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Safety culture and changing visual representations of war? The case of Afghanistan

Kurzfassung: In der internationalen Konfliktberichterstattung werden Sicherheitsmechanismen zum Schutz von lokalen Nachrichtenmitarbeitern anders gehandhabt als zum Schutz internationaler Mitarbeiter. Die größte Auswirkung hat dies wohl auf die Bildproduktion in Kriegszonen, wo lokale Photojournalisten erhöhter Gefahr ausgesetzt sind. Eine mögliche Folgewirkung könnte darin bestehen, dass lokale Photographen aus konfliktgeschüttelten Ländern Konflikte ihrem internationalen Publikum anders versinnbildlichen als internationale Photographen dies tun. Diese Möglichkeit wird in der vorliegenden Studie anhand der Bildberichterstattung über Afghanistan untersucht. Gestützt auf den Vergleich von international und lokal produzierten Bildern explorieren wir die möglichen Effekte, welche eine Verschiebung des Vertrauens in lokale statt internationale Photojournalisten darauf haben kann, wie weit entfernte Kriege einem internationalen Publikum ins Bild gesetzt werden. Die Studie argumentiert dafür, lokale Photojournalisten in Konfliktzonen besser zu schützen.

Abstract: In international conflict correspondence safety mechanisms are unequally employed to protect local news-staffs in contrast to international staffs. Arguably, this has had the greatest impact on image production from war zones, exposing local photojournalists to increased dangers. But it also raises the possibility that local photographers from conflict-torn countries may represent conflicts to international audiences differently than do international photographers. This possibility is explored in this study using the case of Afghanistan. Based on photojournalists' perceptions and comparisons of international and locally produced images, we explore potential effects of the shifting reliance on local rather than international photojournalists on how distant wars come to be pictured to international audiences. This study advances an argument for giving increased protection to local photojournalists in conflict zones.

1. 'Safety culture' and the rise of local image producers from war zones

Since 9/11 there has been growing concern for the safety of journalists in the global news industry when reporting on conflicts. This has meant increasing provision of hostile-environment training for journalists and other measures where the risk to news personnel is factored in when making editorial decisions about what to report on and where to report from. In her recent book describing how these changes have come about as a result of well-publicized targeting of foreign correspondents working for international news media, Palmer (2018) has termed this trend the development of a 'safety culture' in international conflict correspondence. She has also described how this 'safety culture' is in itself flawed due to its emphasis on the individual responsibility of journalists for their own security rather than on finding systemic causes and solutions. More importantly for the current discussion, she also pointed out that *local* news-staffs that produce news for international audiences are often kept out of the purview of this 'safety culture' (Palmer, 2018). This is because, she argued, they are thought to be immune to the kinds of dangers that international journalists might face, while the very specific vulnerabilities that result from their 'local'-ness, not to mention their precarious employment situations, are ignored in this so-called 'safety culture'.

Arguably, one of the fundamental shifts in conflict correspondence because of this problematic yet pervasive 'safety culture' has been the growing dependence on local sources and resources to produce images of wars (Paterson, 2011; Patrick and Kennedy, 2014). This may be related to the financial effects of shrinking foreign news-gathering budgets (Hamilton & Erickson, 2006; Palmer, 2018). War photography is particularly affected by this shift to reliance on local sources, because as a 'somatic' journalistic practice (Bock, 2008) – i.e., a form of journalism requiring *physical* presence on site – conflict photojournalism is prone to be especially dangerous for news-personnel in conflict zones (Allan & Sreedharan, 2016; Istek, 2017).

The use of non-journalistic local image-sources to represent conflicts, such as activists and non-governmental organizations, has received some scholarly attention (Allan, 2014; Chouliaraki, 2015; Wright, 2015). In contrast, there has been little discussion so far of the effects that this shift from relying on 'parachute' photographers and photojournalists (Pedelty, 1995; Murrell, 2015) to engaging local *professional* photographers and photojournalists may have on visual representations of distant wars for international audiences. The present study seeks to meet the need for research on the *visual effects* in representations of war resulting from the growing 'safety culture' in international conflict correspondence. Ultimately, it also seeks to understand the *value* of the contributions that these local image producers can and may make in serving international audiences and uses this to argue for providing them with better safety measures and working conditions.

Thus, the main question explored in this study is whether professional photographers working for international audiences, who hail from the very countries embroiled in conflicts, observe and represent these conflicts differently than international photographers – 'professional, specialized tourists' (Sontag, 2003: 17) – who visit these places as outsiders. Particularly, I examine the question of if and to what extent their representations of wars *at home* may change and challenge hegemonic perspectives of the global North which are reified in traditional practices of visual representations of *distant* wars. The rationale behind asking these questions reflects back to the issue of the lack of safety measures for these local image-producers (Mitra, 2017). If indeed visual representations of wars produced by local professionals can qualitatively enrich and enhance the ways violent conflicts are portrayed in international media for distant audiences, then ensuring the safety of these image-producers should be assigned top priority.

In addressing these questions, the present research study is located at the intersection of studies on safety for journalists and research on visual representations of distant wars, and it explores how the relationship between the two may be understood in contemporary conflict correspondence. It examines these larger themes with a case study of a contemporary conflict: the post-2001 war in Afghanistan.

2. Afghan war and increasing reliance on local photojournalists

Afghanistan has experienced ongoing war since 1978, with its most recent, still-metastasizing conflict beginning in 2001. The current cycle of violent conflict has been steadily worsening since 2014 (Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015; UNAMA, 2018; Mashal, 2018). However, in the years since 2001, the Afghan media sector has re-constituted itself with the aid of the international community. One especially pronounced change during this period has been in the practice of photojournalism and photography in Afghanistan: we have seen a meteoric upswing since the ban on photography imposed by the Taliban between 1996 and 2001 (Rawan, 2002) was reversed following the US invasion[1].

In the years immediately after 2001, international photojournalists on assignment in Afghanistan produced most of the images of the country and the conflict presented by media to international audiences (Campbell, 2011). Currently, however, Afghan photographers are playing the most important role in the production of images of their country for international audiences (Murray, 2012). This shift was aided by the increasing local capacity for photography and photojournalism in the country, as training, education and the necessary equipment have become more widely available in Afghanistan. Furthermore, with the outbreak of severe and protracted conflicts in other parts of the world such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, international news-gathering resources have been diverted away from Afghanistan, resulting in increased reliance on local image-producers. But this shift has also come about because of the deteriorating conflict situation in Afghanistan. As the comparatively safer situation in Afghanistan in the years after 2001 has given way again to increasing conflict, with not only the Taliban but also ISIS participating in hostilities, it has become increasingly dangerous for foreign news personnel to travel and operate in the country. Consequently, less expensive, more "expendable" local Afghan photojournalists have largely replaced international photojournalists in Afghanistan (Mitra, 2017; *cf.* Eide, 2016).

Afghanistan offers a highly instructive case of how protecting foreign news-personnel at the expense of local photographers and photojournalists can affect visual representations of contemporary wars. Not only was the Afghan conflict extensively photographed by international photojournalists for a period following 2001, but there has also been a marked shift to representing the ongoing conflict internationally using images made by Afghan professionals. As well, a substantial body of scholarly research already exists on biases and stereotypes in international representations of Afghanistan in the post-2001 period. Taken together, this research on images of Afghanistan produced by international photojournalists provides in-depth, longitudinally-studied frames of reference for the kinds of images of the country routinely reproduced in international media. In turn, this facilitates an examination of how the Afghan photojournalists who have replaced international photographers may differ in their portrayals of Afghanistan for international audiences.

3. Biases and stereotypes in international representations of Afghanistan

Global flows of news and information have long been criticized as one-sided and dominated by political and cultural views emanating from the global North (e.g. Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; 2004; Thussu & Freedman, 2003; Paterson & Sreberny, 2004; Boyd-Barrett, 2010). Within the broader context of global production of news and information, studies of conflict images circulated in international media have also shown that these images reflect hegemonic political and cultural views emanating from the global North (e.g. Myers et al., 1996; van Leeuwen & Jaworski, 2002) which are stereotypical of and biased against countries and peoples embroiled in conflicts in the global South.

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[1] See Mitra (2017) for a detailed description of the context in Afghanistan, including media developments in the country in the post-2001 period, as well as a longer discussion of the complex history of photojournalism in Afghanistan.

Within this context, photographic representations of Afghanistan in international media by international photographers have been much studied in academic circles since the US invasion in 2001. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive picture of the hegemonic perspectives – and their biases and stereotypes – that have prevailed in international representations of Afghanistan. The following broad trends have been confirmed time and again by studies of the representation of Afghanistan and the Afghan conflict in international media:

a) International news reportage, including visual news, have been more biased towards 'negative news' – focusing on the ravages of the ongoing conflict as well as other socials ills and problems – about Afghanistan (Aday, 2010; Shabbir et al., 2011).
b) International visual news of Afghanistan has focused on episodes and events of war and violence in Afghanistan (Verschueren, 2012).
c) International visual news of Afghanistan has tended to focus on foreign troops present in Afghanistan and other armed parties to the conflict (Ottosen, 2005; Fahmy, 2005a, 2005b; Griffin, 2004; Zelizer, 2005; Campbell, 2011; Sliwinski, 2015), rather than on ordinary people whose lives are affected by war and violence in the country (Verschueren, 2012).
d) International visual news of Afghanistan has tended to focus on the political and military leaders who 'manage' the war rather than on the lived experience of those personally affected by it (Verschueren, 2012).
e) International visual news has reified prevailing historical and cultural stereotypes of Afghan society and culture by using images of Afghan women as symbols of oppression in Afghan society (Jabbra, 2006; Mackie, 2012) or employed their images to symbolize the progress of Afghan society since 2001. This is because the war in Afghanistan has been justified by official sources in the US and allied countries as necessary to 'liberate' Afghan women (Fahmy, 2004; Jiwani, 2009; Mackie, 2012; Mitra, 2014).

The best in-depth study of international photographic representations of Afghanistan to date was made by Verschueren (2012). His analysis of images published in European and US newspapers led him to observe, "what remained largely absent from the news photography of the Afghan conflict is the human condition of war, the experience of the local population, the prolonged consequences of the war, and its structural and cultural roots" (2012: 157). Interestingly, as an antidote to the biases and stereotypes he discovered while analyzing international representations of Afghanistan, Verschueren (2012: 158-159) argued that,

> One route to addressing the issues of stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and simply access could be rethinking collaboration between Afghans and foreign journalists. The former can not only provide an in-depth perspective of their own culture but they can also suggest new ways of photographing and representing conflict. Afghan photographers and journalists can help replace the image of Afghanistan as an empty space, a medieval realm and an oppressive zone, and they can help connect with the multiplicities of living in contemporary Afghanistan.

The current study is informed by alternatives for creating conflict-images differing from the typical portrayals of Afghanistan in international media *by Afghan photographers* who work for international audiences, as stated by Verschueren (2012) in the passage above. Such a study of how Afghanistan is represented to international audiences by Afghan photojournalists has until now been missing from academic discussions. At the same time, it is increasingly urgent to better understand *their* representations of Afghanistan, as the growing 'safety culture' in conflict correspondence is unevenly applied to local photojournalists in Afghanistan. This is unfortunate, because the images that come to represent Afghanistan for international audiences are mostly if not entirely produced by these photojournalists.

4. Research questions

To understand how the unequal application of safety concerns within conflict correspondence (Palmer, 2018) may affect visual representations of contemporary conflicts, in this study I focus on two areas of inquiry that in journalism studies are often examined separately but not together (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014) – journalists' perceptions *and* their performance, and the relationship between the two. By exploring local Afghan photojournalists' perceptions, I have sought to understand two different, specific questions. The first of these relates to Afghan photographers' perceptions of ways Afghanistan has been and is being represented internationally:

> *Research question 1:* What kinds of images were perceived by Afghan photographers as dominant in international representations of Afghanistan?

The second question dealt specifically with how Afghan photojournalists may represent Afghanistan differently than their international counterparts:

> *Research question 2:* What kinds of images do Afghan photographers say they would prefer for representing Afghanistan internationally?

In trying to understand the professional performance of Afghan photojournalists and relate them to their reported self-perceptions, I conducted a comparative study of image-sets to see if and how the responses to research questions 1 and 2 might be expressed in images produced by international and Afghan photojournalists respectively. The aim was to answer:

> *Research question 3:* Were the perceptions and preferences of Afghan photographers consistent with sets of published images of Afghanistan made by international and Afghan photographers?

5. Methodology

Apropos of the research questions, this study was conducted in two parts. The first investigated Afghan photographers' perceptions using in-depth research interviews, while the second sought to understand their recorded perceptions through an analysis of two sets of images of Afghanistan chosen as a comparative case study.

To collect qualitative data regarding the perceptions of Afghan photographers, I conducted semi-structured but open-ended interviews in Kabul, Afghanistan in late 2014. Twenty professional Afghan photographers were interviewed as part of a larger study exploring the professional experiences of Afghan photographers. Eleven of these interviews were conducted in Dari with the aid of an interpreter, while the others were in English. Of these 20, three were women photojournalists. In accord with the ethical guidelines[2] for this research, the respondents' names and employing organizations are kept confidential in this study.

Of the 20 photographers, 18 talked specifically and in great detail about making images for international audiences. Among them, eight were or had been photojournalists – freelance or full-time – for international news agencies based in Afghanistan. Another four were or had been full-time photojournalists for an Afghan news agency that regularly supplied international client news services. A further three had worked as photojournalists for international news services in the past and were working as documentary photographers either directly engaged by international organizations for photographic projects or were receiving funds from international sources to do documentary photographic projects primarily for an international audience. Following the interviews, the transcripts were thematically analyzed (Guest et al., 2011) using both inductive and deductive methods (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) in order to group the responses of the Afghan photographers around recurring patterns.

To better understand the perceptions of the Afghan photographers regarding image production I decided to examine whether their comments corresponded to published images of Afghanistan. For this purpose, I decided on a purposive case study approach as the appropriate 'methodological strategy' (Meyer, 2001: 348-9; Wilson, 2011: 90-1). I selected two sets of images: one by international photographers and the other by Afghan photographers. My choice of a purposive sample-based case study was informed by a strategy of instrumentality (Stake 1995 in Baxter and Jack, 2008: 548). This needs further explanation. Published images in international media are the end products of a long 'visual gatekeeping chain' (Bissell, 2000) and do not solely reflect the decisions of photographers. Thus, drawing randomized representative samples from published images of Afghanistan would not adequately address questions regarding the roles of local and international photographers, as the images would have been selected, edited and captioned by news professionals other than photographers. To solve this problem, I chose two purposive samples of sets of published images of Afghanistan which are documented (Time.com, 2011; Sayar, 2012) to have been selected through a process where the photographers exercised editorial choice, so that influences of foreign 'image processors' (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 48) within the 'visual gatekeeping chain' (Bissell, 2000), though perhaps not entirely absent, were less significant.

The first set of images – by international photographers – is an online photo-series published in TIME magazine on October 7, 2011, entitled 'Afghanistan: The Photographs That Moved Them Most'[3]. For this series, the magazine invited 40 international photographers to select photographs of Afghanistan that they had taken between 2000 and 2011. The photo-series also included captions and commentaries written by the photographers themselves to provide contexts for the images they selected. The second body of work that I chose – as a purposive sample of images produced by Afghan photographers – was a photo-book, also from late 2011. Produced by 3rd Eye Film and Photojournalism Centre in Kabul and published in Afghanistan, the photo-book is entitled 'New Afghanistan through Afghan Eyes', published in English[4]. I collected the pictures in this photo book while conducting my fieldwork in Afghanistan in 2014. The photo book includes 156 photographs of

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[2] As this study involved human participants, it received prior non-medical research ethics review approval according to the 'Tri-council Policy Statement 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans' (2010) of Canada from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of the University of Western Ontario under file no. 105378.

[3] The photo-series is available to view through this link: http://time.com/3781604/afghanistan-the-photographs-that-moved-them-most/

[4] In the author's possession. A detailed page-by-page, image-by-image description of this photo book is available upon request from the author.

Afghanistan by 14 Afghan photographers (Seerat et al., 2011). I settled on this set of images because like the TIME photo series, the selection of images was usually made by the photographers themselves (Sayar, 2012), and also included were commentaries written by some of the contributing Afghan photographers (Seerat et al., 2011) much like the online photo-series. Comparison of these two bodies of photographic work was also aided by the fact that both included images taken in Afghanistan over the decade between 2000 and 2011 (Time.com, 2011; Sayar, 2012). Both of these sets of images are likewise not daily news-based visuals but 'longer format' photographic products aimed at providing a 'longer, lingering look' at Afghanistan over a longer period of time (Mitra, 2014).

To better understand the topics of the images in order to compare them to responses by the Afghan photographers, I analyzed the images as "photo-texts" (Verschueren, 2012: 32), i.e. understanding the images and their captions as a "mixed-media unit" where the photo is a metonymic device representing "a slice of life" and the caption provides its essential context. The photo-textual analysis of images was particularly well-suited to the current study, because it is flexibly applied between "multimodal cultural expressions" (Verschueren, 2012: 32), i.e. across platforms, intended audiences and media. This analytical flexibility meant that I could compare the images in the photo series and the photo book, even though they were published on different platforms.

6. Findings and discussion

In this section, I present findings from the two parts of the study as they relate to each of the research questions. I also discuss the findings in terms of previous research and the goals of the current study.

6.1 What kinds of images were perceived by Afghan photographers as dominant in international representations of Afghanistan?

In the responses of Afghan photographers to open-ended questions regarding what kinds of images of Afghanistan were routinely shown and seen in international media, certain patterns emerged. These patterns in the raw interview data found through both deductive and inductive thematic analysis of the interview data were coherent enough across the interview-transcripts –closely clustered around a theme to allow "further processing" (Boyatzis, 1998: 142) to levels of "higher abstractions" (Guest et al., 2011: 50-52) – to clearly define image-topics that respondents repeatedly mentioned during the interviews. The topics that internationally circulated images of Afghanistan tended to depict, according to Afghan photojournalists, were the following: *negative aspects* of Afghanistan showing social ills and problems in Afghanistan (three respondents); *Afghan and foreign military personnel* (three respondents) and *political actors and leaders* (four respondents). Furthermore, the most frequently mentioned topics of images that respondents thought were in circulation internationally were photographs depicting acts of *war and violence* (11 respondents).

A respondent expressed his frustration with such international representations of Afghanistan:

> [T]he international agencies or international media, they are focusing on attacks. For example, in one month, there's no [other] picture of Kabul, there are attacks, there are wounded, there are people [who] died so then you can see all over the world, [when] they are publishing the news, 'oh Afghanistan!'… . [T]he problem with the international agencies [is] that if you send pictures [to] them from daily life, or other subjects, they don't show much interest in it. They like fifteen picture[s] of suicide attacks [and] fourteen of them are right away in the website. And then you see it is published in the New York Times and so this is the problem. Sometimes I even fight with my editor, 'why are you not using this [non-suicide attack related] picture'? They just say we have other important subjects, which is why we cannot have these [other] kinds of pictures.

Apart from these four topics, nine respondents noted that photos showing Afghan women were often seen and shown in international representations of Afghanistan. One respondent noted that since *"the fall of the Taliban, all [news media] people love to find woman without burqas. They want to see women without burqas".*

According to this respondent and others, images of Afghan women as symbols of both progress and oppression in Afghan society continued to dominate representations of Afghanistan at the time of the study. These responses closely mirrored the tendency in international media representations of Afghanistan, as found by scholars cited above, to use images of *Afghan women as symbols* of 'progress' or 'oppression' in Afghan society. As a matter of fact, almost all the patterns that emerged from the responses of the Afghan photojournalists closely mirrored the trend in international representations of Afghanistan noted by previous researchers. One exception was that 'military leaders' (Verschueren, 2012) were not mentioned as a frequent image-topic by the Afghan photographers.

6.2 What kinds of images did Afghan photographers say they would prefer to see representing Afghanistan internationally?

The respondents were asked open-ended questions on whether as Afghans they felt certain kinds of images from Afghanistan should be shown internationally. They described preferred topics they thought would correct imbalances, negative stereotypes and biases in international media images of Afghanistan. The patterns regarding different types of images identified by the respondents were again so coherent across interview-transcripts that they could be grouped into five distinct topics, in addition to one that was common to the topics perceived by Afghan photographers as dominant in international representations.

The five topics different from the responses regarding dominant topics in international representations were *reconstruction and development* in Afghanistan since 2001 (four respondents), *democracy re-introduced in Afghanistan* (three respondents), *sports and recreational activities* in Afghanistan (four respondents), *landscapes and historical sites* in Afghanistan (five respondents) and, the most often mentioned, *ordinary people of Afghanistan* (10 respondents). Most respondents mentioned more than one topic as their preferred choice. As one respondent commented,

> 'I like to take photographs [of]… women who are studying, or are teaching, farmers working in fields. They live like farmers who live in America or work in Germany. They do not support war, they are peaceful men, but war is something … that happens or [they are] forced to deal [with], so … this is something you can show with pictures. For example, we have soccer teams, we have [the Afghan] Premier League, we have viewers for that, and these are all things that show people [there] that the ways they want to live are ways that people [here] also wish to live.'

As mentioned by this respondent, the sixth topic of images preferred by Afghan photographers was also one of photographs using Afghan women as symbols for either oppression or progress in Afghan society (five respondents). For example, one respondent mentioned two instances where he had taken photos of Afghan women, in this case showing their 'progress', because he preferred to take these photos rather than taking them to satisfy requests by the international agency he did freelance work for,

> "in Mazaar-e-Sharif, [I covered a] woman taxi driver for [the] first time in Afghanistan. In Badakhshan, I [covered] a girl who walks three hours every day to [go to] school. Every day three hours in one direction, and three hours in the other. Six hours just to… study. I went myself, [this was my own] idea, this is not my agency[´s] idea… my agencies have never asked me to take such pictures or work on such stories or feature articles, but it is due to my own inspiration that I have worked on such positive features, that I have taken such pictures".

In sum, the respondents did mention 'new ways' of representing Afghanistan through topics not often seen and shown in international representations of Afghanistan, as Verschueren (2012) has noted, but they also had one preferred image-topic common to their perceptions of how Afghanistan is often represented internationally.

6.3 Did these perceptions of the Afghan photographers correspond with sets of published images of Afghanistan produced by international and Afghan photojournalists respectively?

The Afghan photographers interviewed for this study identified a total of ten types of image-topics. They thought that four of them dominated international representations of Afghanistan but they did not prefer them. They identified a further five topics they said they would prefer and which they thought were also lacking in international representations of Afghanistan. There was one image-topic identified by the respondents that was common to their perceptions of international representation and their own preferences – images that show Afghan women as symbols of progress or oppression in Afghan society.

To identify and locate these image-topics in the image-sets that I chose as my purposive sample – to address research question 3 – required clarification of each one's boundaries. For example, the image-topic 'ordinary people' in Afghanistan needed to be clearly differentiated from the image-topic 'Afghan women', and the category 'international and Afghan military personnel' needed to be broadened to 'combatants', in order to include non-military fighters as well. To identify the boundaries of each topic, I followed an iterative and reflexive procedure by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, as well as by viewing and reviewing the images that I selected for my case study. Below I describe each of the 10 different types of image-topics, as they finally came to be understood for interpreting the photo-texts.

- *Negative aspects of Afghanistan*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to social ills and problems in Afghanistan, irrespective of the implied causes of such problems.
- *War and violence*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to places where acts of war and violence are occurring or have occurred.

- *Combatants*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to an active participant in violent incidents in the Afghan War.
- *Political leaders*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to individuals who play an influential political role.
- *Reconstruction and Development in post-2001 Afghanistan*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to physical infrastructure being built or having been built as part of reconstruction and development efforts in post-2001 Afghanistan.
- *Re-introduced democratic process in post-2001 Afghanistan*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to re-introduced democratic political processes in post-2001 Afghanistan.
- *Sports/Play*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to organized and unorganized forms of active physical recreation.
- *Landscapes and historical sites*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to landscapes and historical sites in Afghanistan.
- *Ordinary Afghans*: Photo-texts that visually depict or textually refer to civilian Afghans. If civilian Afghans include visually recognizable women or girls, the image-text does not visually depict or textually refer to the female gender of Afghans in a way that treats the female referents' gender as part of, or the image's main subject and symbolic of larger social processes and phenomena in Afghanistan.
- *Afghan women as 'symbols'*: Photo-texts that visually depict Afghan women or girls and/or textually refer to their female gender in a way that treats their gender as the main subject and symbolic of larger social processes and phenomena in Afghanistan.

Based on these interpretations, I analyzed the two image-sets for the presence/absence of the ten image-topics, as identified from the interview transcripts but adapted for comparison with the photo-texts. I present an overview of the findings in Table 1. I also discuss how the presence/absence of each image-topic and contextual differences between their depictions corresponded or did not correspond with the perceptions of the Afghan photographers interviewed for this study.

Image Topics	TIME Photo Feature (N=40)		New Afghanistan (N=156)	
	No. of Images	Percentage	No. of Images	Percentage
Negative aspects of Afghanistan	8	20%	12	7.6%
Combatants	28	70%	4	2.5%
Political Leaders and actors	0	0%	1	0.6%
War and violence	22	55%	4	2.5%
Reconstruction	0	0%	12	7.6%
Democracy	2	5%	5	3.2%
Sports and recreation	0	0%	16	10.2%
Landscapes and historical sites	2	5%	35	22.4%
Ordinary Afghans	9	22.5%	77	49.3%
Afghan women as symbols	5	12.5%	33	21.1%

Table 1: Frequency of image-topics in chosen image-sets

Negative aspects of Afghanistan: In the TIME photo feature, 8 of 40 images (20%) refer to social ills and problems in Afghanistan, but mostly those caused by gender violence against women[5]. There are only three photo-texts which depict social problems going beyond gender violence against women. One photo-text refers to sickness and lack of adequate health care, another shows victims of a drought, and the third shows a woman who had lost her arm during an aerial bombardment of her village. In the commentary for the photos, however, all three problems, including health-care and drought, are contextualized in terms of the ongoing conflict.

This emphasis on the conflict as the cause of social ills is relatively less present in the 12 images depicting social ills and problems among the 156 of the photo-book 'New Afghanistan'. Only two images explicitly refer to the 'impact of war' (e.g. a woman with prosthetic limbs shown begging) to describe the scene being depicted, while two more photo-texts indirectly refer to the conflict (e.g. a crying child referred to as a refugee.) The scenes depicted in the other seven images cover a range of social ills and problems not directly related to war. These include a disaster scene following an avalanche and a photo showing smog over Kabul, captioned 'Kabul's air pollution'. Another three images refer to problems faced by Afghans because of a lack of basic amenities such as access to water, electricity and transportation. Another image in this category portrays a poor family and refers to their poverty as a social problem, and still another shows a man identified as a drug addict.

The presence or absence of images depicting social ills and problems was relatively comparable to the Afghan photographers' perceptions that internationally circulated images are biased in favor of showing negative aspects of Afghanistan. While one in five images in the TIME photo feature depicted social ills and problems in Afghanistan, less than ten percent of all the photographs in the book 'New Afghanistan' showed social problems.

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[5] As these images portrayed Afghan women and girls as symbols of their gender, they are also included and discussed in the description of that particular image-topic.

The differences between the representations of Afghanistan's social ills and problems in the two image-sets were most marked in the contexts where these social ills and problems were presented. In the TIME photo feature, the root causes of the social ills and problems depicted were either gender oppression in Afghanistan or the ongoing conflict. The commentary accompanying one photograph, by Yury Kozyrev, showing a young girl described as a rape victim, even connected such gender violence to the ongoing conflict. As photographer Lary Towell wrote in the commentary for the photograph he contributed to the TIME photo-series, Afghanistan appeared as a country "almost 100 percent embroiled in this conflict", much as Verschueren noted the 'ubiquity' of war in international media representations of Afghanistan (2012: 157). The causes of the ills and problems mentioned in the photo-book 'New Afghanistan' were more socially oriented and less often linked to the ongoing conflict.

Combatants: In the TIME photo feature, 28 of 40 images (70%) show combatants in the Afghan conflict. Of these 28, seven show only Afghan resistance fighters and Taliban militants, while 21 images show either only international troops stationed in Afghanistan (17) or international troops along with Afghan combatants (four). There is a marked difference between how Afghan and international combatants are contextualized by captions in the TIME photo feature. The Afghan combatants are either not referred to at all or are nameless, aside from one exception. They are described as 'Taliban', 'Taliban fighters', 'Afghans' or 'Afghan combatants'. Only for a portrait image of an Afghan national army soldier does photographer Kevin Frayer mention the Afghan soldier's name. The namelessness of Afghan combatants is in sharp contrast to the attention given by international photographers in their photographic contributions to the names, combat roles and even personal life stories of international soldiers. Four of these images named the individual international soldiers, as well as detailed their military status, while also describing their personal lives or the role they play in the image. Eight images referred to their army units (regiments, battalions, divisions, platoons, etc.) or described the particular combat role they played, such as 'infantrymen', 'special forces' or 'GI'. There were also other ways international soldiers, even if nameless, were referred to. In his caption to the image he contributed of a group of Welsh soldiers, photographer Eros Hoagland mentioned that the faces of the soldiers reminded him of "Christian knights of the first crusade", while another caption mentioned that the image shows international soldiers – smiling and engaged in playful wrestling – "as their mothers saw them".

Of the images included in the book 'New Afghanistan', only four of 156 (2.5%) show combatants. While three images show Afghan national army soldiers, only one shows international troops. The latter is not a picture of a war scene but rather of a soccer match between an Afghan women's team and a team of women soldiers belonging to the International Security Assistance Force, with other international soldiers standing in the background as spectators.

The observation by the respondents that international images of Afghanistan focus on military personnel, expanded here to include all combatants, was borne out in the image-sets. Seven of every ten images in the TIME photo feature portrayed combatants, while in the photo-book 'New Afghanistan' they appear in less than five percent of the 156 images. The context in which Afghan combatants are presented in the TIME photo feature is also markedly different from that of international soldiers. The Afghan combatants' role as 'fighters' or 'soldiers' is emphasized over their humanity in the TIME photo series, while international soldiers are more specifically identified, humanized in a few cases and glorified in one.

Political leaders and actors: In one image contributed by photographer Moises Saman in the TIME photo feature, a photograph of the then-President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, can be seen as part of a scene of a tribal elders' gathering. But this image cannot be said to be the primary topic of the image by Saman. Other than this image within an image, there is only one other image of a politician in the two sets of images, though not of an influential and widely recognized leader. This is in the book 'New Afghanistan', where one image captioned 'Women participation in politics' [sic.] shows an unnamed Afghan woman-politician holding up a red card against an out-of-focus background, which appears to show a parliamentary setting.

The focus on political actors and leaders in international images of Afghanistan, which was observed by the respondents and also noted by Verschuren (2012:108-112), was not confirmed by a comparison of the image sets. Indeed it was not substantially present in either set of images. The reason for this relative absence of political leaders and actors in the two sets of images can perhaps be that neither collection was meant to accompany daily news from Afghanistan.

War and violence: A majority of the images in the TIME photo feature are from scenes of war and violence. Twenty-two of 40 images (55%) are described by the contributing photographers as having been made in the theater of war or when, or immediately after, an act of violence occurred. These images span the entire period between 2001 and 2011 depicted in the series. The earlier-dated images included scenes of active combat between the Taliban and international and Afghan troops during the 2001 US invasion. The later-dated images are from scenes of continuing conflict in Afghanistan after the initial invasion: insurgent attacks on and bombings of international troops. Of the images included in the book 'New Afghanistan', four (2.5%) may be said to refer to a scene where acts of war and violence took place. For example, the caption of a photo taken through a rusted tin wall, showing ruined buildings and a few people in front of them, refers to the subject of the image as 'Kabul after war'.

The respondents' views concerning international images of Afghanistan being dominated by scenes of war and violence could also be located in the comparison of the two image-sets. The contrast was stark. Scenes of war and violence made up over half of the images in the TIME photo feature, while just over two percent of the 156 images in 'New Afghanistan' related to war and violence.

Reconstruction: There are no images in the TIME photo feature that relate to the subject of reconstruction in post-2001 Afghanistan. In contrast, 11 images are given a special section entitled 'reconstruction' in the photo-book 'New Afghanistan', while one other image also shows reconstruction (7.6%). The various kinds of infrastructure shown built or being built include a gas drilling operation, electrical cable being strung along a road, houses under construction, roadwork, a railroad and a cellphone tower.

The preferences mentioned by Afghan photographers for images showing reconstruction in Afghanistan could be found when comparing the image-sets. While there were no images of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan in the photos taken and chosen by international photographers for the TIME photo feature, there were more than ten such images taken and chosen by Afghan photographers in 'New Afghanistan'.

Democracy: In the TIME photo feature, two photographers contextualize their images (5%) in relation to the re-introduction of democracy in Afghanistan following the US invasion. In one image taken in 2004, the democratic process is mentioned only in passing by the contributing photographer, Emilio Morenatti. The image was taken while United Nations workers were unloading ballot kits from a helicopter in preparation for the first direct presidential vote in a remote (unnamed) village in Afghanistan, Morenatti writes. But the image does not show this process and portrays instead a group of young girls standing in a row with their faces uncovered, while the caption refers to the primary subject of the image as showing "part of an Afghan generation still free of repression imposed by Taliban rule". The other image shows a meeting between a district chief and local tribal elders in the village of Marja and refers to the US government's "failure" to bring democracy to Afghanistan through its "'government-in-a-box'" strategy.

According to the captions, in the book 'New Afghanistan', five images (3.2%) refer to reintroduced democracy in Afghanistan. Of these, three show Afghan women participating in politics. Another shows a poster of a female election candidate on a lamp-post which is shredded and twisted out of shape, suggesting a past explosion, with the caption 'Exercising democracy'.

The difference in simple numbers and occurrences in the two sets of images that referred to democracy in Afghanistan was not as great as the interviews suggested it would be. The difference was in the context where the nascent Afghan democracy was presented in the two image-sets. In the TIME photo feature, one photographer's caption only mentioned renewed democratic processes in passing, while another contextualized the democratic process in negative terms. In the book 'New Afghanistan', four images referred to the democratic process in a positive light, while also using the participation of Afghan women in politics as a sign of progress in Afghanistan. The photo-text captioned 'Exercising Democracy' may perhaps be read as a more ambivalent comment on the renewal of democracy against the backdrop of an ongoing war.

Sports and recreation: The TIME photo feature does not include any pictures of Afghans engaging in sports or recreation. The only image referring to sports or recreation was one of two international soldiers shown wrestling with each other in a friendly manner. Among the images in the book 'New Afghanistan', 16 show (10.2%) Afghans engaged in organized sport activities or unorganized 'play'. Of these, three are of skiing, soccer and cricket respectively, and five others show traditional Afghan sports, including Buzkashi, cock fighting, camel fighting, traditional archery and traditional wrestling. In addition, eight images show Afghan children playing.

The preference of Afghan photographers for showing Afghans pursuing recreational or sports-related activities could be determined through comparison of the two image-sets. The TIME photo feature included no images of Afghans engaged in organized or unorganized physical recreation, while 16 such images appear in 'New Afghanistan'.

Landscapes and historical sites: In the TIME photo feature, there are two images (5%) which offer panoramic views of landscapes while the text also specifically draws attention to them in the accompanying commentaries. Both of them show the ruins of Kabul, one taken immediately before the US invasion in 2001 and the other in 2005. In the book 'New Afghanistan', 35 images (22.4%) show landscapes or cityscapes and historical sites (not including those referring to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan). Of these 35, 13 showed sites of historical importance, while three were cityscapes of Kabul, Helmand city and of the 'Mokhaberat intersection in Nangarhar province', respectively. The 13 historical sites depicted were from nine different Afghan provinces. A further 22 images were landscapes whose natural beauty was referred to in captions. These images of landscapes were from 16 different Afghan provinces.

The preference to show natural beauty, landscapes and historical sites in Afghanistan mentioned by the respondents in the interviews, as opposed to their absence in dominant international representations of Afghanistan could be found in the two image-sets. Not counting the two images in the TIME photo feature that show and refer directly to a landscape of devastation caused by war, no images show scenes of natural beauty or

sites of historical importance in the country. In contrast, over 20 percent of the images that appear in 'New Afghanistan' show cityscapes, landscapes, as well as historical sites from all across Afghanistan.

Ordinary Afghans: In the TIME photo feature, nine of the 40 images (22.5%) show non-combatant Afghans (not including pictures that portray Afghan women and refer to their gender in the commentary). All nine images contextualize the non-combatant Afghans depicted in terms of the war and violence that surround them. Thus, in a comment on an image showing several children and an old man sitting in front of a house, the photographer Mauricio Lima describes them as enjoying "momentary peace" before the arrival of US troops (with whom the photographer was traveling).

In the book 'New Afghanistan', 77 images (49.3%) show non-combatant Afghans. Of these, 26 show Afghan women and girls but do not refer to their gender in the caption accompanying the image. None of these image captions refers to war in describing the non-combatant Afghans pictured. Instead, they are mostly referred to in terms of the (civilian) activity they are engaged in and sometimes according to their age or ethnicity. The majority (31) of these images show Afghans engaged in miscellaneous everyday or recreational pursuits. A further 10 images are portraits of Afghan men and children, whereby the captions refer to their youth or innocence, positive mood or other aspects of their demeanor captured in the images.

The preference of Afghan photographers mentioned in the interviews for showing 'ordinary people' in Afghanistan was borne out by the wide gulf between the number of times non-combatant Afghans appear in images of the two sets. While they make up less than one quarter of all images in the TIME photo feature, almost half of all images in 'New Afghanistan' show non-combatant Afghans. The difference in the contexts where non-combatant Afghans were represented is also striking. The international photographers in the TIME photo feature contextualized non-combatants solely as victims of war, whereas images in 'New Afghanistan' portrayed the everyday lives of Afghans as neither circumscribed nor defined by war in the country. The portrayal of Afghans engaged in everyday activities in 'New Afghanistan' thus supports Verschueren's (2012) suggestion that Afghan photographers can bring attention to the lived realities of Afghans, rather than portraying their lives as dominated by an all-encompassing and intransigent conflict.

Afghan women as symbols: In the TIME photo feature, five images (12.5%) contextualize the Afghan women depicted in terms of oppression experienced by women in Afghan society. A young girl who was a victim of rape is shown in one (as mentioned above), while two others show women who have suffered gender-related violence. One image shows a burqa-clad woman walking through the ruins of Kabul city. The photographer, Eric Bouvet, refers to the burqa she is wearing as a symbol for all of Afghanistan. Another shows a group of young girls with their faces uncovered and refers to them as 'free of oppression' by the Taliban, because they are not veiled (mentioned above). Apart from these five, one other image (by photographer Gary Knight) refers to the Afghan women depicted – shown at the admissions office of Kabul University after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 – as a symbol of hope for the future of Afghanistan.

In the book 'New Afghanistan', 33 images (21.1%) refer to the gender of women depicted. Twenty-one of these contextualize them as symbols representing progress in the status of women in Afghan society, showing them as studying, working or engaged in sports. Seven images refer to the woman protagonists shown as symbols of cultural diversity (drawing attention to the traditional ethnic costumes they are wearing) or refer to them as symbolizing 'beauty'[6]. Apart from these, two other images in 'New Afghanistan', while depicting women, offer a more complex conception of the status of women in Afghanistan that goes beyond iconizing them as symbols of either oppression or progress for Afghan women. The first, by photographer Basir Seerat, shows a burqa-clad woman clutching a book whose cover picture is of a woman wearing a hijab. The cryptic caption states 'tradition & modernity'. The second image, by photographer Farzana Wahidy, shows a burqa-clad woman magazine seller holding a magazine in front of her veiled face. On the magazine's cover we see a woman with face uncovered, creating an unsettling visual contrast. Both pictures visually and textually refer to the ambiguous changes and continuities in the position of women in Afghanistan.

In the research interviews, the Afghan photographers said that images using Afghan women as symbols are dominant in international representation of Afghanistan, and are as well images they themselves prefer. This commonality was not numerically borne out in the comparison of the presence/absence of this topic in the two sets of images. While less than 15% of the images in the TIME photo feature depict and contextualize Afghan women as symbols, more than 40% of the images in 'New Afghanistan' directly or indirectly use Afghan women as symbols.

There was also a contextual difference in how Afghan women were used as symbols in the two image-sets. Only one of the six photographs which referred to the gender of the women depicted in the TIME photo feature

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[6] While 26 images are included where the gender of the women depicted is not explicitly mentioned in the context provided, the images in 'New Afghanistan' also show women shopping, dancing at a wedding, teaching, a woman singing at a concert, a portrait of a woman who is referred to as a contestant in an Afghan talent hunt TV show, a woman worshipping, and another a woman working beside men as a road laborer.

interpreted the women shown as symbols of 'progress' in Afghan society, rather than of oppression in Afghan society. Among the 33 images where the Afghan women depicted are referred to by their gender in 'New Afghanistan', 31 do not mention in any way their oppression in Afghan society and instead use the women depicted as positive symbols: of progress, beauty, or national and ethnic culture. The two others visually and contextually point to the complex changes and continuities in the social positions of and roles played by women in Afghanistan rather than referring solely to gender oppression[7].

While keeping these differences in mind, observations by the respondents in this study of international representations of Afghanistan, and comparison of these two image-sets can be seen as proof of a shared tendency to use Afghan women as metonymic devices to convey both positive and negative messages about Afghan society.

In sum, the Afghan photographers' awareness of known biases and stereotypes in international representations of Afghanistan, and their self-reported preferences largely corresponded with how different topics appeared in the two image-sets. Most importantly, the correspondence of the Afghan photographers' responses regarding their preferred image-topics to the topics found to be most prevalent in the photo-book 'New Afghanistan' does go some way towards showing that Afghan photographers are not only aware of the biases and stereotypes in international representations but also can depict Afghanistan differently – in most cases – through topics other than those that dominate international representations. This goes some way towards supporting the claim for a potential among Afghan photographers to challenge and change international representations of Afghanistan that are circulated for international audiences, especially if, and as, they come to play increasingly important editorial roles in picturing the conflict in their own countries for audiences abroad.

7. Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge that because both parts of this study are qualitative in their approach and design, the findings presented above cannot be generalized to every journalistic context and conflict. Another limitation of this study is that while I have described at length how Afghan women were used as symbols in images of Afghanistan, I have not traced differences in the perceptions of Afghan women photographers or the images they produce. This is because only two of the 18 photographers whose perceptions I report above were woman, and thus differentiation of perceptions based on gender was not feasible given the available data.

Despite these limitations, this study points to an important, under-reported topic within the larger issue of journalists' safety. I start by questioning what kinds of impacts on journalism arise from ways of perceiving risks to journalists in contemporary conflict zones, particularly because risks to local journalists and international journalists in conflict zones have been understood differently since 9/11 (Palmer, 2018). I explore one potential fallout of this different perception of risks for local and international news-staffs: the visual effects of internationally-circulated images of war. My study seeks to understand such visual effects from the viewpoint of local photojournalists working in conflict zones, to see if and how growing reliance on them to produce visual news about 'distant' conflicts may affect how wars come to be represented for international audiences.

This study describes both the perceptions of local photographers in Afghanistan regarding biases and stereotypes in how the conflict in their home country is depicted internationally and their differing preferences for how Afghanistan should be portrayed visually. It thereby shows that local photographers, who are also involved in international image production, *can strive to come to terms with the dominant hegemonic perspectives* reflected in international conflict images. The study grounds these perceptions in actual differences in the performances of Afghan photographers when representing Afghanistan to international audiences and shows that local photojournalists *can also struggle to change those very terms*. These findings from Afghanistan show that a potential (perhaps positive) impact on how conflicts are visually represented for international audiences is within the realm of possibility as part of the 'safety culture' in conflict correspondence (Palmer, 2018). Particularly the perception of heightened dangers to foreign photojournalists rather than local photojournalists in today's conflict zones remains current within the news industry.

But if stereotypical and biased photographic representations of conflicts in internationally circulated images are indeed to change because of the growing 'safety culture' for international news-staffs in conflict correspondence, it cannot stem merely from the increasing number of local photographers engaged in conflict-related image production processes for international audiences. It must also include granting editorial control to local staffs to represent conflicts in their countries in their own terms for international audiences. Only then could the possibility to challenge hegemonic discourses in the global North about distant conflicts – which the growing importance of local photographers in conflict zones has made possible – be fully realized. This study advances an argument, by

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[7] In the 26 other images depicting Afghan women but not referring to their gender textually, although again none of the women are shown in contexts of gender oppression or violence, their relatively 'free' movement in different social spheres can also be seen as a broad reference to the progress in the status of Afghan women in Afghan society.

extension of its findings, regarding the *worth* of contributions local photographers can make in conflict zones. This argument encompasses not just a call for increased engagement of local image-producers and the necessary ceding of editorial power to them to change and challenge hegemonic perspectives through their images, but also for better provisions for their safety to be provided by the international news industry[8].

This is the other side of the coin of the growing number of local photographers working for international audiences in conflict zones such as Afghanistan. If this trend is to to continue and if we are to benefit from these local image-makers' ability to provide international audiences with different, non-stereotypical imagery of contemporary conflicts, then the safety of local photojournalists in contemporary conflict zones should receive greater attention. I hope the future will bring more engagement from practitioners and scholars with the work local image-makers are doing in conflict zones, and the importance of the images they produce of these conflicts, in order to advance as much as is possible the cause of providing secure employment conditions and environments for their work.

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[8] The local Afghan photojournalists whose perceptions I report on in this study also described the different sources of threats made against them while working in Afghanistan. In another text I detailed these risks, threats and dangers (Mitra, 2017). In short, there was a shared perception among 17 of these 18 professional photographers that they, as Afghans, were more at risk, more prone to be intimidated, threatened and obstructed in their work than are international photojournalists.

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