

Photography and photojournalism, an emerging object of study in communication research in Spain

La fotografía y el fotoperiodismo, un objeto de estudio emergente en la investigación en comunicación en España



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Abstract:

This paper addresses photography and photojournalism as an object of study in communication research in Spanish universities between 2007 and 2018. The documents analysed show that despite being an emerging study, due to the social interest it inspires in the era of post-truth, there is still relatively little scientific production linked to RDI projects. However, the topics that have been studied over those twelve years show an increasing interest in researching topics of international relevance in the Social Sciences, such as identities. It is

Resumen:

Este artículo aborda la fotografía y el fotoperiodismo como objeto de estudio en la investigación en comunicación en las universidades españolas entre 2007 y 2018. De los documentos analizados se extrae que, pese a tratarse de un estudio emergente, por su interés social en la era de la posverdad, la producción científica vinculada a proyectos I+D+i no es aún relevante. Así, las temáticas que se han estudiado en estos doce años muestran el progresivo interés por investigar temas de relevancia internacional en las Ciencias Sociales como las identidades Cabe dest-

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worthy of note that many of these studies, especially doctoral theses, still adhere to the role of the image in offline media and most of them are descriptive. But a new era is opening for communication research in which what has previously been a weakness, the lack of a clear study methodology, may become a strength, given that photography can be interpreted from different approaches and disciplines in tune with new ways of thinking about and investigating these disciplines, these new approaches tending towards the holistic. There is evidence of great interest in the development of this object of study, which is considered a key element in the global media panorama.

Keywords:

Photography; photojournalism; communication; meta research in communication; doctoral theses; academic papers; contributions to conferences.

acar que aún muchos de estos trabajos, especialmente tesis doctorales, se ciñen al papel de la imagen en medios off-line y la mayoría de ellos son descriptivos. Pero se abre una nueva etapa para la investigación en comunicación en la que lo que ha sido una debilidad, la falta de una metodología clara de estudio, puede ser una fortaleza, dado que la fotografía puede ser interpretada desde diferentes enfoques y disciplinas en sintonía con las nuevas formas de pensar y de investigar estas disciplinas y que tienden hacia lo holístico. Se constata un gran interés por el desarrollo de este objeto de estudio que es clave en el panorama mediático mundial.

Palabras clave:

Fotografía; fotoperiodismo; comunicación; metainvestigación en comunicación; tesis doctorales; artículos científicos; comunicaciones en congresos.

1. Introduction

The awarding of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for photography to the Spanish photojournalist Emilio Morenatti has increased the visibility of photojournalism in Spain. Media attention to photojournalism, interviews of photojournalists, talks, and social responsibility or crowdfunding projects are directly related to this journalistic discipline. Among the internationally renowned Spanish professional photojournalists, we should mention the three photographers working for the prestigious agency Magnum –Cristina García Rodero, Cristina de Middel and Lúa Ribeiro–, the Pulitzer Prize winners Javier Bauluz (1995), Manu Brabo (2013), Susana Vera (2020) and Emilio Morenatti (2021), as well as, for example, Arturo Rodríguez and Samuel Aranda, awarded by World Press Photo. To them we should add the respected work of photojournalists such as Maysun, Anna Surinnyach, Olmo Calvo and Judith Prat, among many others.

This public profile has been further enhanced by the new TV programme on Spanish public television's La 2 channel –“Detrás del instante”–, where each episode focuses on a photographer, many of them photojournalists, such as Xurxo Lobato, Gervasio Sánchez, Raúl Cancio, César Lucas, Sandra Balsells, Manuel Outumuro and Isabel Azkárate.

There have also been popular documentaries about Spanish photojournalists such as Joana Biarnés, distributed via the Filmin platform, as well as exhibitions at prestigious annual festivals like PhotoEspaña (now in its XXIV edition) or, even, the annual World Press Photo awards which have often been held in Madrid and Barcelona in recent years (except in 2020 due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19).

Several generations of major photojournalists currently coincide in Spain, such that we can plausibly speak of a golden age of photojournalism in the country. However, the profession has been badly hit by the financial crisis affecting traditional media, which has led to talk of a decline (Alcaide, 2017).

This reality has been apparent to the main academic media, as has been reflected in many recent publications on photojournalism in Spanish scientific journals. Some of the latest papers have analysed the narratives of war and peace (Baron Pulido, 2020), the

collective imagination of audio-visual fakes (Cerdán Martínez & Padilla Castillo, 2019), fact-checking (Guallar et al., 2020), the photographic construction of reality (Leon et al., 2018) manipulation (Mayoral et al., 2019) and images of poverty (Del Prado Flores et al., 2020)

To the interest in this central theme, we can add the incorporation of photojournalism as a subject in the curricula of many communication and information sciences faculties in Spanish universities, both public and private, which was not previously the case, and can be seen in the register of Universities, Centres & Titles (RUCT). Furthermore, if we look at the curricula for the subject in many of these faculties, we can observe that the content is not intended solely to train students, but to educate them. This means that, although at first glance this may seem to be an eminently practical subject – in fact, it is often professional photojournalists who give the classes as associate professors –, it actually goes beyond that as both theory and history, training in the way of looking, and image analysis, are amongst the key competences that the student is expected to acquire.

The lecturers who have been teaching the subject in recent years at centres where it was not previously available are specialising and it is for that reason that we consider photography and photojournalism to be a tendency of growing scientific interest in the area of academic study of communication.

The above explains the evident increase in interest in this object of study among researchers, which is added to the already consolidated work in the area by academics such as Margarita Ledo (Baeza, 2000), the application of innovative methodology such as framing, and its indisputable importance in current times and the age of post-truth.

This paper proposes to analyse the research done into photojournalism and photography in communication and to join the dots drawn by this research profile in the last decade, this being a crucial part in facing both the strengths and weaknesses of this area of knowledge.

Among said weaknesses, the most discussed in the area of research is the scant contribution of papers on the subject among scientific production. However, considering the data obtained for this study via the results of the R&D projects generically denominated MapCom, the lines of study demonstrate that it is an object of study of increasing interest.

2. Conceptual framework

There has been concern since the 1980s about the lack of academic research into photography and the lack of consideration of this artistic, communicative, and documentary discipline in academia. Among the researchers who did work in this area we find Joan Fontcuberta with his *Notes on Spanish Photography* in 1983 for Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography*, which was followed, in 1989, by *Photography and its Documentary Possibilities, an introduction to its use in the Social Sciences* by Bernardo Riego, Marie-Loup Souguez and Miguel Ángel Sánchez. This concern is reflected in the most recent study titled "Academic research on photography in Spain" (García-Ramos & Jiménez-Gómez, 2020). The paper analyses doctoral theses on photography over the last decade in Humanities and Social Sciences faculties at Spanish universities. It points to the lack of specialization among lecturers and the dispersion of study as the principal difficulty slowing its development, though on the other hand, the great versatility of this area of study is highlighted, as is its privileged position for multi-disciplinary studies.

Recent papers on photography in scientific journals concerning documentation have come to a similar conclusion, pointing out that only 2.18% of the total cover the subject. A small figure “if we bear in mind the enormous number of photographic documents held in archives, libraries, museums, image banks, agencies and documentation centres of public and private institutions, all susceptible to being handled and analysed for their use and application” (Sánchez-Vigil et al., 2021). The paper criticises the limited importance given in higher education to aspects such as the treatment of all the many aspects of photographic collections, digitalization, conservation and restauration, and shows that the universities with subjects and degrees close to this discipline are the main generators of research and papers.

One of the motives that may be put forward to understand the lack of academic interest in this area of knowledge could be the absence of a clear methodology for image analysis. However, as stated by someone who has become a theoretical reference for photographic research in Spain, Javier Marzal Felici:

“Image Theory cannot aspire, under any circumstances, to develop a body of knowledge capable of predictive mathematical modelling, nor does it possess a stable object of study, or one sharply defined from a single scientific paradigm” (Marzal-Felici, 2021).

This observation stems from the subjectivity with which the classical image theorist Roland Barthes related the analysis of a photograph (Barthes, 2007) and with the varied readings offered by another of the traditional references in this type of research (Sontag, 2007) and is related to another Spanish reference for addressing the post-photographic age, Fontcuberta (Fontcuberta, 2016).

Nonetheless, far from a decrease in the scientific interest in photographic analysis, interest has been spurred on by methodologies such as framing (Ardevol-Abreu, 2015) among whose most outstanding research we can find “Visually framing the invasion and occupation of Iraq in Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report” (Schwalbe, 2013) which served as inspiration for the study conducted in Spain “Análisis de contenido de la representación fotográfica de la crisis de los refugiados sirios y su incidencia en el framing visual” (“Content analysis of the photographic representation of the Syrian refugee crisis and its incidence in visual framing”) (Del Ramo, 2016) and other more recent studies such as that published on refugees in the European press (Amores et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there are other methodologies employed in image interpretation from different study perspectives, such as the anthropological, documentary, semiotic, historical, iconological, biographical, ethical, etc. and it can be said that “any practical methodological proposal is a theory of image or of representation” (Marzal-Felici, 2021).

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the bibliometric analysis of research into photography and photojournalism in the field of Communication between 2007 and 2018 (this being the period of study of the research group from which this study stems), taking into consideration the doctoral thesis in the area, scientific papers published in the principal Spanish journals over that period, these being analysed in line with their impact and providing that they were directly and expressly related to a state-financed research and development

project, and contributions presented and published in the minutes of the conferences of the Asociación Española de Investigación en Comunicación. This meaning the data represents the highest level of research in Spain.

The data has been taken from two R&D projects called MapCom (<https://mapcom.es/>). The first of these (CSO2013-47933-C4) brought together, between 2007 and 2013, four coordinated groups and over 70 researchers. The second (PGC2018-093358-B-I00) focused its analysis between 2014 and 2018 with the participation of over 20 researchers from nine Spanish universities.

For this paper we have filtered 152 documents (94 doctoral theses, 30 papers published in the indexed journals and 28 varied contributions to conferences of the Asociación Española de Investigación en Comunicación) with their principal object related to photography or photojournalism. The searches were conducted in the corpus of documents registered and analysed by MapCom, both by title and by keywords, these being “photo”, “photography” and “photojournalism”. Furthermore, the documents have been reviewed one by one in order to more precisely analyse their object of study and the methodology applied during the research.

Bibliometric analysis implies performing both an inventory and analysis of the sets of documents which make up the scientific production, using statistical means, during which a series of variables must be taken into consideration, thus allowing the determination of tendencies.

The main variables analysed in this paper are related to the data in the register: publication year, institution (university, journal), region, the author’s gender and data relative to content and approach: subjects, fields, types and modes of communication, tecYiques, and objectives.

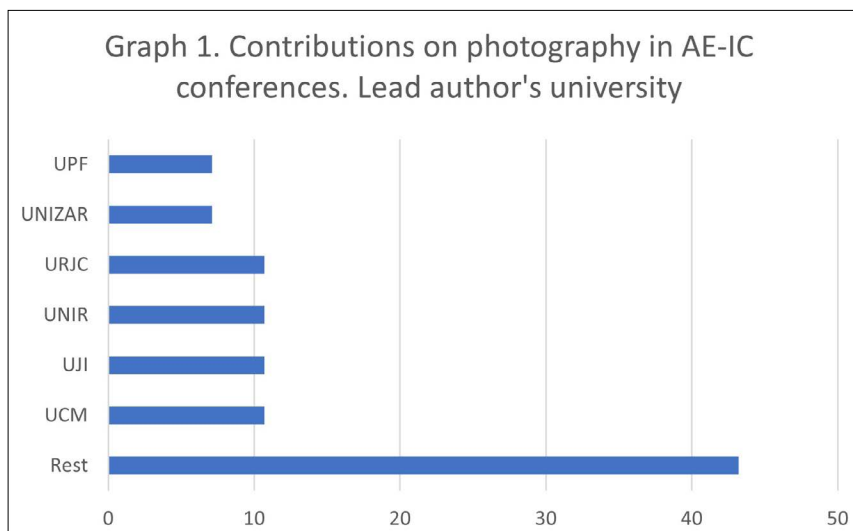
4. Results

4.1. Years of publication

Far from an initial hypothesis indicating that research interest in photography and photojournalism had been growing over time, we found that the publication of papers and doctoral theses did not follow a gradual development, but rather experienced jumps related to R&D projects which had photography as their principal or secondary object. Thus, in 2013 and 2017, there were two peaks of greater publication of papers, whilst 2016 was the year with the highest number of doctoral theses (a figure due to a general increase in the number of doctoral theses presented before the change in Spanish university plans).

4.2. Institution

As regards the universities that backed the results of the research in the communication of photography both via doctoral theses and by research papers, no significant ranking is observable, with the exception of the UCM which is the leader in doctoral theses presented over those 12 years (26% of the total). In fact, quite a similar participation can be seen, for example, as regards contributions to conferences concerning the subject, with a four-way tie between the Rey Juan Carlos, the Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, the Jaume I and the Complutense. See Graph 1.



Source: Created by the authors

Concerning the journals with papers dedicated to photography and related to a state-funded R&D project, there is a triple tie between *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, *El Profesional de la Información* and *Comunicación y Sociedad* with seven papers each (23.3%).

4.3. Gender perspective

The gender perspective in communication research is also applied to this research. We gather from this that at the beginning of doctorates, when junior researchers present their doctoral theses, little over half are female PhD students (52.8%) while somewhat fewer are male (47.2%) (Lozano-Ascencio et al., 2020). However, when the position of doctor has been reached, there is a notable decline in access to Chairs (Caffarel et al., 2018). In terms of communication research focused on photography or photojournalism, the gender gap is from 6 female authors against 4 males, taking as reference the three classes of documents analysed (papers, contributions to conferences and doctoral theses). There is however exact parity in lead authorship of papers in the indexed journals; among the doctoral theses, 7 of every 10 are defended by women; and lead authorship in contributions to conferences is assumed by men in 6 out every 10 cases.

4.4. Content of communication research into photography and photojournalism

Three of every four documents analysed are directly related to the main subject of this paper (photography, journalism, photojournalism) while the rest are more closely related to art, advertising or propaganda. Something very similar occurs with the doctoral theses, as three out of four focus on the main subject; 80% of the papers analysed are along the same lines and two of every three contributions to conferences also focus on photography and journalism.

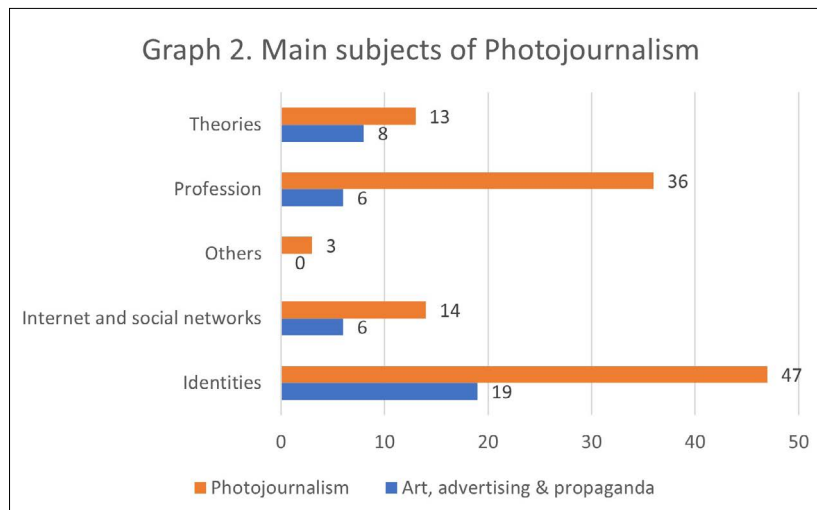
Almost half (43.4%) of the central themes of the documents analysed are concerned with identities (social problems, emigration, gender, psychological conflict); in second place comes research into matters related to the practice and profession of photojournalism (companies, photographers, professional routines), and lastly, we find subjects related to the conceptualisation of journalistic photography, and the utilisation or presence of photography on the internet and social networks.

Within Photojournalism, “identities” is the principal subject (47 N / 30.9%), followed by the “profession of journalism” (36 N / 23.7%), while the third most common subject within art, advertising and propaganda is again “identities” (19 N / 12.5%) (Graph 2).

Society’s more vulnerable collectives –children, the elderly, women, racialised persons and the LGTBIQ+ collective– have been the object of interest of research focused on the image offered, in particular, by the mass media as well as by social networks.

Images are related to the construction of collective identity and these studies are in consonance with the increase in cultural studies, with particular relevance for gender perspectives, both in the domestic and international academic spheres. This type of research is also associated with decolonisation studies focused on et’nic minorities or the power of the world’s predominant cultures.

Among the subjects studied, it is surprising that the main figures of photojournalism, be they historical or current, have barely been touched upon, and that among the scientific studies dedicated to the ethics of professional journalism, there is practically no mention of photojournalists, in as much as their professional development calls for specific codes and methods, nor yet of editors or graphic editors.

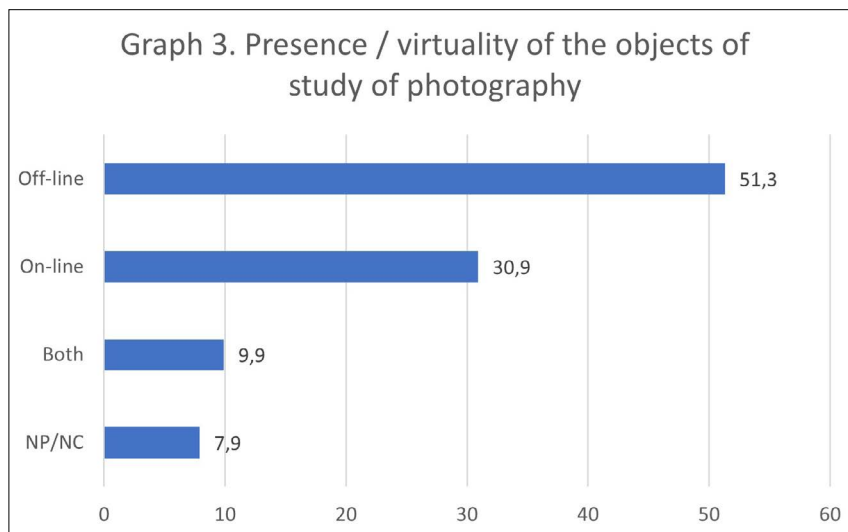


Source: Created by the authors

4.5. By type of communication

Half of the documents studied (52%) carry out their differing analyses of photography considering communication through the media. That is, on the basis of searching for data or images in the media. The remaining 48% (73 documents), are interested in organisational, group, interpersonal or other areas of communication.

It is noteworthy that over half (51.3%) of the documents analysed choose printed images and documents, against 30.9% of analyses performed using virtual images. Graph 3.



Source: Created by the authors

4.6. *Tec iques of research into photography*

The great majority of the documents analysed (60.5%) utilise documentary tec iques (Content Analysis in journals, newspapers, advertising and political campaigns) to approach the object of study and gather information. The other documents employ tec iques focused on participant or systematic observation including semiotic studies (17.8%), surveys (7.9%) and in-depth interviews (7.2%).

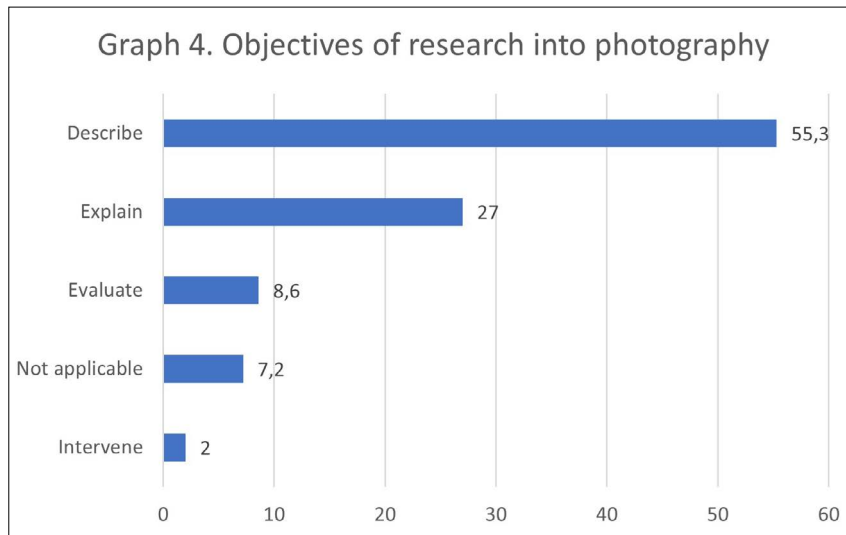
In the analysis of the global data compiled through the MapCom project, it has been observed that framing or agenda-setting is one of the methodologies on the rise in communication research in Spain. However, studies tend to focus on the analysis of textual content, leaving interpretation of the accompanying image to one side.

Nevertheless, it has been found that quantitative documentary tec iques (content analysis), with descriptive objectives and focused on media communication, and with journalistic theoretical references (framing or agenda-setting), do not analyse the

graphic material which often accompanies the messages. However, the international scientific world is increasingly focused on this aspect, leading us to suppose that a greater scientific interest in this matter shall soon feed into the domestic arena.

4.7. Objectives of research into photography

Among other points to analyse are the objectives of the research, which are not always directly expressed in the studies, this meaning they must be interpreted by the analysts involved in the research group. Graph 4 shows that just over half of the documents (55.3%) are descriptive, that is, their procedures are oriented toward registering photographic images for documentary follow-up: to classify artistic patrimony, catalogue the social role of women, measure political information in electoral campaigns, etc. 27% of cases have an explanatory *raison d'être*, that is, to expound causes, effects, correlations and changes in the object of study proposing models for analysis and simulations for the better study of the images. Lastly, 8.6% of research has objectives of evaluation, that is to say, they validate, contrast or test existing models to analyse visual representation, identity construction, documentary or fictional narratives, etc. It is noteworthy that very few researchers (2%) of the doctoral theses, indexed papers and contributions to conferences have considered the possibility, when conducting their research, of intervening to change social processes or behaviour through the use of experimental dynamics applied to isolated individuals or groups. Such intervention is highly infrequent in the majority of communication research in Spain.



Source: Created by the authors

5. Conclusions

High level research into communication in Spain between 2007 and 2018 paid little attention to photography and photojournalism, but half of these documents show lines of research in harmony with social demands such as the cultural study of identity.

The MapCom data study makes it clear that one of the main weaknesses of this approach is economic, as, despite growing social interest in photography and photojournalism, this has not led to an increase in scientific production related to RDI projects. Greater study is called for of candidates' profiles for this type of project and of the subjects usually chosen, in order to perhaps discern one of the possible obstacles to the development of research into less common subjects such as photojournalism and photography and which are associated with a less prestigious area with a minority group of followers and therefore lesser impact. However, these are times of change which call for fresh ideas in the way we approach competitive RDI projects with a clear vocation for knowledge transfer. From the very first moment when competitive projects with photography and photojournalism as their main object of study are launched, interest in the area will increase and, at the same time, this will feed back into Communication studies and will enhance its prestige among the scientific community.

Furthermore, the door should open for new professional academics associated with the increasingly common subject of photojournalism in communication and information sciences faculties in Spanish universities, pushing for not only a new, more practical curriculum, but also a theoretical one, in which historical knowledge, as well as knowledge of methodologies of image analysis take an important place amongst the competences the student is to acquire.

Research into photography and photojournalism over these twelve years shows other signs of weakness, such as the lack of a full immersion in the study of on-line or digital imagery; the incorporation of graphic material in the application of methodologies such as framing, also known as agenda-setting; the analysis of current or historical photojournalistic works; and the professional deontology of photojournalists and graphic editors and their relationship with the era of post-truth.

And it is precisely here that an opportunity presents itself. This could be the moment for methodological innovation, giving greater emphasis to techniques focused on systematic or participant observation (where methodologies such as semiotics are included, and which currently only represent 17.8% of the total of the work studied), surveys (now only 7.9% of the documents analysed) and in-depth interviews (barely 7.2% of the total). Moreover, we were surprised to find that only four studies deal with the figures and work of major photojournalists over time, a vacuum that we are sure will be filled.

It is also important to highlight that the current need to work on fact-checking to counteract the effects of fake news created by false or manipulated images may drive forward a model of scientific working which is currently hardly representative, this being intervention to change social processes and behaviour. This line of work could contribute to knowledge transfer, but at the moment represents only 2% of the total of studies analysed.

As we have been detailing, the weaknesses detected by our research could give an initial impression of research into photography and photojournalism being disjointed, as far as communication goes, but following analysis bearing in mind several contextual factors, what we find is potential development towards a trans-disciplinary and contemporary research model, in which photography is interpreted from different analytical viewpoints, such that there is no single way of approaching the subject, but

that it may be an object of study that requires an interdisciplinary approach, to thus be up to the new ways of thinking and carrying out research.

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