, but we have to*” or “*It doesn’t matter, it’s for the web*”. Selecting an image simply “*because there is no choice*”, combined with the speed of online publishing, tends to reduce photographs to mere illustrations. For example, when illustrating a road accident in Ukraine with no agency images available, a web editor from *La Libre* reluctantly resorted to a generic Shutterstock image of an ambulance, captioned as a stock illustration.

These observations suggest that images fulfil different editorial functions depending on the medium, pointing to a differentiated configuration of visual gatekeeping across publication environments. Journalists and editors often described print images as requiring greater aesthetic or symbolic value, while web images were more frequently treated as functional elements ensuring visibility and readability. In this sense, visual gatekeeping is not a uniform process but is shaped by the specific constraints, affordances, and audience logics of each medium, leading to distinct selection criteria and professional expectations.

- Influence of the audience and platforms

In contemporary digital news environments, audience influence rarely operates through direct interaction alone but rather through newsroom constructions of an “imagined audience” (Coddington et al., 2021), inferred from platform metrics, algorithmic visibility, and editorial interpretations of what attracts attention online. Lead images for web stories functioned as “entry points” on homepages, apps, and social media feeds, competing for attention alongside headlines. Although the metrics used in different newsrooms did not provide extensive insight into the nature of photography itself during our observations, audience expectations were clearly considered in visual selection. Newsrooms have integrated the demand for quickly consumable online information, understandable at a glance, with minimal room for suggestion. “*It doesn’t matter how it looks, it has to explain. Someone reading on their phone needs to see the photo and immediately know what we’re talking about*” (level 1, *L’Écho*). Consequently, editors frequently prioritize clear, literal visuals that allow for instant comprehension.

This tendency toward literalism often reinforces stereotypical visual representations, reflecting the news value of consonance. For instance, a *Le Monde* homepage editor, discussing a story on Ukraine’s EU accession, replaced two earlier composite images with one showing Ukrainian and EU flags face-to-face, judging it “*more readable*” and directly aligned with the headline. This decision reflects an anticipation of audience expectations rather than direct feedback. The choice also reflected the belief that web audiences are “*less captive*” than print readers, requiring stronger “*hooks*” to engage them. Practices of this kind also reinforced the news values of eliteness and personalization, as editors usually prefer close-ups with fewer contextual

details. For example, in a portrait, a bust shot was often favored over a wider view, facilitating immediate recognition.

In contrast, print lead images – particularly on front pages – could adopt more informative or reflexive approaches, emphasizing aesthetic appeal over consonance thus revealing a tension between aesthetic considerations and more conventional news values in visual gatekeeping. Such images can offer a visual experience that deviate from conventional expectations. For example, in *L'Écho*, a weekend print story on Brussels Airport featured a close-up of departure board, which the picture editor justified to the chief editor as an intentional avoidance of the “expected” plane-on tarmac shot. Online coverage of the same topic, however, employed that conventional image, prioritizing immediate recognition and algorithmic visibility.

In this sense, audience influence does not simply reflect readers’ preferences but emerges through the interaction between editorial judgments, platform infrastructures, and newsroom interpretations of audience engagement, extending visual gatekeeping beyond selection into ongoing processes of adjustment and evaluation.

Discussion

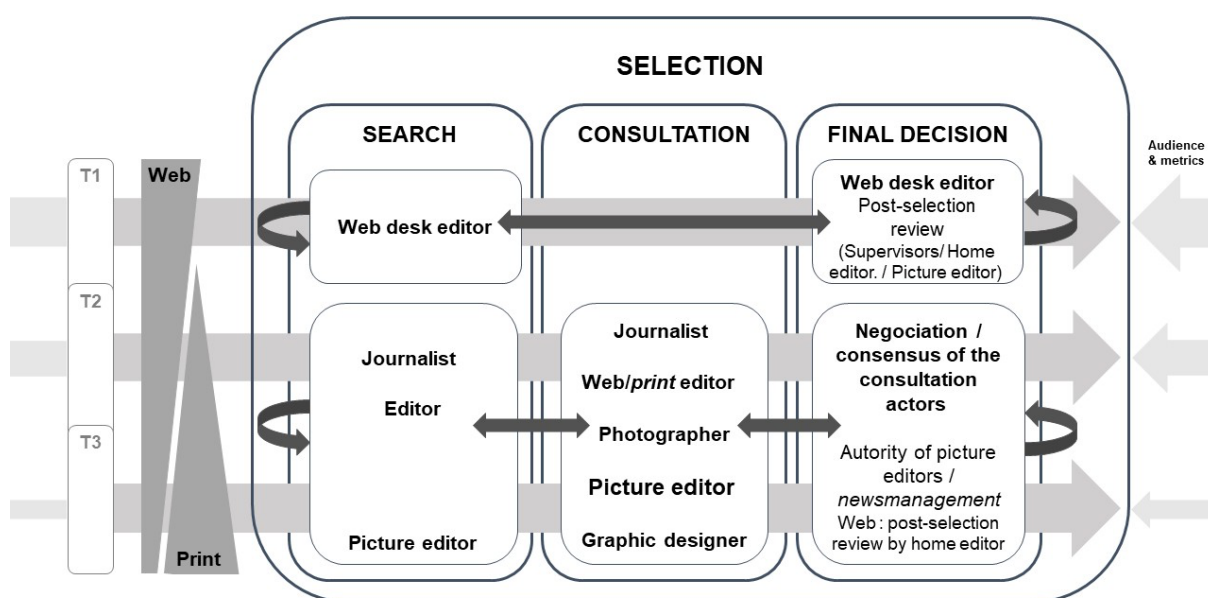
Building on our description of the various actors involved in the picture selection process and their respective roles, as well as the analysis of news values and their interaction with contextual factors, we propose an updated model of visual gatekeeping. Compared with earlier models (de Smaele et al., Schwalbe et al.), our model expands visual gatekeeping in three ways: by mapping a broader range of newsroom actors, by emphasizing the negotiated nature of visual authority, and by integrating contextual influences such as temporality, medium and audience expectations. Our findings suggest that visual gatekeeping in converged newsrooms cannot be understood solely through traditional news values or professional judgment. We define visual gatekeeping as a distributed, negotiated, and context-dependent process through which news images are collectively selected and structured by temporal constraints, platform logics, and organizational arrangements. This definition conceptualizes visual gatekeeping as a dynamic and iterative process structured by contextual influences.

We first decompose the selection process into three stages, drawing on the visual framework of de Smaele et al. (2017): the search for visuals, consultation among newsroom actors, and the final selection decision. On this basis, we present a more nuanced model (see Figure 1). We integrate a broader set of variables into the visual gatekeeping model and show that these stages are not strictly linear but involve iterative adjustments and feedback loops between actors.

A detailed analysis of the roles of each actor and their interrelations allows us to identify and differentiate participants at each stage of the process. With the current trend toward greater versatility and task dispersion across multiple actors, the roles and functions of individuals can be enacted and perceived differently by members of specialized groups, each guided by their own norms and conventions, complicating chains of cooperation. As Berthaut (2013) observes in the production of France 2’s news programs: “within the collective work, different ways of thinking about ‘journalism’ and of ‘doing journalism’ coexist and dominate” (p. 31). The same applies to photography, which operates “at the convergence of multiple expectations” (ibid.). Consequently, the visual gatekeeping process involves multiple actors and functions, often spanning distinct hierarchical levels within the newsroom. Everyone is also influenced by personal objectives, which must be negotiated in relation to the goals of others. This highlights that visual authority is not fixed but negotiated across actors and situations. Role theory

(Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017) helps explain these dynamics, but our findings extend it by showing that role enactment in visual gatekeeping is continuously negotiated and shaped by situational constraints within the newsroom. Visual expertise remains central despite increasing task dispersion across actors.

Figure 1 : Visual gatekeeping as a distributed, multi-actor, and context-driven process in convergent newsrooms



The analysis of the various individuals involved in the process reveals that while photo selection is driven by certain news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2017; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), context emerges as a central structuring factor. News values alone cannot account for selection decisions. Aesthetic appeal also emerges as a particularly subjective news value, shaped by individual perceptions and professional negotiations, which makes it unevenly defined and implicitly negotiated across actors and situations. This highlights that personal influences are inseparable from organizational definitions of role, status, and expertise. A journalist's reluctance to see photography as part of their normative role, or a graphic designer's claim to aesthetic input, only become consequential because the newsroom provides or denies them institutional legitimacy. Hence, in visual gatekeeping, the "individual" level of Shoemaker and Reese's model cannot be detached from the organizational level: the newsroom acts as a filter that authorizes or limits the enactment of personal orientations in practice. The organization acts as a central mediating layer that enables and constrains the enactment of gatekeeping roles. These role conceptions also intersect with practices. Our fieldwork shows that practices are not only tied to established news values, but also to contextual pressures that extend far beyond the image content itself. We emphasize three that appear on the visual gatekeeping model (Figure 1).

Regarding temporality, we structured newsroom practices around distinct time frames (T1, T2, T3), ranging from immediate breaking news to follow-ups and colder, long-form reporting.

This division strongly conditions how pictures are chosen. In T1, speed dominates, leaving web editors little room for consultation or aesthetic consideration: the photograph becomes a placeholder for visibility rather than an editorially meaningful choice. By contrast, T2 and T3 provide opportunities for negotiation, collaboration, and a search for distinctive or aesthetic visuals, especially in print. The very definition of what constitutes an “acceptable” picture is therefore dependent on the temporal regime of the story. This temporal division also maps onto the distinction between platforms: immediacy is structurally linked to the web, which dominates at T1, while slower cycles (T2 and especially T3) are more often associated with print, where additional time allows for deliberation and more curated visual choices. Inversely, the relevance of print diminishes as immediacy increases, while the role of the web decreases as stories move toward colder, long-form coverage. Our findings show that temporal constraints do not simply accelerate gatekeeping but transform its nature, shifting decision-making from deliberative to routinized practices under conditions of immediacy.

The medium itself also acts as a structuring influence. Print environments encourage selective and often more aesthetic choices, whereas on the web images primarily function as devices of visibility shaped by platform constraints. Here, photographs function primarily as devices of visibility and algorithmic compatibility rather than as carriers of journalistic meaning. This supports the idea that visual gatekeeping is environment-specific, varying across publication contexts characterized by distinct affordances, constraints, and audience expectations. These findings highlight differences between visual and textual gatekeeping, although both remain shaped by broader organizational routines and context-dependent processes long identified in gatekeeping research. While textual decisions are guided by narrative coherence and editorial framing (Tuchman, 1978), visual gatekeeping places greater emphasis on immediacy, aesthetic considerations, and technical constraints such as format and visibility. In digital environments, images function as entry points for content, making attention and readability central selection criteria.

Finally, the audience and platforms act as retroactive and anticipatory influences. Audience influence operates primarily through mediated and anticipatory processes rather than direct interaction. This finding aligns with research on post-publication gatekeeping (Singer, 2014; Hermida, 2020; Salonen & Laaksonen, 2023), as image selection continues to be adjusted after publication. These influences are largely mediated through newsroom constructions of an “imagined audience” (Coddington et al., 2021).

This dynamic can be further understood through recent work conceptualizing audiences as a “discursive institution” (Banjac, 2022). Rather than acting solely as external recipients, audiences contribute to shaping journalistic expectations, roles enactments, and newsroom routines. In our case, these expectations are internalized within newsroom practices, particularly through the work of web and exposure editors, who orient image selection toward visibility, immediacy, and audience engagement. However, this internalization remains uneven across professional roles. While some actors align their practices with anticipated audience preferences, others – such as picture editors – maintain alternative professional orientations grounded in aesthetic or informational values. This suggests that audience expectations operate as a structuring but contested force within visual gatekeeping processes.

These dynamics should also be situated within broader structural transformations affecting contemporary newsrooms. Previous research shows that economic pressures, newsroom convergence, and visual culture shape the place and status of photography within news organizations (Zecchinon, 2025), helping to explain some of the variations observed across

newsrooms, particularly in the allocation of visual tasks and the degree of editorial authority granted to picture editors. Taken together, these findings suggest that visual gatekeeping is best understood as a context-driven and multi-level process shaped by the interplay between roles, organizational structures, and contextual constraints.

Conclusion and further research direction

This study has shown that photographic gatekeeping is far from being controlled solely by the actors inside the newsroom. Rather, visual gatekeeping emerges as a distributed, negotiated, and context-dependent process. While editors, journalists, and photo specialists continue to make daily choices, their decisions are profoundly shaped by organizational definitions of roles, by routine constraints, and by external influences. In line with Schwalbe et al. (2015), newsroom actors increasingly resemble gatecheckers or gatewatchers: they verify, adapt, and circulate images, but ultimate visibility is co-determined by platform logics and audience behavior. As Ferrucci and Kuhn (2022) remind us, the organization remains central, but it does not operate in isolation. It mediates both internal negotiations and external constraints, balancing between editorial culture and the demands imposed by technologies, formats, and audiences. The central implication is that visual gatekeeping must be conceptualized as a multi-actor, multi-level process, where the newsroom acts as a point of mediation between external pressures and editorial practices. More specifically, this study contributes to gatekeeping theory by demonstrating that visual gatekeeping is increasingly structured by contextual constraints, leading to a shift from actor-centered to context-driven models of editorial decision-making. The acceleration of workflows, the standardization of digital formats, and the audience-driven preference for literal, easily legible images are all reshaping not only how pictures are chosen but also what counts as a “good” journalistic image. In this sense, visual gatekeeping reflects broader transformations in journalism, where external technological and economic actors have become powerful co-gatekeepers. These transformations also highlight the growing prominence of visual elements in digital journalism, where images play a central role in attracting attention and shaping audience engagement, reinforcing their strategic importance in editorial decision-making.

This research is not without limitations. The study is based on ethnographic observations and interviews conducted in five French-speaking daily newsrooms between 2022 and 2023. The results cannot be generalized to all media organizations, nor do they capture developments since that period. Notably, the growing integration of generative AI constitutes an emerging layer of gatekeeping influence. Beyond automated image production, AI introduces new forms of algorithmic control over the selection, visibility, and circulation of news images, while raising concerns about authenticity, editorial authority, and the reconfiguration of professional roles in already resource-constrained newsrooms (Matich et al., 2025). Future research should examine how these technologies reshape newsroom routines and decision-making. Beyond newsroom practices, further studies are needed on how audiences perceive and evaluate news images. If editorial choices are increasingly made with imagined audience preferences in mind, we need empirical evidence of how users interpret and engage with pictures. Reception studies could complement newsroom-focused approaches, bridging the gap between production and consumption of visual journalism.

In conclusion, photography remains a central yet contested resource in contemporary journalism. While newsroom actors continue to play a key role, their decisions are embedded in an expanded ecology of influences that includes routines, organizations, technologies and

audiences. Understanding visual gatekeeping requires moving beyond the binary of individual versus organizational factors toward a context-driven, multi-level process.

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