

# (Mis)framing photographs as an obstacle to fair dissent

MARTA ZAMPA

*School of Engineering*

*NTB University of Applied Sciences Buchs, Switzerland*

*marta.zampa@ost.ch*

CHIARA POLLAROLI

*Institute of Argumentation Linguistics and Semiotic*

*Università della Svizzera italiana, Switzerland*

*chiara.pollaroli@usi.ch*

In this paper, we consider the consequences for public argumentation of misframing photographs. When photographs are altered, misframed by the textual component that accompanies them or used improperly to stand for something they actually do not portray, they activate the wrong premises in the audience and lead it to the wrong conclusion. We explore this topic by analyzing famously misframed photographs of children in crisis situations used in media, and focus on the dangerous consequences for public debate and for the credibility of journalism.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, argument schemes, framing, loci, media, manipulation, multimodality, photography, public opinion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Instinctively, humans believe that a photograph depicts reality. We expect it to reproduce exactly what happened, where and who was present. We put our trust in this medium because it was invented exactly with a documentary purpose (Peirce, 1935-1966; Barthes, 1977; Kjeldsen, 2018; Mazzali-Lurati, Pollaroli & De Ascaniis, 2018). Unfortunately, this is becoming less and less the case: photos are being not only altered to convey a partial message, but also recontextualized improperly to stand for something they actually do not portray. To this aim, they are often misframed by means of misleading textual components that accompany them.

In this paper, we explore the (mis)framing of pictures in media and its consequences for argumentation in the public sphere. Photos, by virtue of semantic condensation (Kjeldsen, 2012, 2018), are particularly

effective in enthymematic argumentation (Bitzer, 1959; Pollaroli & Rocci, 2015). Furthermore, thanks to emotional condensation, they trigger a strong emotional response in the viewer (Kjeldsen, 2018). Photographs and the way they frame reality can be employed as the factual premises. They function as starting points of an argumentative inference, by activating major premises based on shared knowledge, values and desires. Therefore, manipulating photographic material is particularly dangerous for argumentation, as it may manipulate the inferential process (see Rocci, 2017) by activating a distorted major premise, which impairs the balance among the dissenting parties. The resolution of a difference of opinion is indeed endangered if the parties do not base the discussion on the same data and cultural premises. This may cause the activation of an irrelevant or unsuitable argument scheme, leading to the wrong conclusion.

We investigate misframing by taking as an example photographs of children involved in wars and humanitarian catastrophes that were widespread by the media. We analyze their framing (both from the technical viewpoint of picture construction and of how the picture is framed by the text) and consider how they are employed in argumentation by different parties.

## 2. MISFRAMING PHOTOGRAPHS: A LONGSTANDING HABIT

The habit of misframing photographs is a longstanding one. An example we all are acquainted with is the Napalm Girl (Picture 1) by Nick Ut. The picture was taken in 1972, during the Vietnam war, and published in *The New York Times*. It won the Pulitzer price and played a major role in convincing the remains of the pro-Vietnam party to put an end to the atrocious war.



Picture 1: Napalm Girl.

What many readers might not be aware of, is that this is not the actual picture Nick Ut shot. It is a selected part of what you see in Picture 2.



Picture 2: the whole Napalm Girl scene.

In Picture 2 one notices that, on the right side, photographers were walking with the children and getting ready to shoot further images. They knew the village was to be bombed with napalm, and got there to capture the escape of its inhabitants. This becomes even more apparent in Picture 3.



Picture 3: Photographers waiting in front of bombed village.

It was not even just a couple of photographers who happened to be there and got ready for the best shot: they were a dozen, waiting at a safe distance from the toxic explosions.

This is not the place to delve into the ethical issues of the journalistic profession and to take stance about whether it was right for these photojournalists to stand there to document an ongoing tragedy. Sure, their documentary endeavor played a key role in ending the misery of this specific war. What this example helps us do is to demonstrate that the technical framing of photographs, i.e., the selection of a scene and its participants and the potential elimination of some parts to bring attention on what is considered the core of a scene, was not invented in the digital age.

### 3. OUR APPROACH

Our analysis is set within the framework of multimodal *rhetoric*, because we consider photographs as visual semiotic means embedded in communication which work in specific contexts of the public sphere and are aimed at influencing a specific audience (Kjeldsen, 2012, 2018;

Mazzali-Lurati, Pollaroli & De Ascaniis, 2018). We also look at how they play a role within the broad argumentative discussion on a topic of public interest, involving various actors as well as the media reporting the discussion and the audience forming an opinion.

A sound analysis of photographs as components of multimodal pieces of communication - in our case, a news piece - involves a description of what viewers actually see on a page (Bateman, 2008) with particular attention to the principles of composition (van den Broek et al., 2012, pp. 123-143) which are met, that is the way the elements of a scene are arranged and framed.

The meaning designed by a selected composition represents the world according to a certain perspective, a certain *frame* (Fillmore, 1982; Goffman, 1975; Rocci, 2009).<sup>1</sup> We consider frames as culturally recognizable representations of situations made of entities, attributes, and events. Choosing to frame a situation in one way instead of another invokes different systems of values and knowledge. As Greco has shown (Greco Morasso, 2012, Bigi & Greco Morasso, 2012; Greco, 2016), framing corresponds to choosing the relevant premises for a discussion on an issue, especially to choosing the cultural and contextual starting points or premises. Special attention should be devoted to the work done in Greco Morasso (2012), where framing is studied in the context of print journalism as a phenomenon which leads to different interpretations of an event according to the frame chosen and elaborated. As here we are taking into account pieces of news discourse which integrate images, it is important to mention that it is nowadays indisputable that frames can be represented also by images or by multimodal integrations of different semiotic modalities (e.g., Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Forceville, 2004; Pollaroli & Rocci, 2015).

Premises of argumentative reasoning are drawn from these cultural blocks. We consider argumentation within the framework of the Argumentum Model of Topics (Rigotti & Greco, 2009, 2010, 2017; Rocci, 2017). The model focuses on the inferences activated by the combination of material premises, derived from a given situation (datum) and from its cultural context (endoxon), with procedural premises, which regulate the reasoning mechanism. In multimodal argumentation (e.g., Kjeldsen, 2012; Pollaroli & Rocci, 2015), the visual part constitutes the datum. This is all the more the case for photographs, due to their already mentioned documentary and indexical nature. In this paper, our attention is devoted

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<sup>1</sup> We are aware that the concepts of *frame* and *framing* have received different definitions from different disciplines (see the discussion in Tribastone and Greco, 2018). Here we choose to focus on a notion of *frame* which comes from both sociology and linguistics because it allows us to adopt a sound perspective on a communicative phenomenon which involves both text and image within a specific context.

to the challenges for a sound argumentation posed by a manipulated or misframed datum.

As we consider photographs that appeared in the media and depict issues of topical socio-political relevance, we take into account also the visual news values of the photographs (Bednarek & Caple, 2017), e.g., the characteristics that make a photograph newsworthy. They apply both to the content and to the capture of a photograph, e.g., its formal characteristics. Whereas picture-newsworthiness can be tightly bound to a specific news outlet (see Zampa, 2017), some criteria are universal – for example the eliteness of the people portrayed, the superlativeness of the situation, the personalizing effect achieved through showing a protagonist the audience can identify with.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

As case studies, we take two photographs that received vast attention in the media, both for their primary application by the authors and for the sensation provoked by their misframing.

##### 4.1 *Crying girl on the border*

The first is the *Crying girl on the border* (12.6.2018), by Getty photographer John Moore, which won the World Press Photo Award for 2018 (Picture 4).<sup>2</sup>



Picture 4: *Crying girl on the border*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2019/37620/1/John-Moore>.

This photograph is part of a series by Moore, which enjoyed broad circulation in the media in June 2018. The crying girl in pink quickly became a symbol of the separation of children from parents enforced by the US government at the Mexican border.

The photograph (and its main character) indeed possesses various characteristics that make it a good candidate for being a symbol of the children's tragic destiny. From the perspective of the visual news values' analysis, it is *consonant* with a stereotypical suffering child, in a *negative* context (the adults ignore the child, the child is isolated although in company, the scene is dark), it *personalizes* the problem in this specific kid and it is *timely*, as it is shot exactly where and when the current crisis took place. The compositional choices reinforce the news values: the camera is at the height of the girl, her pink attire contrasts with the darkness of the surroundings, the spotlight is mercilessly set on her.

As for the frames activated by the visual, we noticed:

- *desperation* in the child's attitude;
- *power relation*, symbolized by the uniform, weapon and behavior of the guard towards the woman, as well as of both adults towards the child;
- *ambush*, conveyed by the nightly setting in a desert place, where the woman and the child appear to have been caught by surprise;
- *search*, again in the attributes of the guard and the vehicle, in the action he/she is performing on the woman and in the passive attitude of the woman.

As mentioned above, the Crying Girl soon became the face of the crisis. It was published below headlines describing and criticizing Trump's policy towards migrants. Titles such as "Almost 2,000 children separated from families at US border following Trump administration 'zero tolerance' policy" (*The Independent*<sup>3</sup>) or the choice of the girl for the Time's "Welcome to America" cover story (Picture 5) framed the episode as a paradigmatic case of children's separation from their parents.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/children-separated-trump-immigration-policy-zero-tolerance-parents-border-a8401526.html>.



Picture 5: Welcome to America (July 2, 2018).

Therefore, we can say that two frames are added by the combination of text and picture or by recontextualizing only part of the photograph: *abandonment* of the child and *discrimination* of the US towards migrants. They both cannot be derived only from the photograph: the girl is not alone but close to people, and the ambush and search could well be aimed at saving a ransomed kid, and taking place within the US and towards a US citizen.

In reality, the girl was never separated from her mother. She was put on the floor so that the guard could search the mother, and cried because she was tired from the trip and scared. After the search, she stayed with her mother. Therefore, in this case the verbal misframing and recontextualization in the media lead the readers (and thus public opinion) to a wrong conclusion about the event. It looks plausible and convincing because it corresponds to our expectations about a separation, thanks to the above listed visual characteristics. We could say that it activates a *visual endoxon*, i.e. a shared cultural premise regarding the visual construction of the abandonment of a child. It is a prototypical example of this situation; thus, it can become a symbol of the destiny of all children affected by Trump's "zero tolerance" policy (see Musi, 2014, on prototypes in argumentation).



#### 4.2 Boy walking in the Syrian desert

This photograph was shot by Andrew Harper, head of the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Jordan, on February 16, 2014. The 4-year-old Marwan was walking through the desert from Syria to Jordan. In the picture, he is the only migrant present and gets help from UNHCR workers.



Picture 6: Marwan meets UNHCR workers

Children walking alone for a while are no surprising phenomenon in the migration context. Family members migrate together but often lose sight of each other within a group, especially when rushing through borders. UNHCR helps families to reunite and specially to find missing children, which usually happens rather quickly.<sup>4</sup>

As it was the case for the Honduran girl, also this photograph and its protagonist Marwan possess various characteristics that make it a good candidate for being a symbol of children in the contest of migration. As for the visual news values, it is *consonant* with a stereotypical abandoned child, walking alone in an inhospitable environment. The circumstances are *positive* though, as he gets help from adults, who engage with him in a respectful way. The viewer can identify with the situation of helping a lost child, which *personalizes* the event. It is (or was, at the time of shooting) a *timely* scene too, being from the ongoing war-related

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26231631>.

migration from Syria. The technical choices reinforce the news values: the camera captures the scene from above, underlying the smallness of the kid, the bright colours enhance the *positivity* of the encounter.

The photograph activates the following frames:

- *vulnerability* of the lonely child;
- *abandonment*, as the child appears to be unaccompanied;
- *harshness* of the environment;
- *humanitarian work* identifiable thanks to the uniforms worn by the adults in the picture;
- *help* provided by the adults to the kid.

This photograph, tweeted by the author, quickly became popular (Picture 7).



Picture 7: Harper's first tweet on Marwan.

The retweets though misrepresented and misframed the photograph as *Marwan migrating alone*. Harper reacted by confirming the original interpretation of the event and posting a photograph that shows where Marwan stood with respects to the rest of the caravan.



Picture 8: the migrants' caravan with Marwan walking behind.

The misframing had immediate consequences on the credibility of the retweeters and of media who also embraced this extreme reading, as *The Guardian*<sup>5</sup> points out: "The picture triggered a wave of sympathy on social media, swiftly followed by skepticism and anger at the perceived misrepresentation of Marwan's plight."

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: CONSEQUENCES FOR ARGUMENTATION

We argue that misframing a photograph manipulates the datum of an argumentative move. The public is thus left to reconstruct argumentation on an issue of public interest on the basis of an unreliable material component. We understand the importance of the material component in terms of argument from authority. Photography as a medium is authoritative thanks to its indexical nature (see Section 2). It is expected to show how things really are. As we all know, this authority is

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet>.

experiencing a phase of mistrust due to the spreading of various tools for modifying photographs and to the spread of fake news. Cases of misframing contribute to undermining this authority.

In the case of the Honduran girl, for instance, the photograph should be material proof that children are separated from parents at the US border, a highly criticized practice by the Trump administration. The argument goes:

*Endoxon*: it is a habit to separate migrant children from parents at the US border

*Datum*: this photograph proves a case of a child separated from parents at the US border

*First conclusion*: this photograph proves the separation of children from parents at the US border

*Maxim from the locus from authority*: if x is an authority, and x proves y, then y is the case

*Final conclusion*: children are separated from parents at the US border

While this is true in general, it is not in the case depicted in this photograph. Once this becomes clear, a reporter, a medium or even journalism as a whole risk losing the trust of the audience. This is of course a case of hasty generalization by the audience, who moves from one misframed case to misframing as a pervasive practice in journalism. We also notice that two other argument schemes are intertwined in this journalistic practice: an argument scheme of the *part for whole* type and an argument scheme of the *prototype definition* type (Musi, 2014). The process of choosing a photograph of a child corresponds to a reasoning process of the part for whole category. In other words, a journalist chooses to picture one child instead of another in order to represent the crisis that is affecting all children. At a second level, a line of reasoning from the prototype definition is at work. The decision a journalist makes is based on how prototypical of a certain situation a photograph is, that is how many characteristics it shares with the prototypical child in that situation.

The loss of trust in photographs (and journalism) on the audience's side awkwardly co-exist with a difficulty of being critical when reading a piece of news and not considering that a much more complex situation hides behind a picture that shows only a frame of it. Ideally, a critical audience should be able to activate a part-for-whole process of reasoning much more often. In other words, it should be able to unravel the (mis)framing offered by the medium and activate a reframing in order to obtain a clearer view on the event. A critical audience should be able to understand that the photograph chosen is just a part of a broader, more complex situation.

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