Research methods of visual mass-media content

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ABSTRACT

The author refers to the content of the AIF.ru media website. The content covers a tragic event, that stroke Kemerovo (Russia) in March 2018. That is a fire that burnt down a mall. The researcher applies the method of continuous sampling, the method of axial coding, content analysis at different stages to analyze the AIF.ru content. It was concluded that photography is used for timely coverage of events. The result has been achieved thanks to the method of continuous sampling and counting the number of visual content items by types. With the help of the method of axial coding, it is stated that there is a thematic (location, people) principle in grouping photos on the site. A completed content analysis made it possible to draw a conclusion that, first of all, the place of events and officials related to the incident are visualized. However, the personal grief is not displayed for the audience. As a rule, people are depicted as part of a single whole as crowds, as a large number of people which symbolizes public tragedy in the pictures AIF.ru.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing → Visualization;** Empirical studies in visualization

KEYWORDS

Visual turn, mass media, method of continuous sampling, method of axial coding, method of content analysis.

1 INTRODUCTION

The fact of total visuality domination in all spheres of human life has long become a thing that goes without saying in numerous discussions about the essence of modern civilization. Notions such as mosaic thinking, virtual reality, and visual culture become ingrained not only in science, but also in everyday communication.

The most dynamically developing types of visual media content need theoretical understanding. It makes present research relevant.

This article is based on various research approaches, which we can combine in two groups. Firstly, it is related to philosophic analysis of the visual culture and the phenomenon of visuality. Secondly, the article deals with research conveying information visualization trends in modern mass media.

McLuhan marked a clear correlation between the development of new technologies and revolutionary changes in the modes of communication [1]. W. Mitchell proposed the detailed analysis of the visuality as a part of these changes [2]. His term "pictorial turn", constructing as an echo of Rorty's "linguistic turn", helps to understand the importance of images as a new communicative system rather than a sort of addition to the text. A numerous of specialist develop these point of view (see, for example YU. Buyakova [3], S. Avanesov [4], P. Shtompka [5], V. Savchuk [6] A. Reutov [7], M. Gabova [8], T. Kazarina [9], V. Kincapsa [10], M. Zagidullina [11] and others.

Visualization in information field is in the focus of many researchers (A. Gorbacheva [12], A. Svitich [13], V. Tulupov [14], V. Shevchenko [15] and others). Over the past three decades, major advances in mass-media as a platform of visual culture have allowed to find some algorithms of the analysis of images as an independent part of communication. The qualitative case studies method can be applied to mass-media facts. The use of qualitative case studies is a well-established approach in humanities P. Baxter and S. Jack [16]. In mass-media researching, it can be fruitful to consider the phenomenon of visualization in the context of social reality.

The empirical base of the research is made up of the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* (AIF.ru) visual content for the period from 25 to 27 March 2018. That is 107 reports that cover the tragic events of the fire in Zimnaya Vishnia mall, Kemerovo (from the fire break till the end of the rescue operation).

2 VISUALITY IS THE BASIC FORM OF THE MODERN CULTURE

A person's (as a social being) awareness of his place (role, functions, etc.) in modern society, as well as a personal fulfillment, is largely mediated by his communication.

The cultural field, as a sphere of visuality and figurativeness, is receiving the most important dimension nowadays. That dimension is media. «A fantastic turn to images, to a visual culture becomes a reality today thanks to the media that produce visual signs in the field of advertising and politics. Signs that do not mean anything, nothing stands for them. Contrary to the realistic theory of knowledge, they have an inconceivable impact on behavior of people» [17]. Under the influence of mass media, reality turns into a media reality that produces the reality of the modern world as a visual one. Technical progress and the development of mass media have made the visualization of reality unavoidable. In its turn, the reality visualizes increasingly the media, which publish more photos, videos, graphics and so on.

It needs to be recognized that the media world becomes more realistic for us than the real world itself. Our concepts of it are often based not on the experience we have gained, but on the images that are replicated by the media. We will not confuse the Eiffel Tower with anything else, although a trip to Paris is only in the plans. We are quite aware what Donald Trump looks like, despite the fact that we have never met in person; we know how Zimnyay Vishnia burned down, although we are thousands kilometers away from Kemerovo. Visuality functions as "a form of world and reality representation, as the basic form of the modern culture existence" [8]. It becomes an essential characteristic of the modern mass media, which determines their face. Various kinds of media visualizations make it possible to see the world multidimensional, in its whole dimensions and aspects.

3 MEDIA IS THE AVANT-GARDE OF VISUAL TURN

In our opinion, visual formats in the media make it possible to convey information laconic (this is especially true for subject areas that are difficult to understand in verbal representations). They also cut off all the extras, things that are not necessary. So they are able to keep the attention of the media consumer for a long time. We agree with V. Shevchenko, who says, "it is possible to visualize a certain territory, a portrait of a person, a manual for a television, an air crash, a political situation, sports achievements, a culinary recipe.... So absolutely any data" [15].

However, different phenomena and subject areas require different forms of content visualization. In one case, a photo essay will be the most appropriate, in another - "explanatory infographics", in the third – a bright color accent. Serious,

detailed analytical materials often require a combination of different kinds of visual content. A wide variety of types and subtypes of visualization in media requires a classification. Typologies of visual content are actively being developed in the current journalism studies. However, it must be acknowledged that they describe a visual media field through similar categories and approximately in the same set of units. Thus, analyzing the current periodicals, A. Svitich refers to "illustration" as a stumbling block of a classification. To "illustration" the researcher refers a photo image, a graphic illustration and information graphics [13]. V. Shevchenko, who also typologies visual content on the example of printed media, offers not an expanded but a voluminous list of "types of content visualization". The author's typology includes different types with their subclasses of visual messages. That is how visualization specification in mass media is achieved. As part of the classification, the author considers "a primary graphic character (pictograms, monograms, logos, emblems, ornaments, vignettes, stings, decorative elements); drawings (cartoons, travesties, comics, graphic, technical and art pictures); infographic (maps, diagrams, tables, graphs, tree graphs, matrixes, plans, structures and flowcharts); photo and typography" [15].

The Internet becomes a leading generator of creating new kinds and types of visual content. Technologies development leads to new visualization types. So, a systematic classification (typology) needs to be supplemented with various forms of multimedia content. That includes video, clips, installations, flash animation, slideshows, etc.

Different kinds of visual typologies emerge in the World Wide Web. As a rule, they are targeted at marketers, copywriters and other experts of the advertising market. For example, employees of the communication agency Comagency consider visual aids as an effective tool of PR-strategies. They distinguish such types of visualization as photographs (including photocollages), drawings, videos and animation (including presentations, flash animation and gif animation), infographics, page design, corporate identity, logos and other author's marks, fonts and color schemes [18]. One of the authors of Cossa, which is an Internet resource about marketing and communications in the digital environment, includes in the classification of visualization in social networks. Among them are: 1) pictures / photos, graphics and infographic; 2) videos, grid banners (which allow to divide photos into fragments and represent them as a single banner) screenshots (which even turn text information with print screen button into an image); 3) pictures with quotes, Internet memes, visualized quizzes, polls and riddles, subscription buttons and alike (e.g. "buy now", "join", "get free") [19].

Of course, such classifications are imperfect; they often contain items that duplicate each other. They are not aimed at all-embracing definitions and classifications of network visual content types as well as edifice. That is quite natural, since the enumerations, mentioned above, are created for specific tasks by

practitioners, who are interested in a fixation of a new phenomenon that can bring success. While professional scientists are looking for systemic knowledge. We cannot but agree that the emergence of such typologies is spontaneous, since their authors just show the process of network visual content variety increase. That manifests that diversity of visuality phenomena is constantly increasing in media sphere.

So, we can confidently say that visual content has a great range of variants in modern media (especially online). However, it should be noted that different types of visual content have different frequency of occurrence, different applications.

4 TYPES OF VISUALIZATION OF JOURNALISTIC CONTENT

Or indirectly related to the text of a publication. It is made using Photo is the leading type of journalistic content visualization.

This is the most commonly used way of material visual presentation. It often acts as a visual and semantic center of a media message (regardless whether there is text in this message or not). A photo attracts attention, raises a material relevance, allows to "grab" immediately the core of an event. Special character of a photo image is connected with its ability to create the effect of presence, of a unique moment that will never happen again.

On the one hand, photo is a documentary, as it is able to represent reality in every detail. On the other hand, it is an art, it performs aesthetic functions. "Photo is a public document, which is the basis for fixating and displaying social information. < ... > A person concentrates on an image. He perceives it as the only trustworthy thing. He is viewing it, sliding from one detail to another. Only a viewer singles specific details out to himself, and gives them meaning" [20].

Types, kinds and genres of journalistic photo can be listed for a long time. However, the "core", major genre of photo images, according to V. Tulupov, are "photo information (photo-note), photo portrait and photo report. The photo-information represents a certain fact (what is depicted), a portrait is a concrete person (who is depicted), a photo report consists of at least three pictures, and is dedicated to the event (a caption must indicate what happened and who took part)" [14].

The oldest way to visualize information, which goes back to the rock art, is a graphic illustration, the definition of which, as applied to the periodical press, is given by A. Svitich. From her point of view, "a graphic illustration is a graphic image, directly means of hand-drawn graphics or digital visualization tools" [13]. In our opinion, this definition is quite applicable to other types of mass media (we are primarily interested in online media).

If, prior to the distribution of the photo, illustrations used to be the leading means of visualizing, today this kind of visualization put on the back burner. However, even now, a non-

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standard, brightly, interestingly made illustration can become the main reason to follow a link. With this approach, an illustration may turn out to be the central element of a media text, although the traditional role in modern journalism is the auxiliary role of illustrations. An illustration is connected with the artistically expressive means of visuals. Therefore in some cases it has a greater emotional potential, and sometimes can exceed an impression made by a photo. Among the genres of modern illustration are" the traditional genres (portrait, caricature, cartoon, comics), and new ones, caused by the transformation of genre features (associative symbolic illustration, illustrative information graphics, illustration with elements of the lettering)" [13].

Infographics (visual representations of information) is a newish, fast-paced visualization tool, that jumped the shark in media a few years ago. Infographics can be viewed as a combination of a text and an image, created with the help of graphic design for the purpose of conveying any meanings. Infographics is a product of a collaborative creativity of a designer and journalist. It turns into an aesthetically attractive, informative, attractive "valuable social currency".

A well-designed and well-organized infographics "can provide viewers with an immediate and deep, very full impression, and give the way through a complicated story to get straight to the core" [21]. On the Internet, modern infographics can be presented not only in the traditional, static form, but also in an interactive format that allows the consumer to control the display of data. For the internet-based media, it is also very important to include a video that can be done both professional and amateur, by a professional or a witness of the events. The latter may not be not of a high quality, but until a professional video is distributed, it is able to provide answers to many questions of a media user.

However, it does not lose its relevance, even after a professional video stories broadcasting, because it represents the evidence of what happened from the very middle of things.

Today, different phenomena and interrelations cannot be considered tangible and obvious until they are visualized by the media. Hence, there are a desire to adapt existing methods of designing images to current conditions, and a constant search and development of new visualization tools, as well as attempts to achieve a synergistic effect, using multiple types of visualization within a single material.

5 VISUALIZATION OF A TRAGEDY IN MEDIA (METHODS OF ANALYSIS ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE INTERNET WEB-SITE AIF.RU)

AIF.ru web site content is under consideration in order to identify specific characteristics of events timely coverage through a visual content of leading domestic online media. The

content is devoted to the tragedy in Kemerovo (Russia) within the time period of the end of March 2018.

For the analysis we selected 107 materials by surfing the media web site for the tag Zimnaya Vishnia. The chronological framework of the sample is two days from fire break (the coverage was launched accordingly) up to an officially announced of the rescue operation completion by the Emergency Situation Ministry (March 25–27, 2018). The framework is determined by the need to explore the media timely coverage of the tragic events exactly during their unfolding. Therefore, we were less interested in the content that contained a reflection upon the tragedy as well as the materials published after the rescue operation was completed. However, about 50 publications were included in the empirical base beyond the designated chronological framework as background to observe a certain continuity in the coverage of the tragedy by the media.

Then, the types of the selected materials visual content are analyzed, using the method of continuous sampling. A photo on AIF.ru web-site is the main and leading means of visualizing of Zimnaya Vishnia media content. Unsurprisingly, this means of communication is a safe bet, since during first days of large-scale disasters, there is little infographics. Infographics suggests a comprehension of the situation; illustrations are not entirely applicable for ethical reasons. Moreover, a photo does not change a corporate style. A media consumer is waiting for information and wants to see what is happening, obeying the laws of clip-on thinking. So, the bet is always made on the photos as they are emotional, and are able to convey the atmosphere as well as involve into the event.

Next step is an axial coding undertaking. Since this method is not very common in the practice of scientific research, we will dwell on it in more detail. Axial coding is one of the methods of qualitative text analysis, which is based on the so-called grounded theory. The term grounded theory, as a special concept, was introduced by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967, who focused on theorizing research related to the verification of qualitative data obtained under specific conditions, for example, unstructured interview data, including observation and archival research. The grounded theory is designed for a wide range of applications, primarily in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. Nevertheless, the techniques developed later on the basis of this theory turned out to be quite applicable to large data sets and, in particular, turn to be a kind of development and improvement of the well-known method of content analysis. The most important in this connection the general scheme of the study proposed by N. Pidgin and K. Henwood can be under consideration [22]. There are four research stages:

1) Preparation of data, including collection and recording of the material. In short, that is the empirical base formation.

2) Primary data analysis. Coding is performed at this stage. Open encoding is a continuous code designation (using the procedure of constant questioning - What is it? What is it about?). Author of the manual "Qualitative methods:

introduction to humanistic sociology" V. Semenova notes that "at the stage of open coding, the researcher marks all the topics in the text as categories that are at a very low level of abstraction. They come from the general research questions and the first immersion in the text. After the initial coding, the researcher makes up a general list of identified topics, which serves as an orientation and an incentive for further specification. Such a list reflects most fully the breadth of the information collected and may contain topics that are beyond the scope of this study (those can be used in future projects)" [23].

3) Axial coding (the so-called "nuclear analysis") – involves the establishment of links between codes. Describing the stage of axial coding, V. Semenov writes that axial coding is the second "passage" through the data. At the initial stage the themes coexisted separately and the researcher did not think about the connection between them. With axial encoding, the researcher concentrates on the codes themselves and their possible refinement in relation to a certain context. It moves in the direction of organizing ideas or sets the axis of the key categories. The causes and consequences of events, conditions and types of interaction, strategies and processes are elucidated. The question arises: is it possible to combine and build categories in a certain sequence and correlate with the main theme of the researcher interest? Axial coding stimulates reflection on the links between topics and categories, gives rise to new questions. This strengthens the link between testimonies and concepts; the categories are refined, reformulated, or, conversely, discarded and replaced by new ones. A logical relationship is established between the central theme of the study and its confirmations scattered across different fragments of the primary text [23]. J. Corbin and A. Strauss define axial coding as follows: "Axial coding is a number of procedures by which data, after an open encoding, is reconciled in a new way by establishing links between categories. This is done with the help of a coding paradigm, including conditions, context, strategies of action / interaction and effect" [24].

4) Synthesis of data and selection of categories. "Electoral coding is a process of electing the central category, during which the category is systematically linked to other categories. The validation of these links and the denotation of categories require further improvement and development" [24]. In fact, the final encoding procedure is the creation of a convincing interpretation of the data. It is precisely the form of acquired knowledge integration, their presentation in the form of a connected story. From the point of view of the established research experience in the Russian science this is an obligatory element of any research, entrenched under the name analysis. Thus, we are talking about the axial coding of the database - the establishment of codes, correlated with each other on the principle of subordination.

As a result, two main thematic groups were identified: photographs of locations and photographs of people.

After the formation of the groups, we started the content analysis of the materials.

Photos of the locations are the mall Zimnaya Vishnia, a spontaneous memorial, next to the burnt building, where people almost immediately began to bring flowers and toys, in memory of the deceased children.

If to speak about photos of people, there are practically no faces of dead children, and their parents in the frame on the AiF website. Most of them can be seen in portraits exhibited by the spontaneous memorial. We think that this is a deliberate and thoroughly thought choice of the editorial board. Perhaps, that is unwillingness to overreact already worked out audience, as well as a tribute to the families of the deceased. A quality media can not afford to engage in mass hysteria. In this context, the publication "Grabbing and dragging them ...", about the heroes who saved the victims of Zimnaya Vishnia [http://www.aif.ru/society/people/hvatal_ih_i_taskal_kak_prosty e_lyudi_spasali_detey_na_pozhare_v_kemerove], is rather an exception. Here one can read about the deceased Tatyana Darsaliyu, who shoved her daughter from the shopping center and returned to evacuate the children left inside, about Dmitry Polukhin, who brought three children from the burning building, Konstantin Kolabukhov, who saved a three-year-old baby. But this publication is not about the victims. It's about those who risked themselves, saving lives.

In addition to the victims of the tragedy, there are photos of accidental witnesses and those who were there on duty. The firefighters, EMERCOM employees, investigators from the TFR, eyewitnesses of events and others are caught on camera, but basically all these people were on the periphery of the camera focus. They get into the shot accidentally, rather recapturing the atmosphere than posing as models. The Kemerovo spontaneous rally participants represent unity rather than individualism. People and their emotions appear in the shots, mainly in photos, connected with the spontaneous memorials. The memorials where men, women and children gather together. which again represent the whole country, grieving together with Kemerovo. They are seen not as individuals, but as a part of a compassionate nation.

The officials often appear in the AIF photos of Zimnaya Vishnia. For example, the core of the material "Putin instructed the head of the Ministry of Emergency Situations to immediately fly to the place of fire in Kemerovo" is the portrait of Vladimir Puchkov (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/putin_poruchil_glave_mchs_nezam edlitelno_vyletet_k_mestu_pozhara_v_kemerovo). In the information message "Peskov: it's still early to talk about the causes of the fire in the Kemerovo shopping center" there is a picture of the individual. It is a photo of Dmitry Peskov (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/peskov_rano_govorit_o_prichinah_ pozhara_v_kemerovskom_torgovom_centre). There is a close-up of Dmitry Medvedev in "The government of the Russian Federation will allocate 1 million rubles to families of victims of emergency in Kemerovo"

(http://www.aif.ru/incidents/pravitelstvo_rf_vydelit_po_1_mln_r ubley_semyam_zhertv_chp_v_kemerove). The face of the president is the key image of the publication "Putin flew to Kemerovo" (http://www.aif.ru/society/putin_priletel_v_kemerovo). Several publications contain large photos of Aman Tuleev (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/tuleev_izvinilsya_pered_putinym_z a_pozhar_v_zimney_vishne). Virtually all photos with rare exceptions (for example, Medvedev's photo from RIA Novosti) have been taken from the websites of relevant ministries and departments.

Photos of the defendants in the case of Zimnaya Vishni begin to be published on the web site with the first arrests and charges. However, it is done with a little delay. By the way, this happens after our deadline. So, the first material on this topic appears on the site on March, 26 (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/zaderzhan_ohrannik_kemerovskog o_tc_otklyuchivshiy_pozharnuyu_signalizaciyu), the second is after bout 5:00 p.m. on March, 27. Yet they do not contain photographs of the accused (they contain a photo of the building only) (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/v_kemerove_predyavleny_obvineni ya_zaderzhannym_po_delu_o_pozhare_v_tc). But in the publication "An accused of the fire in Kemerovo considers the reason of a fire to be an arson," published on the site in the evening March, 27. While a photo of the detainee Nadezhda Sudenok behind bars is presented with a reference to RIA Novosti (http://www.aif.ru/incidents/obvinyaemaya_po_delu_o_pozhare _v_kemerove_schitaet_prichinoy_chp_podzhog).

Kemerovo events are reflected not only in single news photos, but also in photo galleries. In particular, the material "Fire in Zimnaya Vishnia mall in Kemerovo" presents a photographic tape consisting of 13 items. It most vividly reflects the drama of the situation.

The photos in the gallery are not taken by AiF. The authors are mostly employees of RIA Novosti and Reuters. We can say that these photos aesthetize the tragic event, they are shot "beautifully", albeit with a terrible beauty.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the AIF.ru web-site publications on the fire in Zimnaya Vishnia showed that the tragic events are no less (and even more) "productive" sphere of information visualization than any others. However, the desire to turn even the most terrible tragedies into an image raises questions of an ethical and aesthetic nature. What can be shown and how? What cannot be hidden? And so on. The coverage of events in Kemerovo is accompanied by an avalanche of visual content in social networks and a variety of online publications: photographic

materials from the scene of events, infographics explaining the mall construction and errors in the evacuation of its visitors, etc.

The analyzed publications of AIF, which has a huge experience of information activity, revealed that the main type of visual content in cases like this is a photo. At the same time, contrary to our research expectations, the portrait photo is much inferior in terms of the number of panoramic photos of the reportage character, the main character of which is the building itself. The number of the victims and their relatives face images is extremely small. The shots of rescuers and eyewitnesses are more frequently used. The major part of the face images is represented by official. As a result, the scene of events and officials related to the incident is visualized first of all. The personal grief is not displayed on public. As a consequence, the tragedy becomes somewhat impersonal and at the same time collective. Also, it should be noted that there is a lack of manipulation in photographic materials, which is production personnel, excessive naturalism and other. Nevertheless, the emotional effect is achieved by depicting charred interiors of the shopping center, an improvised memorial to the victims of the tragedy. A person in AIF.ru pictures, as a rule, is depicted as a part of a whole through photos of crowds, which expresses the collective nature of grief and the scale of the tragedy.

Thus, we see that the comprehension of the modern visual media content in the categories of visual turn gives a powerful paradigm for media and its analysis. It opens up prospects for further research in various directions. However, the refinement of techniques, methods of such analysis, its extrapolation onto other infospheres (sports, war, economics, etc.) is a matter of time and a question of the research prospective.

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