

The place and status of photography in changing newsrooms: economic constraints, digital convergence and visual culture in the 2020s

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Abstract

In the context of financial constraints, digital transformation, and evolving editorial priorities, this study examines the role and status of photography in contemporary newsrooms. Drawing on ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews conducted in five French-speaking newspapers in Belgium, France and Switzerland (*Le Soir*, *La Libre*, *L'Écho*, *Le Monde*, and *Le Temps*), the study analyzes how economic pressures, newsroom convergence, and visual culture influence editorial strategies related to photography. Findings reveal a spectrum of adaptation, ranging from balanced integration of photography to a state of imbalance where visual content is deprioritized. While financial constraints often lead to reduced investment in photography, a strong visual culture and editorial visual competence within a newsroom can serve as mitigating factors. The study highlights the persistent challenges of fully integrating photography into digital-first strategies and underscores the importance of editorial decisions in shaping photography's place within contemporary journalism.

Keywords: Photojournalism, photography, newsroom convergence, visual culture, editorial strategies, digital transformation,

Introduction

The importance of images in contemporary journalism is undeniable: they capture attention, structure narrative and reinforce the impact of articles. Yet at a time when the media are facing increasing economic constraints and accelerating digital transformation, the place of photography in newsrooms is paradoxically under threat. While technology encourages the omnipresence of visuals, investments in photography are not necessarily aligned with this visual dominance (Zecchinon, 2024). While digital platforms require images to maximize reader engagement, making photographs a recognized 'entry point' to news articles (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017) their editorial treatment is often relegated to second place, and their journalistic value questioned. The place photography occupies in newsrooms and the attention it receives within editorial strategies remain underexplored.

Since the 1990s, the press has faced cost-cutting measures to address financial pressures, with the rise of the internet reducing paper sales and ad revenues. Newspapers have struggled to

develop alternative revenue streams, balancing print and digital formats in traditionally paper-based newsrooms (Arrese, 2016). Recent challenges, such as rising paper prices, energy costs, and inflation following COVID-19 and the 2022 war in Ukraine, have added to the pressure. Among all cultural sectors, photojournalism has been particularly affected by digitalization, which has created a negative synergy between pre-existing vulnerabilities and new structural disruptions (Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016). Although photographs still attract clicks and attention, their editorial status has been eroded, with photo departments often among the first targets of newsroom restructuring. As Láb and Štefaníková (2017) note, the replacement of full-time professional photojournalists by wire services, freelancers, citizen journalists, or even writing reporters reflects not only financial constraints but also shifting conceptions of photographic labor and authorship. Within advertising-driven models, quantity frequently prevails over quality, prompting newsrooms to prioritize speed, volume, and virality over aesthetic or journalistic standards.

In this context of accelerating media convergence and economic transformation, this tension has intensified. As Klein-Avraham & Reich (2016) observe : “digitalization did not ‘cause’ the threats to professional photojournalism (...). However, the ways in which digitalization was implemented evoked a negative synergy of old and new weaknesses of photojournalism as visual creatures in predominantly textual kingdoms” (p. 439). Their analysis situates photography at the intersection of structural fragility and rapid technological change, arguing that these factors have left visual journalists in a particularly vulnerable position within the broader crisis affecting the news industry. Simonsen & Evensen (2017) suggest that “photo departments with a strong culture and visual editorial competence will try to develop creative and flexible responses to a climate marked by disruptive change”. Based on these studies, we propose to explore these three aspects – economic constraints, technological change, and evolving newsroom – in greater depth, as they form the foundation of our study. The analysis draws on an in-depth qualitative study conducted in five French-speaking daily newspapers in Belgium, France and Switzerland. This article focuses exclusively on photography in newsrooms, rather than the broader field of visual journalism that includes video, illustration, or infographics. ~~It seeks to understand how photography is positioned within editorial strategies in an era marked by economic constraints, technological change, and evolving newsroom cultures.~~

Literature review

Business model fragility and its impact on news photography

Historically, the business model of print journalism has relied on two main revenue streams: sales (subscriptions and single-copy purchases) and advertising. Within the framework of platform economics, a newspaper can be conceptualized as a two-sided market that connects two interdependent user groups: readers and advertisers (Anderson & Jullien, 2015; Gabszewicz & Sonnac, 2010). The newspaper facilitates interaction between these groups, each of which derives specific benefits: readers gain access to information, while advertisers reach a targeted audience. Since the early 2000s, however, this model has been severely disrupted by the rise of the internet, real-time access to information, and the broader process of digitalization. Audiences have become increasingly reluctant to pay for news, while advertisers have redirected their spending toward digital intermediaries, particularly powerful infomediaries like Google and Facebook (Cools, 2022; Rebillard & Smyrniotis, 2019; Sonnac, 2009). The business model of the press is under increasing strain, as both revenue streams are

being simultaneously eroded (Belleflamme et al., 2022). These challenges are more acute in small markets like Belgium or Switzerland, where limited population constrains audience reach and ad potential. Such markets face structural disadvantages: fewer resources, less innovation, and limited scale economies (Lowe & Nissen, 2011; Puppis et al., 2009).

Within this climate of austerity, newsroom managers have had to make strategic trade-offs, cutting costs in some areas while maintaining investment in others, particularly digital tools and platforms (Standaert, 2016). While not solely financial, editorial strategies are strongly shaped by economic considerations regarding photography. Photojournalists often occupy a precarious position within newsroom hierarchies, making them more susceptible to layoffs during financial contractions (Lindblom, 2015). Photography is frequently viewed as illustrative rather than journalistic, which reinforces its subordinate status in relation to text-based reporting (Ritchin, 2013; Zelizer, 2010). The digital environment has altered the economic logic of photography itself as well as its quality. Láb & Štefaniková (2017) observe that technological developments now allow media outlets to publish virtually unlimited numbers of images at no additional cost, which has fundamentally altered the economic logic of online news production. Advertising success increasingly depends on the number of clicks generated and the amount of time users spend on each page. Traditional genres like photo essays have been partly replaced by simpler single-image formats suited to fast-paced, entertainment-driven media.

Digitalization, convergence et the transformation of photographic work in newsrooms

Convergence has emerged as a crucial concept in journalism studies, reflecting the transformations in media production, distribution, and newsroom organization. Initially understood as the technological integration of media, computing, and communication industries (Küng, 2016), convergence now encompasses broader cultural and structural shifts in journalistic practices. Newsroom convergence refers to the transition from single-platform journalism to multi-platform production, reshaping editorial workflows and professional roles (Jenkins, 2006; Singer, 2008). Küng (2016) outlines three overlapping phases of convergence in news organizations: the creation of autonomous digital units, their gradual integration into traditional editorial structures, and the shift to a fully “web-first” strategy, where digital distribution becomes the primary output. However, as Jenkins (2006) notes, convergence should be understood as a process rather than a fixed outcome, with local variations shaped by organizational strategy, technological capacity, and market pressures (Domingo et al., 2007).

Empirical research shows that convergence significantly impacts photojournalism, both in terms of professional identity and production routines. In the Czech context, Štefaniková & Láb (2018) argue that convergence has radically transformed visual storytelling. They observe a shift away from the idealized ‘decisive moment’ toward a more cinematic mode of image production, facilitated by burst-mode shooting and near-unlimited digital storage. Klein-Avraham & Reich (2016) study on Israeli photojournalism reveals that rather than enhancing collaboration with other newsroom actors, digitalization often reinforces the isolation of photojournalists. Their analysis also identifies five structural vulnerabilities that make photojournalism particularly susceptible to effects of digitalization: poor historical timing of digital transition, photography’s inferior status in text-centric cultures, denial of creative authorship, editorial routines shaped by managerial needs, and de-skilling through substitution of expertise with generic digital skills. This last effect of convergence has been widely documented in the scholarly literature, particularly in relation to ‘multiskilling’ and ‘multitasking’.

In an environment shaped by digital innovation and resource constraints, journalists are increasingly expected to master multiple skills (e.g., photography, video, text, editing) and perform a broader range of tasks (Jenkins, 2006; Küng, 2016). This push toward polyvalence has generated debate about whether it constitutes de-skilling or up-skilling. Nygren (2014) argues that multiskilling enhances journalistic autonomy and creativity, enabling reporters to take greater ownership of their work. Yet in the case of photojournalism, this shift often translates into increased workload without corresponding support or recognition. Studies document how photojournalists are now required to write articles, shoot video, and produce multimedia packages, often with minimal training or editorial guidance (Bock, 2008; Santana & Russial, 2013). Bock (2008) shows that convergence increases both cognitive and physical demands, from heavier gear to technical and spatial challenges in the field.

Štefaniková & Láb (2018) also note that non-photographers increasingly perform photographic tasks. Czech photojournalists report feeling more threatened by colleagues equipped with digital cameras than by amateurs or audiences. Their concept of the ‘myth of acceleration’ further challenges the assumption that digital tools necessarily lead to efficiency. While each stage of the digital workflow is technically faster, the accumulation of new responsibilities, from shooting and editing to keywording and archiving, often makes the overall process as time-consuming as the analog era.

Organizational and visual culture and their effects on photography

Convergence is not merely a technological process but also a cultural transformation within news organizations. As Hanitzsch (2007, p. 269) defines it, culture in journalism encompasses “a set of ideas (values, attitudes, and beliefs), practices (of cultural production), and artifacts (cultural products, texts)”. In journalism studies, organizational culture plays a key role in shaping newsroom dynamics and editorial decision-making (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022). While there is no universal journalism culture, each media organization develops its own, ultimately leading to the production and dissemination of news. Menke et al. (2018) argue that newsroom culture plays a dual role in shaping convergence: it both defines the conditions for implementing new practices and influences journalists' attitudes toward change. They emphasize that convergence should not be seen solely as a shift in news production but as a cultural reconfiguration, where existing organizational norms facilitate or hinder its adoption. Within newsrooms, cultural variations influence editorial structures and decision-making processes (Esser, 1998), while visual culture shapes the role and influence of visual journalists. Lowrey (2002) highlights the existence of subgroups within newsrooms, distinguishing between visual journalists (photographers, designers, graphic artists) and word journalists (reporters, editors). Visual journalists, even without overt conflicts, assert control over the presentation norms of news content. de Smaele et al. (2017) point out the central role of newsroom culture in shaping photographic selection processes. While photo editors often present their decisions as autonomous, intuitive, or even emotional, the study reveals that these choices are in fact deeply embedded in organizational routines, house style, peer dynamics, and editorial hierarchies.

This intersection between visual decision-making and organizational culture is at the core of the model proposed by Simonsen & Evensen (2017), who identify three organizational responses to crises within photo departments : rejection (the very notion of crisis is denied or minimized), adaptation (the crises is acknowledged and met with creative or structural adjustments) and capitulation (photo departments relinquish control and accept managerial directives). These responses depend not only on structural constraints but also on how much

visual work is valued. Newsrooms with strong visual culture are more likely to pursue flexible, creative strategies and retain influence.

This literature review has demonstrated that the place of photography in contemporary newsrooms can be understood at the intersection of economic, technological, and cultural dynamics. These dimensions are not isolated or hierarchical; rather, they are deeply interconnected and jointly shape editorial strategies and newsroom practices. To analyze the data, which combines ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews conducted in five newsrooms, we adapted the framework proposed by Simonsen and Evensen (2017). Our study broadens this model to encompass the attitudes and decisions of entire newsrooms, not just photo departments. This expansion is necessary to reflect the reality that editorial and strategic decisions about photography are often shaped by managerial positions and the newsroom's overall culture, particularly in contexts where dedicated photo departments no longer exist.

Our study contribution lies in its comprehensive examination of newsroom practices and strategies concerning photography. By expanding the analytical framework to include managerial roles and newsroom culture, we fill a gap in research: while studies have often focused either on photo departments (de Smaele et al., 2017; Simonsen & Evensen, 2017), on broader newsroom adaptations to crises (Horst & Moisaner, 2015) or on convergence impact (Domingo et al., 2007; Menke et al., 2018; Singer, 2008) few have examined photography as an integrated part of editorial and managerial decision-making. This study extends the model and frames photography as a strategic, managerial concern in today's newsrooms.

In this context, we address the following research question: **How do economic, cultural, and technological factors interact to shape editorial strategies regarding the role and status of photography in newsrooms? What balance – or imbalance – between these factors influences decision-making on photographic content?**

Method and material

This study investigates the factors influencing editorial strategies related to photography in newsrooms through an ethnographic approach (Robinson & Metzler, 2016) and in-depth interviews. Our research spans five prominent newsrooms in three French-speaking countries: Belgium (*Le Soir*, *La Libre*, and *L'Écho*), Switzerland (*Le Temps*), and France (*Le Monde*). The methodology combines five weeks of newsroom ethnography and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the editorial and strategic use of images. This study is part of a broader analysis of the role and value of photography in newsrooms, focusing on editorial strategies and journalistic practices. It examines the processes of image production, selection, and publication, shedding light on how photographs are integrated into editorial workflows and the factors that influence their use in news content (Zecchinon, 2024).

The selection of these newsrooms was deliberate, encompassing diverse economic situations and organizational structures to provide a comparative perspective. The comparison allows us to draw conclusions beyond cultural or individual systems while explaining the differences and similarities between the objects of analysis, each situated within its own contextual dimensions (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). The Belgian newsrooms were chosen as they represent the primary French-speaking daily newspapers in the country. *Le Monde* and *Le Temps* were selected for

their reputations as leading national dailies in their respective countries, offering distinct perspectives shaped by their editorial policies and cultural contexts.

Immersive ethnographic research was conducted across the five selected newsrooms from March 2022 to February 2023, with one week of on-site observation per newsroom. 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 field notes, informal interviews, retrospective questioning, and think-aloud protocols (Somerén et al., 1994; Faulkner & Trotter, 2017), which enabled access to implicit or non-verbalized knowledge. A digital field journal was kept throughout, including detailed descriptions of observed scenes, direct quotes, screenshots, and links to discussed content. Subjective reflections were explicitly marked and used to question researcher positioning. No audio recording was used; instead, key insights and verbatim statements were written in real time to preserve immediacy and relevance.

In addition to the ethnographic observations, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with individuals occupying key roles in the image production and selection process. The interviewees included: journalists, editors, designers, photo editors, staff photographers and freelance photographers, editors-in-chief and their deputies, managing editors and digital managers. The interviews explored their perceptions of photography's role in editorial strategies and visual culture (e.g. Is photography considered important in your newsroom? Do you believe there is a visual culture within your team? Have you implemented, or are you planning to implement, initiatives to develop or strengthen this culture?), the challenges posed by economic constraints (e.g. In your view, what are the current investment priorities for your media organization? Where does photography fit within these priorities?), and their responses to the pressures of convergence between print and digital platforms (e.g. Why is the process of producing, selecting, and publishing photographs different for print and online platforms? What are the specific characteristics of each format? Is there a hierarchy between different publication channels?). This combination of perspectives allowed us to compare what journalists say and what they do (Paterson & Domingo, 2008), to examine how they make sense of the actions they undertake (Ryfe, 2020), and to identify variances in editorial attitudes toward photography across newsrooms and journalistic roles (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

The interviewees are anonymized, and their functions are therefore cited using the masculine form. For each quote from our interviews or newsroom immersions, we indicate only the name of the newsroom and the function level of the person according to the categorization presented below. Since each newsroom uses different terms to designate sometimes identical or similar roles, we have chosen to classify functions into three levels based on their hierarchical importance and to distinguish, for levels 2 and 3, whether the role is related to photography. Level 3 includes operational roles (journalist, print/web editor, graphic designer, photo editor, photographer). Level 2 includes mid-level roles with managerial responsibilities (section head, department head). Level 1 represents senior managerial roles (editor-in-chief, deputy editor-in-chief).

Coding of both ethnographic and interview data was conducted using a mixed approach inspired by grounded theory (Olson, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 2015), combining inductive (open) and deductive (theory-driven) strategies. Initial manual coding in Excel was followed by software-assisted coding with NVivo, allowing for more detailed, micro-level analysis and the creation of a unified coding framework

Findings

To assess how economic, cultural, and technological factors interact to shape the role and status of photography in newsrooms, we examined each newsroom according to three criteria: (1) the economic situation which influences the newsroom's capacity to invest in photography; (2) the technological convergence and digital transformation which determine the extent to which photography is integrated into multi-platform workflows and how digital processes enhance or diminish its editorial role; (3) the visual culture of the organization including the newsroom's commitment to visual storytelling and the integration of photography into its editorial identity, and the editorial visual competence (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017).

1. *Economic constraints and the unequal weight of photography*

Despite differing financial contexts, we identify that photography is generally framed as a cost rather than a revenue-generating activity, with a primary of print over digital. Among the newsrooms studied, *L'Écho* stands out as a notable exception. Thanks to the financial health of the Mediafin group, photography is treated not as a dispensable expense but as a long-term investment. Visual production supports the brand's premium positioning and is thus protected from the austerity logic found elsewhere:

“I imagine some newsrooms aim to cut marginal costs. But in my opinion, stimulating the eye is not such a marginal expense. Here, it reflects a broader work atmosphere that isn't limited to photography” (level 1, *L'Écho*).

This positioning enables regular acquisition of images beyond agency subscriptions, something very occasional at *Le Soir* or *La Libre*. These newsrooms operate under significantly tighter financial constraints, exacerbated by the small size of their national media markets (Puppis et al., 2009). *La Libre* openly acknowledges that the unfavorable economic context is particularly challenging for the newspaper. Photography is among the first areas where there is simply “no more budget”. This statement is frequently used to justify the abandonment of editorial visual roles or the lack of ambition in maintaining a strong visual culture within the organization. At *La Libre*, the head of the image department oversees video production, which continues to receive financial backing due to its monetization potential. “Video is the only department with a growing budget. Photography doesn't bring in revenue, so we must balance where to make money and where to cut” (visual level 2, *La Libre*). An observation shared by *Le Soir*, which derives 40% of its revenue from advertising, primarily generated through video content published on its website.

“Today, choosing the right video is almost more important than choosing the right photo. I'm not saying photos don't matter, but in the way, news is

consumed now, we push with a video first and use the first available photo” (level 1, *Le Soir*).

This logic also limits the variety of visual sources. Newsrooms rely almost exclusively on a few wire services like AFP, AP, Reuters and eventually another national agency (e.g., Belga or Keystone), which narrows the diversity of imagery and makes distinctive visual storytelling more difficult.

Le Monde also follows cost-control logics, but its situation is structurally more stable. As the largest French-language daily, it benefits from a bigger advertising base, wider subscription pool, and stronger brand visibility, allowing for a degree of flexibility not available to smaller players. *Le Temps* illustrates an intermediate case, operating in a challenging economic environment, marked by financial difficulties, ownership and key editorial positions changes. However, *Le Temps* maintains a dedicated photo department with three picture editors, staff photographers, and a department head. The photography budget has remained stable in recent years. Subscriptions to image banks continue, but cost-cutting measures have led to lower salaries for photographers, illustrators, and freelancers.

Although most editors describe their newsrooms as “digital-first”, financial structures remain paper-centric. At *Le Monde*, we observed a picture editor choosing an image for pianist Gabriel Tacchino’s obituary. He found two options: one from AFP (included in the subscription), and one paid separately, which he found visually more appealing. He waited to confirm print publication before buying the paid image, explaining that he usually avoids asking for permission as it’s too frequent and complicated. At *Le Temps*, picture editors may also justify single-image purchases, but only under strict oversight. Observations revealed the cautious deliberation involved: the picture editor’s hesitated over a €117 Magnum image even if it was for print. Management urged finding a cheaper alternative, so he sought an €80 option. He had to report all purchases in a “budget icono” document. “Since leadership changed, image is no longer a priority” (visual level 3, *Le Temps*). This illustrates how economic constraints shape image purchases and platform use.

In *Le Temps*, pricing and budgeting also follow the physical size of print layout, before being reported to the finance department. At *L’Écho*, too, individual photo purchases are almost exclusively reserved for the print edition, with only very rare exceptions made for digital-only content. Such mechanisms reflect a legacy logic that hinders the digital transition: photography is still a more legitimate cost when it serves the printed edition. The observation can also be nuanced, as we observed in some newsrooms (especially at *Le Monde* and *L’Echo* during the immersion) where large-formats photos are developed on the web with a lot of pictures, a special lay-out and even the integration of other digital elements (sound, video, etc.). However, these formats are the exception rather than the rule and are almost always designed also for publication in print.

We also notice that cost-cutting policies promote a reorganization of editorial work, including through staff reductions and multitasking logics that affect photography. Across most newsrooms, departing staff have not been replaced, particularly in visual roles. At *Le Soir*, none of the salaried photographers who retired in recent years were replaced, nor was the photo editor, who left several years ago. The newsroom now relies more on agency wires and increasingly expects journalists and editors to handle basic visual tasks themselves. “If we don’t have a photo editor, we’ll choose the image ourselves. Same if there’s no copy editor. And with fewer graphic designers, we now have to edit the page layout, too” (level 3, *Le Soir*).

In all newsrooms except *Le Monde*, reporters are now increasingly expected to take their own photos while out on assignment. While these organizations no longer employ staff photographers (*Le Soir* being the only partial exception) they all rely on freelancers. However, these contributors typically work under precarious conditions, hired per mission or half-day, with limited contractual stability.

2. Convergence, digital transformation and the challenges integrating photography

Despite widespread adoption of ‘web-first’ editorial models across the newsrooms studied, full convergence of photography remains difficult. In several cases, photography departments remain predominantly aligned with print workflows. At *L’Écho*, for instance, although the newsroom officially adopted a web-first policy as early as 2007 and has successfully led multimedia experiments, picture editors remain physically and functionally detached from web production. Web articles are typically illustrated by journalists or editors themselves, often without expert visual input. Similarly, at *Le Temps*, photo editors are located alongside graphic designers rather than web editors, maintaining strong ties to print. “We’ve somewhat abandoned photography on the web... And on the app, photos are sacrificed. We’d like to change that, but redesigning the site’s aesthetics isn’t a priority” (level 1, *Le Temps*). Although picture editors attend daily print planning meetings and contribute to the paper’s visual coherence, they are rarely mandated for web-only assignments. “We never really commission just for the web. But we’re starting to accept that sometimes it won’t be published in print, and that’s okay” (level 2, *Le Temps*). At *La Libre*, the full transition to a unified CMS in September 2023 was intended to resolve long-standing separation between print and web production. However, the integration has remained superficial. Picture editors merely verify the images selected by journalists for print repurposing, and newsroom routines continue to reflect a print-first logic that we observe in all newsrooms. For example, daily story meetings are often framed in terms of page numbers and layout space for journalists who don’t work exclusively for the web. We heard a journalist, in a meeting of *Le Monde* international department, saying: “let’s keep this one short, about 4000-4500 characters, so we can slot it on that page”. To which the editor replied: “There will be two pages on Ukraine, one on Jordan... It’s going to be a lot, bearing in mind that there will be a lot of France. We’ll probably have four pages”.

Even at *Le Soir*, where the newsroom’s spatial layout has been redesigned to support convergence, with picture editors, graphic designers, and web staff sharing the same central table, legacy perceptions persist. “Curiously, the picture editor role still seems tied to the print edition. As if photography mattered less online » (visual level 3, *Le Soir*). Despite formal convergence of roles and workflows, senior staff with strong print backgrounds continue to influence visual practices, particularly for digital content. Nevertheless, *Le Monde* presents a case of more advanced convergence of photography, thanks in part to its spatial reorganization. Since 2022, picture editors have been embedded within thematic departments, where they sit next to editorial staff and participate in meetings. This proximity fosters greater collaboration and anticipation of visual needs.

“When we were grouped as a separate photo team, we only handled daily print tasks. Now, I sit next to my section editor, and we’re more in sync with the overall production. I’m not sure the image is better, but it’s in the right place” (visual level 3, *Le Monde*).

In addition to these structural obstacles, there is also a strong time constraint that limits the successful integration of photography into web-first environments. Across the newsrooms

studied, a clear divide emerges between immediate and longer shelf-life news content, not only in terms of editorial workflow but also in visual production practices. In web-focused desks in all the newsrooms, photographic selection for breaking news is typically handled directly by web editors, bypassing picture editors. Speed is the overriding concern: editors rely almost exclusively on wire services and when no appropriate image is available at the time of writing, they resort to generic or illustrative visuals.

While observing a web editor at *Le Soir* covering a plane crash in China, he struggled to find the exact Boeing 733 Max image, eventually publishing a suboptimal photo replaced later with an AFP image by his superior. This shows how image selection in fast-paced news is often reactive, not deliberate. At *La Libre*, a web editor said they grab the first decent photo for speed, efficiency supplanting aesthetic considerations. In 1,5 hours of observation, he published 14 articles, which is almost one article every five minutes. Editorial skills in visual literacy are often sidelined in these fast-paced moments, despite the centrality of the image in digital formats.

As noted by Witschge and Nygren (2009, p. 49), “time is the most important news value on the web”. This prioritization means images in fast news mainly signal newsroom reactivity rather than enrich stories. Editors see them as a checkbox, especially in short, open-access wire updates. This is particularly evident when covering international or unpredictable events, where newsrooms rely almost entirely on third-party content such as wire agency photos. In such cases, the role of the editor or the picture editor is limited to selecting from pre-existing databases, whereas photojournalists are mobilized for stories that are local, plannable, or feature-based. These structural differences between news and feature journalism imply distinct image workflows and roles: reactive image curation under pressure for breaking news, versus more deliberate, creative photo production for slower-paced, premium content. Despite convergence efforts, time pressures keep photographic treatments distinct. The immediacy required by web-first production leaves little room for nuanced visual storytelling, which remains more viable in slower-paced editorial environments.

One final aspect that deserves attention is the way visuals function as pragmatic accessories within the digital news flow, rather than as editorial elements. Through entry points such as homepages, news apps, or infomediaries (social networks, aggregators, and search engines), the selection and display of the leading image are shaped by competition for user attention in a saturated media environment (Crogan & Kinsley, 2012). The visual component, combined with the headline, and occasionally the standfirst, becomes central in prompting the reader to click. As several actors pointed out, the function of photographs online differs markedly from print:

“We know our online readers are much less captive than when they read us on paper. When you buy the newspaper, you're committed to reading the content. But online, especially on social media, why would someone choose *Le Monde* over *Le Figaro* for a breaking news story? That's where the headline and the photo come in” (level 1, *Le Monde*).

The need to attract readers amid many sources pushes journalists to consider audience interests more (Costera Meijer, 2020). While metrics offer limited insight on photography, newsrooms focus on quick, easily understood images for online readers. “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*). This leads to literal, close-up photos that clearly

reflect the headline, designed to perform well as small thumbnails on mobile and aggregator platforms.

The tension between editorial intent and platform constraints is clear in photo choices. At *L'Écho*, a picture editor selected an aesthetically composed lab image for print, while a more generic vaccine photo (a doctor in a white coat vaccinating a woman) was used online. A “very classic choice” according to the picture editor, reflecting a more utilitarian approach tied to visibility and clarity rather than visual originality. Web publication demands every article be illustrated, even without strong visual content. Editors often resort to stock images, acknowledging their low quality but citing lack of choice. This functional, checkbox logic - combined with time pressure and limited visual literacy - leads to generic, sometimes irrelevant visuals and contributes to the devaluation of photography in digital newsrooms.

3. *The uneven development of visual culture across newsrooms*

Across all newsrooms studied, photography remains largely subordinate to text. Images are rarely seen as a distinct language in their own right: they are expected to illustrate an article. This terminology, frequently used even by picture editors, reveals a persistent conception of photography as a tool to show what the article says, rather than as a narrative element with its own editorial weight. As one editor-in-chief stated, “it would be pretentious to think you can have an aesthetic in a daily newspaper”.

That said, some variation exists among outlets. *Le Monde*, *Le Temps*, and *L'Écho* have developed a more structured visual culture and editorialized photographic practices, thanks to strong photo departments and clearly defined visual strategies. These newsrooms treat photography not merely as illustration but as a means of expression capable of enriching journalistic narratives, albeit within the constraints of a primarily text-driven environment. In contrast, *La Libre* and *Le Soir* operate with minimal editorial investment in photography, relying mostly on journalists or non-specialist editors to select images, with limited coordination or anticipation.

We observe that visual culture and photographic integration strongly depend on internal newsroom structures and the level of autonomy granted to photo professionals. At *Le Monde*, photography has become a domain of editorial strategy: the director of photography operates on the same hierarchical level as editorial managers, and a team of a dozen photo editors defines the visual tone of the newspaper. Yet even there, images remain precariously positioned not least because the integration of photography into the newspaper's editorial strategies is fairly recent (2005).

“Even though the layout is appealing and the photos are stunning, that’s not the most important thing here. Management knows this and sometimes uses it to put us back in our place: *Le Monde* is a text-driven newspaper where we struggle to integrate images” (visual level 2, *Le Monde*).

At *Le Temps*, while the solid ‘iconography team’ (as it is called to demonstrate the editorial side of their job) demonstrates strong editorial competences, it is not systematically included in upstream editorial planning. “I feel like the critical thinking around photography comes from us. I wish editorial leadership would take a stance on whether an image deserves prominence. I regret the lack of editorial discussions that incorporate visuals” (visual level 2, *Le Temps*). In contrast, *La Libre* and *Le Soir* offer limited editorial space to visual concerns. At *Le Soir*,

former archivists fill the role of picture editors but are not involved in editorial decisions. While photography occasionally receives attention, especially in special projects or the front page, it lacks coherent editorial direction. At *La Libre*, the two picture editors, originally layout designers, have seen their responsibilities shift even more towards design following a recent newsroom reorganization. Image selection is now largely in the hands of journalists, many of whom lack strong visual training. “I occasionally bring up the issue of photography in the editorial committee, but it never gains traction. Either I’m told it’s a matter of taste, or they are overwhelmed with other issues” (level 3, *La Libre*). Page reductions due to rising printing costs have limited photographic space. The newsroom’s photo studio was relocated to make room for a television studio, a symbolic move reflecting the newspaper’s shifting priorities.

At the same time, *L’Écho*, has invested significantly in visual identity since 2012, when a new photo department was created. Aesthetics are now officially one of the six defining editorial pillars. Still, the development of visual culture beyond the photo team remains slow: most journalists treat visual concerns as secondary or delegated to specialists. These tensions underscore a broader pattern: where photo professionals are granted editorial agency, visual culture can flourish, though not without friction. Conversely, when photography is treated as an operational necessity rather than an editorial asset, it remains marginal and fragile.

Visual culture is unevenly shared in newsrooms. While picture editors develop a strong editorial vision, journalists and web editors often take a more pragmatic, conventional approach. They differ in how they perceive and use images, reflecting varying levels of visual competence and the influence of the medium (print or web) in shaping photographic choices. These disparities lead to inconsistent treatment of photography within the same newsroom. At *Le Monde*, a journalist defined a good photo as “immediately legible without a caption,” while picture editors valued images that inform with or alongside the text, but without redundancy. At *L’Écho*, an editor consistently adjusted images to align closely with headlines, favoring photos with clear visual references to the article’s topic. In contrast, at *Le Monde*, a picture editor initially sought a photo of Macron to match a headline but reconsidered, noting that “just because it’s in the title doesn’t mean it has to be in the photo.” In digital workflows, speed often trumps visual originality. At *La Libre* and *Le Soir*, web editors tend to replicate competitors’ image choices, leading to a homogenized use of stock-like visuals (ambulances, police cars, etc.). Picture editors, by contrast, aim to avoid clichés, for instance, at *Le Temps*, one replaced a generic collage with a more personal photo of Federer to emphasize the interview’s exclusivity. Ultimately, visual culture in contemporary newsrooms is not only underdeveloped but also unevenly distributed, fragmented by professional boundaries, workflow logics, and institutional priorities. Photography’s editorial potential exists, but it remains fragile, contingent on the agency of a few and often at odds with the dominant text-centric paradigm.

Discussion

Our study suggests that the interaction between economic, cultural, and technological factors shapes the transformation of visual strategies in newsrooms. We observe that a newsroom with financial stability, a strong visual culture, and well-integrated digital workflows is more likely to afford photography a central role and to respond to crisis through rejection or adaptation (in line with Simonsen & Evensen’s model). Conversely, weaknesses in one or more of these areas can create imbalances that reduce photography’s editorial presence and lead to capitulation.

Based on this analysis, we categorize newsrooms into three levels of equilibrium. Balance: newsrooms in this category maintain strength across all three criteria ensuring a strong and consistent role for photography within the newsroom. Threatened balance: these newsrooms show weaknesses in one or two areas. While photography remains valued, its position is at risk. Imbalance: newsrooms in this state struggle across all three dimensions, leading to a diminished role for photography. Through this framework, we evaluate how these factors interact to either reinforce or weaken photography's place within editorial strategies. We apply this framework to the five case studies.

L'Écho exemplifies a relatively balanced newsroom. It benefits from a stable economic model, a loyal readership, and a coherent digital strategy. Photography is increasingly acknowledged as a storytelling tool, though it remains largely print-oriented. Its centrality is not yet fully established, but the editorial conditions exist for photography to gain further ground, provided economic stability and cultural shifts continue. *Le Monde* also fits within the balanced category, with fragilities. The newspaper remains economically sound and continues to invest in digital development. Photography is increasingly integrated, and editorial competence has been reinforced through the restructuring of photo departments. Ongoing financial and strategic pressures could threaten this balance, but innovation efforts and a growing recognition of photography's value have so far helped maintain it. *Le Temps* falls under the threatened balance category. While the newsroom has long valued print photography, and its photo editors remain strong, digital convergence remains limited. Financial constraints and a lack of digital visual expertise risk undermining the place of photography, particularly as web-first workflows marginalize visual input. *Le Soir* illustrates a clear imbalance. The newsroom faces severe financial constraints, and photography has not been structurally integrated into editorial strategy. Photography is often treated as a secondary concern, limiting its journalistic potential. *La Libre* also demonstrates an imbalance. Deep cost-cutting measures have weakened the newsroom's visual culture, with journalists managing image selection. Photography is viewed as a financial burden rather than a strategic asset, and web-first strategies prioritize video.

This model highlights that visual strategies are not merely the result of financial pressures but also reflect organizational cultures, managerial priorities, and newsroom decision-making structures. Our findings allow us to identify and discuss, considering existing scholarly literature, both the threats and opportunities for the place and status of photography in newsrooms.

A first threat lies in the increasing fragility of the economic model of the press, particularly the destabilization of the two-sided market, which has been weakened since the onset of digitalization. This shift directly impacts editorial decision-making around photography. In several of the newsrooms studied, photography is primarily perceived as a cost center rather than a revenue generator. Budgetary pressure, whether in terms of investing in photographic production, hiring visual journalism professionals, or purchasing images, is accompanied by a broader logic of qualitative erosion. Our findings confirm those of Láb & Štefaniková (2017): photographs are increasingly standardized, selected for their click-generating potential rather than for their narrative or informational value. In this context, photography becomes a visual hook in an attention economy dominated by infomediaries. Research also shows that audiences are increasingly treated as commercial targets whose user experience must be optimized, rather than as partners in the production of journalism (Vos & Singer, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2019). Editorial choices are driven by the need to analyze and replicate audience behavior to attract and retain attention, while complying with the algorithmic and display constraints of powerful digital platforms. Photography becomes a tool to meet these objectives, even at the cost of undermining its journalistic value.

Another key finding of our study is that full newsroom convergence remains largely unattainable, not only due to organizational inertia, but also because of fundamental constraints linked to platform specificity and news temporality. While most newsrooms have gone through the three phases of convergence described by Küng (2016), the promise of seamless integration between print and digital workflows remains mostly theoretical. In practice, photography struggles to transition across platforms. Despite the rise of web-first strategies, print still dominates visual workflows in most newsrooms, where editorial expertise and decision-making remain focused on print. As a result, photography receives more attention in print, while its role online is inconsistent and often lacks clear editorial integration, frequently reduced to functioning as a clickbait image. Although multimedia formats and visually rich features can find a place online - and in some cases, offer creative opportunities (Ritchin, 2013) - our observations, as well as prior research (Collet, 2016), indicate that these formats remain rare and marginal.

News temporality plays also a decisive role in shaping photographic strategies. Our findings reveal a persistent divide between immediate, fast-paced news content published primarily online, and longer-form, often investigative reporting aligned with print cycles. In the case of breaking news, the emphasis on speed and efficiency leaves little room for deliberative photo selection. Images are often chosen based on availability rather than editorial criteria, with web editors relying on stock or agency visuals. Photo editors are frequently bypassed entirely, reinforcing photography's marginalization in high-tempo production workflows. By contrast, longer-form content allows more time for careful image curation and offers greater potential for integrating photography as a narrative tool. However, if speed remains the overriding imperative in digital workflows, photography risks being treated as an afterthought. These temporal constraints highlight that the challenge of integrating photography into digital-first strategies is not only technological but also deeply editorial.

A third structural difficulty lies in the growing prevalence of multitasking, particularly in visual production roles. As outlined by Küng (2016), convergence has increased demands for multi-skilled journalists. However, in the case of photography, this trend tends to result more in de-skilling than in genuine up-skilling (Bock, 2008; Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016). The ideal of fully versatile journalists or photographers, capable of handling all aspects of multimedia production, faces important limits. Štefaniková & Láb (2018) describe this as 'the myth of acceleration', arguing that piling tasks onto individuals does not necessarily lead to efficiency. Our fieldwork echoes this with what we call 'the myth of polyvalence': the accumulation of roles (photographer, journalist, editor) and the fragmentation of the photo editor's function across several non-specialist actors tend to dilute the value of images and complicate the production, selection, and publication process.

Finally, our findings show that these economic pressures and convergence challenges are deeply embedded in organizational and cultural contexts. It is within the newsroom that visual culture is shaped, and our study reveals that this culture remains highly uneven and fragmented. As Lowrey (2002) already observed, visual and textual subcultures coexist but rarely integrate. Photographers and photo editors develop a specific sensibility centered on visual storytelling, while generalist journalists and editors tend to prioritize functional criteria such as immediate legibility or alignment with platform norms. These differing perceptions and routines produce divergent visual treatments, sometimes even contradictory ones, within the same newsroom depending on the platform (print vs. web), the actors involved, and the temporal constraints of

the news cycle. Visual culture thus appears as a key but unevenly shared variable, the strengthening of which requires a deliberate editorial and managerial commitment.

Despite those threats, some newsrooms manage to sustain a strong visual identity. Our findings point to three key mechanisms that enable resistance or adaptation in maintaining photography's editorial role. First, visual culture and editorial visual competence play a crucial role in preserving photography's relevance. In newsrooms where photo editors hold decision-making power, such as *Le Monde*, photography is more resilient to financial constraints. This supports Simonsen & Evensen's (2017) argument that strong editorial visual competence helps resist cuts to photography departments and ensures that photography remains a core element of journalistic storytelling rather than a peripheral concern. Second, the integration of photography into digital workflows strengthens its presence across platforms. Newsrooms that embed photo editors within section teams, as observed in *Le Monde*, manage to maintain a consistent and strategic visual approach in both print and digital formats. However, achieving this requires technical and organizational adaptation to prevent photography from being relegated to outdated, print-centric practices. Ensuring that visual professionals are fully integrated into editorial decision-making across platforms helps reinforce the role of photography in multi-platform storytelling.

Finally, photography as a brand differentiator serves as a powerful tool for sustaining investments in visual journalism. When news organizations position photography as an essential component of their identity, as seen in *L'Écho*, they are more likely to allocate resources to high-quality visual content. In these cases, photography is perceived not as a supplementary expense but as a strategic asset that enhances the publication's distinctiveness, strengthens audience engagement, and contributes to its overall editorial credibility. By embedding photography within their editorial and branding strategies, these newsrooms ensure that visual journalism remains a priority despite economic and technological challenges.

Conclusion and further research direction

This study demonstrates that photography's status in contemporary newsrooms is shaped by a dynamic interaction of economic, cultural, and technological factors. While financial constraints and digital convergence pose significant challenges, editorial visual competence emerges as a key mechanism for preserving photography's role. Ultimately, photography's place in journalism is not solely dictated by economic pressures but also by strategic and cultural choices within newsrooms. Strengthening editorial visual competence may be essential to ensuring that photography remains a meaningful component of journalistic storytelling in an evolving media landscape. Further research should explore how visual culture develops within newsrooms, its influence on journalistic practices, and its impact on audience engagement. Understanding how photography adapts to technological advancements and shifting audience expectations will provide valuable insights into its continued relevance in digital news production.

While this study offers insights into the transformation of visual strategies in newsrooms, it is limited to five French-speaking newspapers operating within relatively similar media ecosystems. Testing this typology in diverse contexts, particularly in media environments with different economic models and ownership structures, will be essential to refining our understanding of photography's place in journalism. Finally, as video gains prominence and

AI-generated imagery becomes more sophisticated, the role of photography in journalism remains uncertain. Investigating how visual storytelling evolves across platforms will be crucial in understanding the next phase of visual journalism.

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