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**The Power of Photojournalistic Imagery in International
Relations: Shaping Audience Behaviour, Humanitarian
Engagement, and Political Outcomes**

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Content Warning

This thesis contains graphic photographic imagery and written commentary of death. Themes include the death of a child, famine, political violence, suicide, severe physical injury, and psychological trauma. The case studies examined include the deaths of Alan Kurdi (2015), George Floyd (2020), and the attempted assassination of Donald Trump (2024), individuals depicted in the context of the Somali famine (1992) and the Vietnam War (1972).

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Abstract

This thesis examines the extent to which photojournalistic imagery shapes audience behaviour in the context of humanitarian causes and political outcomes in international relations. The study draws on five cases – the Alan Kurdi photograph (2015), James Nachtwey’s documentation of the Somalia famine (1992), the Evan Vucci photograph of the Trump assassination attempt (2024), the visual documentation of George Floyd’s death and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests (2020), and Nick Ut’s *The Terror of War* (1972). The study traces the measurable behaviour and political outcomes of iconic photography across media ecosystems, historical periods and political contexts.

The theoretical framework combines agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing theory (Entman, 1993), the CNN Effect, and psycho-social models of compassion fatigue (Slovic et al., 2017; Moeller, 1999). The study adopts qualitative, interpretive and comparative methodology, employing visual frame analysis, discourse analysis and behavioural outcome tracing.

The study finds that photojournalistic imagery shapes audience behaviour significantly, but only under certain conditions, as images function as catalysts for shifts already in motion. A typological distinction is drawn between images that produce immediate, measurable behavioural effects and those that generate cultural and political memory. The Vietnam case serves as a critical counterexample, underscoring the risk of post hoc attribution. The study concludes by addressing the ethical sphere of photojournalism in advocacy and proposing directions for future research.

Keywords: photojournalism, international relations, CNN effect, visual framing, agenda-setting, compassion fatigue, humanitarian intervention, soft power.

Resumen

Esta tesis examina en qué medida las imágenes fotoperiodísticas moldean el comportamiento de las audiencias en relación con causas humanitarias y resultados políticos en las relaciones internacionales. El estudio se basa en cinco casos: la fotografía de Alan Kurdi (2015), la documentación de la hambruna en Somalia por James Nachtwey (1992), la imagen de Evan Vucci del intento de asesinato de Trump (2024), la documentación visual de la muerte de George Floyd y las protestas de Black Lives Matter (2020), y “The Terror of War” de Nick Ut (1972). Analiza comportamientos y resultados políticos medibles de la fotografía icónica en distintos ecosistemas mediáticos, periodos históricos y contextos políticos.

El marco teórico combina la agenda-setting (McCombs y Shaw, 1972), el framing (Entman, 1993), el efecto CNN y modelos psicosociales de fatiga por compasión (Slovic et al., 2017; Moeller, 1999). Se adopta una metodología cualitativa, interpretativa y comparativa, mediante análisis de encuadres visuales, del discurso y seguimiento de resultados conductuales.

Se concluye que las imágenes influyen significativamente en el comportamiento de las audiencias, pero solo bajo ciertas condiciones, actuando como catalizadores de cambios ya en curso. Se distingue entre imágenes que generan efectos inmediatos y medibles y aquellas que producen memoria cultural y política. El caso de Vietnam funciona como contraejemplo crítico, destacando el riesgo de atribución post hoc, y se abordan las implicaciones éticas del fotoperiodismo junto con líneas futuras de investigación.

Palabras clave: fotoperiodismo, relaciones internacionales, efecto CNN, encuadre visual, establecimiento de la agenda, fatiga por compasión, intervención humanitaria, poder blando.

Glossary

ACLU — American Civil Liberties Union

ActBlue — Democratic Party-aligned online fundraising platform used to process donations to progressive causes and candidates

AFP — Agence France-Presse

AP — Associated Press

APA — American Psychological Association

BBC — British Broadcasting Corporation

BLM — Black Lives Matter

CNN — Cable News Network

ICRC — International Committee of the Red Cross

IR — International Relations

NGO — Non-Governmental Organisation

PNAS — Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

PTSD — Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PWRDF — Primate's World Relief and Development Fund

SPJ — Society of Professional Journalists

SRC — Swedish Red Cross

UN — United Nations

UNESCO — United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCR — United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US — United States

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Content Warning.....	3
Abstract.....	4
Resumen.....	5
Glossary.....	6
Table of Contents	7
Chapter 1: Introduction	10
1.1 <i>The Problem: Images and International Relations</i>	10
1.2 <i>Research Question.....</i>	11
1.3 <i>Central Argument.....</i>	12
1.4 <i>Case Studies: Overview.....</i>	12
1.5 <i>Structure of Chapters</i>	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.....	13
2.1 <i>Introduction.....</i>	13
2.2 <i>Foundational Literature: Photography, Suffering, and Politics.....</i>	14
2.3 <i>Agenda-Setting Theory.....</i>	17
2.4 <i>Framing Theory.....</i>	18
2.5 <i>The CNN Effect and the Media-Policy Relationship.....</i>	19
2.6 <i>Psycho-Social Models: Compassion, Collapse and Fatigue.....</i>	20
2.7 <i>Soft Power and the Consequences of Visual Documentation.....</i>	21
2.8 <i>Theoretical Framework: Integration.....</i>	22
Chapter 3: Methodology	23
3.1 <i>Research Philosophy.....</i>	23
3.2 <i>Comparative Case Study Design.....</i>	23
3.3 <i>Method 1 – Systematic Visual Frame Analysis</i>	24
3.4 <i>Method 2 – Discourse Analysis.....</i>	24
3.5 <i>Method 3 – Behavioural Outcome Tracing.....</i>	25
3.6 <i>The Critical Case: Vietnam.....</i>	26
3.7 <i>Limitations.....</i>	26
Chapter 4: Case Studies – Humanitarian Behaviour	27
4.1 <i>Introduction.....</i>	27
4.2 <i>Case Study 1: Alan Kurdi and the Syrian Refugee Crisis (2015)</i>	27
4.2.1 <i>Context</i>	27
4.2.2 <i>Visual Frame Analysis</i>	28

4.2.3 Discourse Analysis	29
4.2.4 Measurable Outcomes	30
4.2.5 Compassion Fatigue and the Limits of Image-Driven Empathy	30
4.3 Case Study 2: <i>James Nachtwey and the Somalia Famine (1992)</i>	31
4.3.1 Context and Institutional Access	31
4.3.2 Visual Frame Analysis	32
4.3.3 Measurable Outcomes and the CNN Effect	33
4.3.4 The Pre-Social Media Gatekeeping Context	34
4.4 Comparative Analysis: <i>Humanitarian Cases</i>	35
Chapter 5: Case Studies – Political Behaviour	36
5.1 Introduction	36
5.2 Case Study 3: <i>The Trump Assassination Attempt (2024)</i>	36
5.2.1 Context and the Photograph	36
5.2.2 Visual Frame Analysis: The Hero/Martyr Construction	37
5.2.3 Discourse Analysis: Deliberate Instrumentalisation	38
5.2.4 Measurable Outcomes	39
5.2.5 Analytical Implications: Ideological Mediation and the Limits of Cross-Partisan Appeal	40
5.3 Case Study 4: <i>George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement (2020)</i>	41
5.3.1 Context and the Definitional Challenge	41
5.3.2 Visual Frame Analysis	42
5.3.3 Discourse Analysis	44
5.3.4 Measurable Outcomes	45
5.3.5 Citizen Journalism and the Transformed Ecosystem	46
5.4 Case Study 5: <i>The Terror of War - Nick Ut (1972)</i>	47
5.4.1 The Narrative and the Evidence	47
5.4.2 The Post Hoc Fallacy and What the Image Achieved	48
5.4.3 Analytical Implications: Two Types of Photojournalistic Impact	50
Chapter 6: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis	50
6.1 Introduction	50
6.2 Pattern 1: <i>Victim Framing and the Identified Victim Effect</i>	51
6.3 Pattern 2: <i>The Hero/Martyr Frame and Within-Community Mobilisation</i>	51
6.4 Pattern 3: <i>Compassion Fatigue, a Structural Constraint Across Humanitarian Cases</i>	52
6.5 Critical Exception: <i>Post Hoc Attribution</i>	52
6.6 Conditions for Traceable Behavioural Impact	53
6.7 The Distribution Infrastructure Has Transformed While the Mechanisms Have Not	53
Chapter 7: Ethical Dimensions	54
7.1 Introduction	54
7.2 Consent and the Rights of Subjects	54
7.3 Instrumentalisation of Suffering and Human Costs	55
7.4 Dignity, the Colonial Gaze and Sontag's Warning	57
7.5 Responsibilities of Photographers and Media Organisations	57
Chapter 8: Conclusion	58
8.1 Answering the Research Question	58
8.2 The Conditions Framework	59

8.3 <i>The Typological Distinction: Immediate and Cultural Impact</i>	59
8.4 <i>Contributions to IR Theory</i>	59
8.5 <i>Limitations</i>	60
8.6 <i>Future Research Guidance</i>	61
8.7 <i>Closing Reflection</i>	61
Bibliography	62
Appendices	65
<i>Appendix A – Cross-Case Comparative Data Table</i>	65
<i>Appendix B – Visual Frame Analysis Matrix</i>	66
<i>Appendix C – Donation & Fundraising Data Summary</i>	67
<i>Appendix D – Glossary of Visual Frames</i>	68

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Problem: Images and International Relations

Amidst an increasingly image-saturated and internet-dependent environment worldwide, photojournalism stands as one of the primary ways audiences far removed from events can understand and emotionally engage with situations they have not witnessed directly. Photographs of humanitarian disasters, political violence, and social upheaval function as records of fact as well as active agents that produce meaning (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Sontag, 2003). Through the framing of events, blame or sympathy is assigned, triggering responses that span individual donors and voters through to state actors and intergovernmental bodies. In doing so, photojournalists operate at the intersection of media, public opinion and political behaviour where scholars of international relations have only partially theorised.

Traditionally, the discipline of International Relations has centred its analytical frameworks on its formal actors: states, intergovernmental organisations and diplomacy and the material factors that operate within their interplay¹. Alongside this development, mainstream and social media have expanded significantly, thus maximising the speed and capacity at which visual information can be distributed. Public sentiment is reshaped in the process, thus altering the conditions under which foreign policy is formed, humanitarian funding is allocated, and political movements are either consolidated or dismantled. A photograph taken in Papua New Guinea can travel to New York, alter donation patterns in Madrid, and shift polling behaviour in Mexico – all within days. This image-to-institution pathway is the analytical focus of this thesis.

¹ For an overview of state-centric analytical frameworks as the dominant tradition in International Relations theory, see Baylis, J., Smith, S., & Owens, P. (Eds.). (2020). *The globalization of world politics: An introduction to international relations* (8th ed.). Oxford University Press

In recent years, a growth of recognition of the media's role in international affairs has emerged, yet despite this, a gap persists in linking photojournalism to core concepts of International Relations. This gap encompasses concerns from soft power to agenda-setting to humanitarian intervention. Foundational work by Perlmutter (1998) and Hariman & Lucaites (2007) examines the political dimensions of iconic imagery, while philosophical accounts by Sontag (1977; 2003) explore the ethics and epistemology of photographic representation. Despite this, systematic analysis connecting the specific, identifiable photographs to behavioural outcomes remains underdeveloped in International Relations literature. This thesis bridges that gap.

1.2 Research Question

This thesis is guided by the following research question:

To what extent does photojournalistic imagery shape audience behaviour towards humanitarian causes and political outcomes in international relations – including NGO fundraising, policy advocacy and electoral dynamics?

The question distinguishes analytically between two categories of audience behaviours examined in this study. Humanitarian behaviour refers to measurable responses to photojournalistic stimuli within the context of crisis relief: volunteer activity, donations towards humanitarian funds and NGOs, as well as transformations in public awareness of specific crises. Political behaviour refers to measurable responses in the domain of political action: shifts in public opinion, shifts in voter sentiment and electoral dynamics, as well as pressure applied to governments to alter or justify certain policies. This distinction is relevant as the causal mechanisms differ. Humanitarian responses tend to be quicker and directly traceable to specific images due to emotional responses, whereas political responses are heavily dictated by ideology, context of institutions and pre-existing political norms or commitments.

1.3 Central Argument

This thesis argues that photojournalistic images shape audience behaviour significantly, yet conditionally. Photos do not act as autonomous causal agents with the power to independently redirect the course of public opinion or foreign policy. Rather, they serve as catalysts, accelerators and legitimate frames for shifts that are already in motion. When a political or humanitarian environment is already open to public mobilisation, the institutional actors are prepared to mobilise, and the visual frame of the photo is aligned with pre-existing cultural codes – photojournalism can produce measurable and consequential effects. When these conditions are absent, images of the same capacity to evoke ideas and emotions may pass without impact. Identifying those conditions, and the mechanisms through which they operate, is the analytical task this thesis undertakes.

1.4 Case Studies: Overview

Five case studies are examined, chosen for their documented behavioural or political impact, their diversity across historical time frames, political context, media ecosystems and the availability of their measurable outcome data. The Alan Kurdi photograph (2015) and James Nachtwey's documentation of the famine in Somalia (1992) serve as the primary demonstrations for the analysis of human behaviour. Evan Vucci's photograph of the Trump assassination attempt (2024) and the documentation of the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement (2020) provide the primary analysis of political behaviours. "The Terror of War" (1972), photographed by Nick Ut, is examined as a counterexample case that popularised the causal narrative surrounding photojournalism, yet is not supported by the available empirical evidence thereby underscoring the limits of the framework.

1.5 Structure of Chapters

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant scholarly literature in order to construct the theoretical framework by which the case study analyses are guided. The foundation will draw on agenda-setting theory, framing theory, the CNN Effect and psycho-social models of compassion and fatigue. Chapter 3 brings together the qualitative, interpretive and comparative methodology, justifying the analytical methods applied in the case studies: systematic visual frame analysis, discourse analysis and behavioural outcome tracing. Chapters 4 and 5 present the analyses of the case studies. Chapter 4 addresses the humanitarian behaviour through the Kurdi and Somalia cases, whereas Chapter 5 addresses the political behaviour through the Trump, BLM and Vietnam cases. Chapter 6 synthesises the findings to identify recurring patterns, exceptions and the limitations and conditions under which photojournalism produces traceable output. Chapter 7 explores the ethical dimensions of photographic advocacy in highlighting important events where vulnerabilities can be exploited. Chapter 8 presents the study's theoretical contributions, limitations, directions for future research and concludes the findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework guiding the analysis of photojournalism's impact throughout the thesis. Four intersecting bodies of literature are explored: agenda-setting theory, framing theory, the CNN effect and media-policy relationship, and psycho-social models of compassion and fatigue. Individually, each addresses a different mechanism through which photojournalism impacts an audience's behaviour. Together, they form a structured

analytical framework with the capacity to explain the conditions under which visual media produce measurable consequences in International Relations. The chapter opens with an overview of the foundational literature where politics and photography intersect, before addressing each theoretical pillar.

Before examining each theoretical pillar in turn, it is worth situating this framework within the broader epistemological tradition of International Relations. This thesis adopts a constructivist epistemological position that draws on Alexander Wendt's foundational argument that the structures of international politics are socially constructed rather than materially given (Wendt, 1999). This describes how shared ideas, norms and identities shape state behaviour beyond material factors. Within this framework, photojournalism carries real analytical weight where images do not simply record events but produce and circulate the shared meanings through which those events acquire political significance. This image-to-institution pathway is precisely the normative channel that constructivist IR theory opens — the space that materialist approaches foreclose by treating only tangible power and material interest as analytically significant. Accordingly, the causal claims made in this study are conditional and interpretive, consistent with constructivist approaches to international relations.

2.2 Foundational Literature: Photography, Suffering, and Politics

Susan Sontag's two major engagements with photographic meaning remain essential as starting points for any politically grounded analysis of visual media and political philosophy. In *On Photography* (1977), Sontag argued that photographs do not only capture the reality of a situation but also shape moral perceptions. When people face regular exposure to disturbing imagery, engagement is not deepened but becomes an "anaesthesia", numbing the ethical sensibility usually activated by photos. Twenty-six years later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag revisits her earlier thesis to establish whether images of suffering reliably produce empathy in viewers or predominantly reinforce what they already believe. The author

provides a counterweight to more optimistic accounts of photojournalistic impact through her scepticism of photography's transformative power on audiences. It should be taken into account that her works predate the time of regular social media use. Sontag's model of spectators who are passive is further complicated by the participatory culture of today's nature of digital sharing, where audiences actively engage with information distribution through circulation, captions and recontextualisation rather than fixed sources. Her later position — that context and framing determine whether photography mobilises or anaesthetises — is a more directly applicable framework for the contemporary cases examined here (Sontag, 1977; Sontag, 2003).

It is worth noting that photographs do not capture reality as photographers select their subject, angle, framing and moment. This constructs a version of events that is not strictly impartial, allowing downstream consequences that may be unintended by the photographer or the publisher.

David Perlmutter's *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy* (1998) is particularly relevant to this thesis. Perlmutter examines a series of photos he termed "icons of outrage" — photographs that generated intense public and government response to international crises — arguing that these photos gave the capacity to function as catalysts for action in foreign policy. He noted that, particularly in democratic states, where protest rights are greater, public opinion had a larger impact on governmental options. His case studies include the Somalia famine (1992) and the Kurdish refugee crisis (1991), both of which contributed to policy shifts in the United States. Perlmutter's framework concerning iconic imagery is crucial, but the present thesis reaches beyond his 1998 analysis to incorporate social media dynamics, quantitative outcome data and a critical case challenging the icon-to-policy causal chain. The limits of Perlmutter's gatekeeping model are most exposed by the George Floyd case, in which a teenage bystander on a smartphone bypassed every institutional layer his framework depended on. His study

provides a firm base to the thesis where the transformation of photojournalism's distribution systems can be measured in present-day contexts (Perlmutter, 1998).

Robert Hariman & John Louis Lucaite's *No Caption Needed* (2007) provides a countering perspective on Perlmutter's thesis, arguing that iconic photographs don't only serve as records but also as cultural texts with shared political meanings in democratic cultures. According to Hariman and Lucaites, the power of iconic photographs lies in their capacity to activate pre-existing cultural concepts, rather than serve as informational content. These pre-existing cultural codes, activated by the right image, reinforce how audiences understand justice, heroism, suffering and community. They describe this concept as a "condensation symbol" in which complex social and political tensions are condensed into a single, tangible form. This object is then circulated within political and social spheres to work as an idea, beyond the time of its relevance. Condensation symbols are applied in this thesis to both the Trump assassination attempt image and "The Terror of War", defining their longstanding use beyond brief moments in politics. An important limitation worthy of mentioning is that this analysis stems from photography culture in the West, where symbols may operate differently across differing cultural and national circumstances (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

Susan Moeller's *Compassion Fatigue* (1999) provides a systematic account of how media coverage of humanitarian emergencies follows a predictable curve, rounding out the foundational literature. Through intense initial coverage of humanitarian crises, public response is rapidly generated and then just as quickly diminished as the news cycle moves ahead, causing increased desensitisation over time to subsequent coverage by audiences. The concept of media-driven empathy and its limits is directly applicable to the rapid spikes and declines seen in donation patterns globally. Moeller's framework was developed prior to the rapid pace and capacity seen in today's use of social media. As an extension of her model, this

thesis argues that compassion fatigue sets in at a faster rate in the contemporary environment due to faster news cycles paired with higher image saturation (Moeller, 1999).

Beyond the foundational literature on photography and political philosophy, a growing body of IR scholarship explicitly situates visual media within the discipline's epistemological and methodological frameworks, providing the theoretical precedent on which the study's constructivist approach relies. Roland Bleiker's study, *Visual Global Politics* (2018), argues that images do not merely illustrate political events but actively constitute them, shaping what is thought and acted upon politically. Lene Hansen's framework of visual securitisation (2011) extends the Copenhagen School's theory of securitisation to consider the role that visual representation plays in threat construction and subjects of security. This demonstrates how images are constitutive of political discourse. William Callahan's visual IR scholarship (2020) develops a methodological approach for reading images as primary political texts, arguing that traditional IR scholarship privileges linguistic sources over visual sources, systematically underestimating the political work performed. Together, these authors situate photojournalism as a mode of political practice operating within international relations, not externally influencing it. This underpins the constructivist epistemological position this study adopts.

In the case analyses that follow, this tradition informs the treatment of each photograph as a political text that constitutes meaning rather than a mere recording. This is meant most explicitly in the Trump and BLM cases, where the photo does not document a political event so much as produce its significance.

2.3 Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) study of the 1968 US election introduced agenda-setting theory, arguing that the media tells people what to think about rather than what to think. They describe that issues and events that receive prominent media coverage are salient in nature to the public.

Prominent coverage plants certain issues firmly in the public mind, regardless of their objective

significance. Furthermore, events that receive little coverage remain effectively invisible to the public, even amidst harsh human consequences.

Photojournalism fills a powerful role within McCombs & Shaw's mechanism for several reasons. Photojournalism occupies an elevated position within agenda-setting because visual imagery bypasses the barriers of traditional linguistic media, expanding the reach of journalism. Second, photographs can generate emotional processing and connection at a more rapid pace than text. Images activate emotional responses faster than text, as the reaction arrives before the analysis does. Finally, visual media are shared more readily online, overcoming cultural contexts; this allows for a single image to achieve global salience within a mere few hours within the context of today's media environment.

These elements underscore the capacities attributed to agenda-setting. While a photograph does not singlehandedly grant a refugee crisis salience, it renders a particular aspect of the refugee crisis more evident, even unavoidable, through visual characteristics immediately legible to the audience. The image published in September of 2015 of a young boy, Alan Kurdi, deceased on a beach in Turkey, granted attributes of "innocence as a victim of a refugee crisis" which dominated the Syrian crisis, temporarily displacing other ideas of "security threats" that had previously dominated the political and media contexts.

2.4 Framing Theory

Robert Entman's 1993 *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm* provides the second theoretical pillar, remaining the definitive theoretical statement on framing in communication studies. Entman defined media framing as the selection of aspects of a perceived reality, promoting them through text. The editor controls the frame by defining the problem, assigning causes, making a moral judgment, and implicitly telling the viewer what kind of response is appropriate. In the context of photojournalism, this definition reveals the political stakes of visual choices (Entman, 1993).

This study employs three dominant visual frames as analytical categories explored throughout the case studies. The victim frame presents a subject as vulnerable and suffering, calling implicitly for aid or protection. It operates through individualisation — presenting suffering as embodied in a specific, named person — in a way that activates empathic response and generates implied moral obligation on the viewer. The martyr frame projects ideas of defiance and resilience onto the subject; they become somebody who transcends suffering to call their community to follow. The threat frame depicts the subject as dangerous or menacing, motivating security responses rather than humanitarian responses. These concepts do not necessarily coexist but are capable of interplay as the same subject may be framed differently amongst differing publishers.

The effects felt by framing are not confined to the visual components of the photograph itself; they are further enhanced by captions, headlines, ideology and discourse the audience follows. A photograph published in a pro-immigration outlet as “Casualty due to Europe’s Failure” can be reframed by an anti-immigrant outlet, stating that “Children's Lives Cost due to Open Borders”. The journalistic event differs greatly, while the underlying image is identical.

2.5 The CNN Effect and the Media-Policy Relationship

The “CNN-effect” refers to the proposition that real-time and emotionally compelling media coverage of international crises generates public pressure that can influence foreign policy responses. These responses range from military intervention to dispatching humanitarian aid to imposing diplomatic sanctions on responsible actors that governments might otherwise avoid. The term emerged following analysis of the 1991 Kurdish refugee crisis as well as the 1992 Somalian famine – both preceded and stimulated US-led humanitarian interventions.

Subsequent scholarship by Robinson (2002) and Gilboa (2005) further explored the relationship between media coverage and policy response. They found that their intersection is not linear but rather dependent on elite framing. When political elites are uncertain about the

course of a policy, media and imagery can exert decisive influence. Despite this, when elite consensus is strong, intensive media coverage can produce little deviation from the pre-established trajectory.

The present study incorporates this qualification, treating photojournalism as one variable within a media-policy feedback loop, rather than an independent causal force.

2.6 Psycho-Social Models: Compassion, Collapse and Fatigue

The psycho-social literature on compassion and empathy provides an explanatory mechanism at the micro-level that the theories of agenda-setting and framing require at the macro-level. Paul Slovic and colleagues (2017) published a landmark empirical study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences that analysed public responses to the Alan Kurdi photograph alongside broader observational data on empathic responses to humanitarian crises.

The first is the identified victim effect, whereby individuals donate significantly more money, attention and emotional effort towards a single identified victim in comparison to statistical accounts of mass suffering. When a visual emerges in the mainstream media presenting a named child lying deceased on a beach rather than a statistic concerning four million refugees, people respond more strongly to an identifiable individual than to abstract statistics.

The second effect is a psychic numbing effect where the “collapse of compassion” appears. As the number of victims rises, individual empathic response does not rise in unison but rather diminishes. Moeller (1999) documented how these effects arise from a pattern of intense initial coverage that produces a sharp public response, but that is followed by a rapid decline in both coverage and responses due to shifts in the media's attention. The donation data from the Alan Kurdi showcased a 55-fold increase of funding, in Sweden, during the week of publication that returned to near-baseline levels within a mere 6 weeks – offering a precise documented confirmation of this mechanism within the media cycle in the present study (Slovic et al., 2017).

2.7 Soft Power and the Consequences of Visual Documentation

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power provides a further theoretical lens through which the IR-level consequences of photojournalistic imagery can be understood. Nye defined soft power as the capacity of an actor to influence the behaviour and preferences of others through appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Where hard power operates through material incentivisation and military capability, soft power operates through an attraction towards the reputational credibility to which the degree of a state's conduct is seen as consistent with their projected values.

Photojournalism is not an instrument that states deploy within this framework, but as an uncontrolled variable that affects the reputational environment on which soft power is dependent. Iconic imagery produced by independent photojournalists has the capacity to reinforce or erode a state's soft power without the state's engagement. When visual documentation exposes a state's conduct as inconsistent with its proclaimed values, it generates the reputation damage that Nye identified as soft power's primary mechanism towards erosion, as seen in response to Darnella Frazier's recording of George Floyd's death. Conversely, when a photograph creates the conditions for an actor's intervention to be framed as ethically responsive, it reinforces the normative authority accumulated by soft power, as seen in Nachtwey's Somalia documentation of Operation Restore Hope.

This distinction serves analytical significance. The study argues that states depend on reputation credibility to exercise their influence externally and visual documentation shapes how their operations are perceived, carrying IR-level consequences. Soft power provides the study with the framework to understand the image-to-institution pathway, beyond immediate behavioural effects. This situates photojournalistic impact within the broader structure of legitimacy and reputational power (Nye, 2004).

2.8 Theoretical Framework: Integration

The four theoretical bodies reviewed in this chapter construct an integrated framework in which each component addresses a different stage along the pathway: beginning before the production of the image, to the behavioural and political outcome of the image. Agenda-setting theory explains the prior conditions: whether a particular crisis enters public consciousness at all. Framing theory explains the content of the response, defining what action the image triggers through its construction of the subject. The literature on the CNN Effect explains the institutional pathway: how the public response translates into policy pressure, and under what conditions political elites respond to that pressure. The psychosocial models explain the extent and durability of the response, determining how individual victim images have more capacity to activate response over statistical accounts and why the effects are usually temporary.

This thesis conceptualises the causal pathway as a four-stage process: visibility, where agenda-setting determines whether an event enters public consciousness; interpretation, where framing shapes how the event is understood and what response is implied; emotional activation, where psycho-social mechanisms such as the victim effect and compassion fatigue determine the intensity and duration of a response; behavioural and political outcomes, where the CNN Effect framework allows for the conditions under which the response translates into institutional action. Each stage is necessary but not sufficient, as a photo may achieve visibility without generating the institutional mobilisation required to attain policy-level outcomes. This sequential logic provides the analytical framework from which the case studies are examined. Applied to the five case studies in the following chapters, this framework generates a set of theoretically informed analytical expectations.

1. Victim-framed imagery of identified people would be expected to produce stronger and more immediate humanitarian responses.

2. Images published in high-salience media environments would be expected to produce stronger agenda-setting effects.
3. The political impact of images would be expected to be moderated by elite framing as well as ideological predisposition.
4. All image-driven behavioural effects would be expected to decay over time.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study is situated within an interpretivist and epistemological tradition seeking to understand the conditions under which photojournalistic images lead to particular effects. Rather than searching for generalisable statistical laws about the relationship between published photography and the behaviour outcomes they produce, the study explains the mechanisms under which the conditions operate. This position is appropriate when determining “to what extent” of the research question: establishing the degree and mechanism, rather than a frequency or probability and cannot be answered by methods excluding contextual depth for statistical breadth. Causal claims are made where the evidence supports them and are qualified where it does not. Correlation and causation are treated as distinct, which is made explicit throughout the study.

3.2 Comparative Case Study Design

A comparative case study design is employed across five selected cases. Case studies are appropriate when the phenomenon under investigation cannot be understood in isolation from the historical, political and media environments within which the images circulate. As Yin (2014) notes, the analytical power of multiple case studies derives from their theoretical

replication, not their statistical generalisability. Findings that recur across analytically distinct cases are more robust than findings from an individual case study, even when documented extensively.

The five cases were selected according to four criteria. Firstly, documented behavioural or political outcomes. Secondly, diversity of context with cases spanning five decades (1972-2024), four continents and three media ecosystems – pre-internet broadcast media (Somalia, Vietnam), early social media (Kurdi, BLM) and algorithmically amplified social media (Trump). Thirdly, diversity of framing types, covering victimhood, martyrdom and witness accounts. Finally, analytical utility where the Vietnam case is included as a critical case designed to test the limits of the framework.

3.3 Method 1 – Systematic Visual Frame Analysis

Each case study image is subjected to systematic visual frame analysis. This method allows for close examination of the image through examination of its compositional variables. These variables include: the centrality and relative scale of the primary subject, the direction and nature of the subject's gaze in relation to the camera, the physical proximity implied by the focal length and framing, the colour scheme and light quality, the degree of implied agency attributed to the subject, the presence or absence of contextual markers (e.g. symbols, crowds, weapons or institutional settings) and the image's overall emotional register. These variables are then mapped onto the three primary framing categories employed throughout the study in a process that is interpretive and justification-based rather than mechanical.

3.4 Method 2 – Discourse Analysis

Visual frame analysis is conducted in conjunction with discourse analysis of the verbal material accompanying each image in its primary contexts of circulation. Linguistic publications examined are newspaper headlines and captions, editorial statements, political speeches and

press releases referencing the image. NGO fundraising materials incorporate the image, and for contemporary cases, samples taken from social media commentary directly linked to the viral circulation of the image. The discourse analysis examines if and how the linguistic contribution to the image reinforces, contradicts or politicises the visual media in the compositional analysis.

3.5 Method 3 – Behavioural Outcome Tracing

For each case study, the study documents and analyses measurable behavioural or political outcomes where data is available. Data sources vary by case to reflect the different media environments and record-keeping practices of different periods. In the Kurdi case (2015), donation figures are drawn from reports published by the SRC and PWRDF, confirmed by academic analysis in Slovic et al. (2017). In the case of Somalia, the analysis relies on journalistic accounts, ICRC documentation and the secondary literature. In the Trump case (2024), fundraising data was drawn from press reporting on campaign finance records. For the BLM case (2020), NGO donation figures are drawn from published financial reports and press reporting.

Outcome tracing is distinct from the claim that images caused the outcomes traced. Where a strong contextual link exists between image publication and behavioural change, a causal argument is formed and defended. Where ambiguous links emerge, the analysis stops at correlation to discuss alternative explanations. The case of “The Terror of War” (colloquially known as “Napalm Girl”) exemplifies this discipline as the popular attributions of anti-war sentiment associated with the image are challenged by polling data that indicates major opposition to the war, predating the image’s publication.

For the purpose of this study, a photograph will be treated as a plausible contributing causal factor when three conditions are met: clear temporal sequencing between photo circulation and behavioural change; explicit reference to the photo by donors or international actors; and

absence of alternative singular triggering event occurring within the same timeframe. This standard is applied throughout the four cases in which behavioural outcome tracing is the primary method. Its absence in the Vietnam case is a finding of analytical significance, rather than a methodological gap.

3.6 The Critical Case: Vietnam

The inclusion of the Vietnam case as a negative case is a deliberate methodological choice to challenge the study's framework. In a comparative research design, critical cases offer the essential function of testing the limits of the framework to prevent confirmation bias. A study examining only cases in which photojournalism clearly produced documented effects would produce a misleadingly optimistic account of photojournalism's capacities.

3.7 Limitations

Several limitations require acknowledgement, as the five cases are not a random sample of photojournalistic events. The cases were chosen partially due to the documentation of their consequences; therefore, the study cannot speak to the large number of potentially iconic images that did not produce traceable effects. The analysis is weighted towards Western and English-language media contexts. The quantitative outcome data varies in quality and completeness across each case: the quantitative data available for the 2015 Kurdi case is simply not available in equivalent form for the 1992 Somalia case, reflecting the difference in record-keeping across different media eras. Finally, the counterfactual problem of whether the trajectory of a situation changes with or without the aid of photography cannot be resolved with certainty, and causal claims are made probabilistically rather than definitively.

Chapter 4: Case Studies – Humanitarian Behaviour

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses two cases in which photojournalism is most directly linked to humanitarian behavioural outcomes: the Alan Kurdi photograph (2015) and James Nachtwey's documentation of the Somali famine (1992). Both cases involve victim-framed imagery of human suffering that generated recorded responses in NGO fundraising, public awareness and foreign policy. Together, they enable comparison of the humanitarian response pathway across two distinct media eras — one before social media and one defined by it — as well as across two differing configurations of the photojournalist-NGO-state relationship.

4.2 Case Study 1: Alan Kurdi and the Syrian Refugee Crisis (2015)

4.2.1 Context

By September 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis had become deeply embedded in Western European political discourse, polarising the debate around reception capacity, national identity and security risk. The crisis had received extensive media coverage prior to the publication of the photo, yet the pattern identified by Moeller (1999) concerning compassion fatigue was demonstrated. In September 2015, the Turkish photographer, Nilüfer Demir, photographed the body of the deceased three-year-old Alan Kurdi, lying face down on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey, following the capsizing of the boat that was carrying him and his family to the Greek island, Kos. Alan, his brother and his mother all drowned. The image spread rapidly, appearing on the front pages of newspapers globally and dominating social media platforms within hours (Vis & Goriunova, 2015).

Figure 1. *Alan Kurdi, Bodrum, Turkey, 2015*
Note. Photograph by Nilüfer Demir. Source: Goldsmiths Research Online



4.2.2 Visual Frame Analysis

The photograph of Alan Kurdi deploys the victim frame with exceptional compositional coherence. The child's body occupies the visual centre of the image, surrounded by a vast beach and receding water, where the spatial isolation emphasises vulnerability and abandonment rather than a scene of chaos and emergency. Contrasting colours of his red shirt and the pale sand function as an involuntary visual pointer, drawing the eye immediately to the suffering of the child. The Mediterranean Sea appears calm behind him, offering no visible danger despite being the waters that killed him. The visual calmness of the scene intensifies the horror, rather than diminishing it. The scene is peaceful, and the child should be alive.

Alan's face is turned away from the camera; the absence of eye contact produces an emotional register of grief over guilt. The distinction carries significant implications for the response that is called for, as no political symbols, institutional markers, crowds or weapons are visible in the frame. The image strips away the political complexity of the Syrian crisis to present one fact: a child has died. This visual construction activates the victim effect theorised by Slovic et al. (2017) as the cruel reality of millions of refugees is made tangible to be understood by a specific and named three-year-old boy.

4.2.3 Discourse Analysis

The linguistic framing that accompanies the Kurdi image reinforced and amplified the construction of its victim framing. The Independent's front-page presentation of "Somebody's Child" positioned Alan within the universal understanding of parental love and loss (Vis & Goriunova, 2015). Fundraising by NGOs leaned heavily into the severity of the photograph, deploying Alan's life as an emotional anchor, linking him to the systemic arguments about refugee policy. Simultaneously, the discourse surrounding the image was not uniform across political contexts as nationalist politicians and media corporations maintained their position concerning the security threat that the refugee crisis caused, either excluding the image or contextualising it to support their interests.

The photographer herself spoke directly to the moral logic driving her decision to release the image. In a widely reported interview following the photograph's global circulation, Nilüfer Demir reflected that:

"There was nothing left to do for him. There was nothing left to bring him back to life...I thought, 'This is the only way I can express the scream of his silent body.'" – Nilüfer Demir, CNN Turk interview, 2015

This statement is analytically significant on two levels. First, it positions the act of photography not as an extraction but as a testimony. The image is framed as an act of advocacy on behalf of the subject rather than a documentation benefiting the photographer or outlet. Second, it illuminates the ethical doubt in photojournalism around the publishing of a photo of a deceased child in reference to the suffering of a specific crisis, whose experience otherwise would remain invisible. This framing maps directly onto the thesis's argument that victim-frame photography functions not merely as a record but as an intentional moral argument.

4.2.4 Measurable Outcomes

The measurable behavioural outcomes following the publication of the Kurdi photograph are the case that has produced the most precisely documented evidence in the study of photojournalistic impact. The Swedish Red Cross's Syrian refugee campaign saw a donation increase from approximately \$3,850 USD to approximately \$214,300 USD within the first week, a 55-fold increase (Slovic et al., 2017). The Canadian fund PWRDF received \$70,000 CAD in additional donations within a mere few days, compared to \$80,155 raised over the preceding three years. The Canadian government also announced a \$100 million matching fund for Syrian relief, citing the photograph explicitly (Vis & Goriunova, 2015). Furthermore, Google search data revealed a dramatic spike in searches for "Syria", "refugees" and "Alan Kurdi" which remained elevated for several weeks (Slovic et al., 2017). Polling data from several European nations indicated a measurable shift toward more open refugee policies in the immediate aftermath of publication (Bos et al., 2019; Slovic et al., 2017).

4.2.5 Compassion Fatigue and the Limits of Image-Driven Empathy

The Kurdi case provided the study with the most precisely documented evidence on the cycle of compassion fatigue. Donation data observed indicated that the contributions made to the Swedish Red Cross Syrian campaigns fell back to approximately \$6,500 USD per day, within six weeks of the initial spike, rapidly returning towards the pre-publication baseline levels. The image produced an extraordinary yet temporary spike in humanitarian behaviour rather than sustained structural change in donation patterns or refugee reception policy. European governments that responded with sympathy in September 2015 reintroduced border controls and resisted refugee redistribution, seen in quotas through 2016 and later. Research on the ideological dimensions of the Kurdi image's reception further qualifies its impact as studies found that pre-existing ideological commitments returned as conservative respondents reverted

to restrictionist positions concerning refugee policy, despite their initial empathic reactions (Bos et al., 2019).

Bos et al. (2019) further suggest that this ideological re-sorting was not simply a function of time passing but was actively reinforced by a concurrent shift in media discourse. As coverage moved from a humanitarian focus toward a logistical and political dimension of refugee reception — housing pressures, questions of equitable EU burden-sharing and national border integrity — the conditions sustaining the empathic response were systematically eroded. The compassion fatigue observed was therefore not merely temporal decay but a product of competing frames reasserting dominance over the victim frame that the Kurdi image had temporarily displaced.

4.3 Case Study 2: James Nachtwey and the Somalia Famine (1992)

4.3.1 Context and Institutional Access

In 1992, Somalia suffered a famine of catastrophic scale alongside a civil war, estimated by the UN to have killed 300,000 people (Brauman, 1993). Despite the severity of the crisis, it had received limited sustained Western media attention. The photojournalist James Nachtwey, working in partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross, travelled to Somalia to document the conditions of the feeding and refugee centres. His images published in major Western outlets, including *Time* and the *New York Times Magazine*, were widely credited in journalistic and scholarly accounts for substantially increasing international awareness, thus generating political pressure.

The institutional context of Nachtwey's access is analytically significant as it distinguishes this case from the Kurdi image. The ICRC facilitated Nachtwey's access in the explicit expectation that his photographic coverage of famine conditions would generate political pressure necessary to mobilise international funding and support for the ICRC's operations. This

strategic decision by an institutional actor to utilise photographic access for advocacy purposes was a decision made rather than a neutral act of journalistic witnessing. This case raises the question of whether such instrumentalisation corrupts the photographic record or merely makes explicit what is always implicit in the selection of what to photograph, which will be addressed substantively in Chapter 7.

Figure 2. *Famine in Somalia, 1992.*

Note. Photograph by James Nachtwey / Magnum. Source: Hood Museum of Art



4.3.2 Visual Frame Analysis

Nachtwey's Somalia images deploy the victim frame in its most extreme register. The most widely discussed image of an emaciated woman being transported in a wheelbarrow to a feeding centre mobilises the victim frame conventions. The subject's physical emaciation is extreme as she depends on others for transportation, signalling the complete erosion of physical agency. Her face is turned towards the camera, her expression is ambiguous, resisting easy interpretation. The setting is institutional but stripped of bureaucratic detail as the background appears neutral, rid of political symbols, national markers or contextual complexity within the frame.

The aesthetic register of Nachtwey's work that prioritises physical proximity, compositional precision and high contrast constructs what critics have called the visual language of a moral

witness. The camera does not flinch from proximity but rather accompanies and refuses to look away. The aesthetic preference of the photographer positions him as a witness, carrying significant ethical weight that Nachtwey has explicitly discussed in accounts of his practice.

4.3.3 Measurable Outcomes and the CNN Effect

Following the sustained photographic and television coverage of the Somali famine in the latter half of 1992, international pressure on the Bush administration to intervene intensified. By December 1992, Operation Restore Hope was established, a US-led military humanitarian mission to intervene in Somalia. It was authorised under UN Security Council Resolution 794, which deployed 25,000 US military personnel to secure aid delivery operations (United Nations Security Council, 1992). Furthermore, congressional hearings on the Somalia crisis in late 1992 explicitly referenced the visual documentation of the famine in their deliberations, with senior officials acknowledging the transformation of the political environment due to media coverage (Robinson, 2002; Perlmutter, 1998). The US military gained legitimacy and credibility for its humanitarian response through the extension of the photographs. Later, these images were further reinforced by the US's post-Cold War claim to moral leadership, a central aspect of the soft power project and identified as the reputational currency by Nye (2004). Nachtwey stated in subsequent interviews that generating international intervention was the direct aim of his photojournalism in Somalia. This candid acknowledgement of his work with the explicit goal of advocacy highlights that the photographer understood the political mechanism of his photographs.

This is one of the most frequently cited examples of the CNN Effect in the humanitarian intervention literature: real-time visual coverage of a catastrophe contributing to a foreign policy response the administration might otherwise have delayed indefinitely. The media-policy relationship in this case is more complex than a simple image-to-intervention causal chain. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali had publicly called for intervention prior

to the peak of media coverage, and negotiations concerning the access of the ICRC had been underway for months. The evidence supports the characterisation of photographic coverage as a legitimising accelerant in policy response, already in development within elite political channels. This is consistent with the study's central claim that photojournalism functions as a catalyst and accelerator rather than an originating cause.

4.3.4 The Pre-Social Media Gatekeeping Context

The case of Somalia is analytically valuable as a point of contrast with the Kurdi case, as it demonstrates the photojournalistic system as it functioned before social media in terms of image distribution. In 1992, photographs reached global audiences exclusively through institutional gatekeepers: wire services, newspaper editors and magazine directors who selected, edited and sequenced visual material according to professional and commercial criteria. Nachtwey's images appeared in major media outlets as editors selected them from his available material, with no other photographs of the Somali famine achieving comparable recognition. The gatekeeping function shaped the visibility of the suffering but also determined which crises generated a public response necessary for humanitarian intervention.

This dynamic of gatekeeping stands as a stark contrast to the Kurdi case, where the distribution of the image spread on social media ahead of major news corporations' decision to publish it. The editorial decision about whether to publish a deceased child on a front cover was effectively pre-empted by the image's social media circulation, as the photograph had reached millions of viewers before traditional gatekeepers had established their judgments. This shift in the gatekeeping function is one of the most consequential media-structural changes for understanding photojournalistic impact in the contemporary period.

This structural shift may also partly account for the divergence in response type observed across the two humanitarian cases. The institutional gatekeeping that published Nachtwey's images through major outlets created visibility among political elites and policymakers, leading

to governmental response, whereas the social media circulation of the Kurdi image reached individual audiences directly; this produced a private donation surge rather than a policy announcement as its primary immediate effect. The shift in gatekeeping is not merely a distribution story but shines light on which actors are reached and the responses they are equipped to produce.

4.4 Comparative Analysis: Humanitarian Cases

Comparison of the two humanitarian cases reveals both the durability of underlying mechanisms as well as their variability within differing contexts. Both cases deploy the victim frame, produce documented increases in NGO fundraising and political pressure and both illustrate compassion fatigue in their aftermath. The identified victim effect, the agenda-setting function of iconic imagery, and the media-policy feedback loop are observed in both cases, bridging across over two decades of media history and two radically different media ecosystems.

However, the differences are analytically productive. The Kurdi case involves a photo captured independently and subsequently appropriated by institutional actors, whereas the Somalia case involves an institutional facilitation of photographic access. The Kurdi spike appeared sharper and more immediately documented; the Somalia case involved weeks of intensive coverage and produced a more durable and substantial policy response. The single image produced a spike, where the sustained campaign produced a new trajectory.

Chapter 5: Case Studies – Political Behaviour

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses three cases where photojournalism produced primarily political consequences rather than humanitarian ones: the Evan Vucci photograph of the Trump assassination attempt (July 2024), the visual documentation of George Floyd's death and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement (2020) and Nick Ut's "Terror of War" (1972) functioning as a critical counterexample. The political cases share distinguishing features separating them analytically from the humanitarian cases examined: the audiences to which they speak are more deeply ideologically established, the causal chains between image and outcome are more heavily mediated by institutional and political context, and the risk of post hoc attribution is substantially greater.

5.2 Case Study 3: The Trump Assassination Attempt (2024)

5.2.1 Context and the Photograph

On July 13th, 2024, a gunman opened fire at a campaign rally for the presidential candidate, Donald Trump, in Butler, Pennsylvania. The attack left Trump wounded and killed one attendee. Evan Vucci, an Associated Press photographer, credentialled and positioned in the press pen, captured the immediate aftermath of the shooting. The frame included Trump with blood streaming from his right ear, raising his fist defiantly towards the crowd while surrounded by Secret Service agents against the backdrop of the flag of the United States of America. The photograph was transmitted via AP wire service almost instantaneously and achieved global circulation within hours. It appeared on front pages worldwide, which generated immediate commentary concerning its visual power, political implications and likely consequences.

The photograph was produced under the editorial standards of the Associated Press by a professionally credentialled photojournalist covering an accredited press event. It is an unambiguous work of professional photojournalism. The subsequent deployment of the photograph by the Trump campaign within hours of its publication represents a political event rather than a photographic event, as the appropriation of a journalistic product was integrated for explicit partisan use. This distinction, and the questions it raises concerning the interplay of photojournalism and political instrumentalisation, are examined through this case study.

Figure 3. *Attempted assassination of Donald Trump, Butler, Pennsylvania, 2024*
Note. Photograph by Evan Vucci. Source: Associated Press News



5.2.2 Visual Frame Analysis: The Hero/Martyr Construction

The Vucci photograph deploys the hero/martyr frame with a compositional coherence that immediately struck political commentators across the spectrum. An analysis of its principal compositional elements reveals the visual logic upon which this frame is constructed.

Trump's raised fist occupies the compositional centre of the image, constituting its primary meaning. The raised fist has deep roots in Western political iconography as used by civil rights activists, labour organisers, revolutionaries and athletes alike in moments of survival and defiance. Within the photo's context of a candidate who has survived an assassination attempt,

a raised fist symbolises a declaration of survival. As if to say, “I am still here, and I will not be brought down”, signalling defiance over distress. The blood streaming from Trump's ear gives physical legibility to his defiance, demonstrating resilience in the face of grave danger.

The flag of the United States, positioned directly above the raised fist, functions as a visual endorsement, simultaneously anchoring the scene in American political symbolism, implying correspondence between the candidate's survival and the nation. Flags are frequently present at rally events, yet their position in the frame, being directly above the defiant fist, creates a visual rhyme between a political figure and a national symbol. This visual construction operates precisely as Hansen's (2011) framework of visual securitisation describes. The photograph does not merely illustrate a security event but actively constructs its meaning, transforming a specific act into a national political narrative.

The Secret Service agents that surround Trump guide the viewer's eye inward towards him, yet signal outwards the reality of the threat overcome. The agents' expressions carry urgency and professional composure; they contrast with Trump's expression of defiant composure, thus heightening the attempt's significance.

In the background, the rally's crowd is partially visible with arms raised, transforming the moment of individual crisis into an act of collective political communion. The response of the crowd to Trump's gesture is visible in the image's frame, completing the martyr narrative as the one who suffers rises and is recognised by his community.

5.2.3 Discourse Analysis: Deliberate Instrumentalisation

Following the attempted assassination, the Trump campaign deployed the Vucci photograph as material for fundraising and advocacy within hours of its publication, highlighting the thesis's most explicit example of photojournalistic instrumentalisation. Campaign materials distributed via the WinRed digital fundraising platform paired the image with the captions “FEAR NOT” and “NEVER SURRENDER” (Support Trump-Vance 2024!, 2026). These lexical choices

amplify the image's visual martyr frame through the activation of specific cultural registers. Drawing from biblical language, "FEAR NOT" emerges from both the Old and New Testaments, signalling divine intervention. When applied to a photograph of an injured yet surviving candidate, it constructs a narrative of providential protection. Furthermore, "NEVER SURRENDER" invokes a different yet equally powerful tradition that evokes the rhetoric of Churchillian resolve, American exceptionalism and the fighter who will not fall. The caption choice paired with the photograph transforms the photojournalistic product into a political consecration.

Media framing of the image diverged sharply along the lines of ideology, contrasting directly with the initial cross-partisan response to the Kurdi photograph. Conservative and Republican-aligned media promoted the photo as evidence of the resilience, historical significance and political violence that Trump carried, mobilising Trump's supporters and attracting undecided voters. Contrastingly, Liberal and Democrat-aligned media responded alarmingly to the image, noting the reality of political violence and the potential electoral consequences of an image mobilising Trump's base. Some left-leaning commentary expressed alarm at the image's asymmetric political impact. The Biden campaign's decision to pause all digital fundraising in the immediate aftermath of the shooting is itself a discourse event of political significance. This decision represents an operational acknowledgement by the opposition party that the image carried political impact that created an asymmetry as Trump's martyrdom narrative flooded regular competitive political activity. Not only did the photo produce a response from Trump supporters, but it also caused a reactive silence from his opponents.

5.2.4 Measurable Outcomes

The Trump campaign and affiliated committees raised \$138.7 million in July 2024, with the Associated Press noting that the assassination attempt may have contributed to the total as supporters were galvanised in the following days of the photograph's publication (Weissert,

2024). Precise figures remain subject to the quarterly disclosure schedules of the Federal Election Commission reporting. A GoFundMe campaign for victims of the Butler shooting raised \$6.6 million in total donations (Fahrenthold, 2024). Republican donors and strategists publicly projected a record fundraising in the weeks following the shooting, with several attributing this directly to the photograph's visual strength. Democratic strategists acknowledged that the image had substantially strengthened Trump's political position. Vucci's photograph of the assassination attempt contributed to the reframing of Trump's public persona, transforming into one associated with political martyrdom, shifting campaign perceptions (Wren & Allison, 2024).

5.2.5 Analytical Implications: Ideological Mediation and the Limits of Cross-Partisan Appeal

The Trump assassination attempt photograph produces a finding that qualifies the thesis's framework significantly: not all victim or martyr frame images produce cross-partisan humanitarian response. The image notably failed to generate empathic response in opposing or uncommitted communities. This is a function of two intersecting factors: the hero/martyr frame's structural tendency toward within-group mobilisation (unlike where the victim frame appeals to the universal notions of innocent suffering, martyr frame appeals to the specific narrative traditions of a particular political community); and the effect of ideological predisposition in mediating frame interpretation (audiences for whom Trump was already a figure of political admiration or loyalty read the martyr frame immediately and resonantly; audiences for whom he was a figure of political opposition were more likely to read the image with suspicion, resignation or alarm).

This finding provides the comparative case study's most important qualification of the framework: the identified victim effect, as documented by Slovic et al. (2017). When the victim is a hyper-politicised public figure rather than an unknown child, the effect operates differently.

The political pre-context of the photographed subject mediates the extent to which viewers are capable of experiencing the image as a universal human event, rather than a partisan one.

5.3 Case Study 4: George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter Movement (2020)

5.3.1 Context and the Definitional Challenge

On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black American man, was murdered by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, during an arrest. The primary visual document of his death was recorded on a smartphone by a 17-year-old bystander, Darnella Frazier, and shared on Facebook. The video of Floyd's death gained traction rapidly, generating a wave of protests that spread across the United States and around the world in the weeks following. The event constituted one of the largest transnational social movements in recent decades.

The inclusion of this case in a thesis on photojournalism requires justification. The primary evidence is not a photograph produced by a credentialed professional photojournalist, but rather a smartphone record filmed by a teenage bystander, acting within the role of a citizen journalist, and emerging terminology of digital media studies. This study argues that the inclusion of this case is justified for three reasons. First, the mechanisms of visual framing, emotional impact and viral dissemination that operate in the Floyd documentation are structurally identical to those operating traditionally in photojournalism: the visual construction of the event, the significance of captions and accompanying discourse, and the relationship between image and behavioural response, all of which replicate the patterns identified in the humanitarian cases examined. Second, professional photojournalism of the subsequent protests generated a rich and consequential visual archive that operated by orthodox photojournalistic conventions. Third, the case tests the thesis's framework under conditions of maximum relevance by examining whether the mechanisms identified here are specific to professional

photojournalism or whether they operate wherever potent visual documentation achieves viral salience. The answer carries significant implications for how IR scholars conceptualise visual politics in the social media era.

Darnella Frazier was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize citation in 2021 for her documentation of the death of George Floyd. This serves as an institutional recognition that citizen journalism has entered the sphere of photojournalism, requiring it to be analytically included.

Frazier herself has reflected on the weight of her act of documentation. On the first anniversary of Floyd's death, she wrote:

“I still hold the weight of having witnessed his murder. I still have flashbacks. I wonder if I should have intervened. A little part of me died that day.” – Darnella Frazier, Facebook, 25 May 2021

This statement is significant for the analytical framework on several levels. First, it foregrounds the psychological burden that witness-documentarians carry, experienced in this case by somebody with no professional framework for processing her recording. Second, it makes explicit the moral ambiguity embedded in the act of documentation, whether to film or intervene. Third, her testimony offers insight into the thesis's argument that the mechanisms of photojournalistic impact do not require professional production to operate.

5.3.2 Visual Frame Analysis

The primary visual document of Floyd's death presents a distinct analytical challenge: Frazier's recording is a continuous video of approximately ten minutes, not a single frame. This fundamentally transforms the nature of the visual frame analysis available. Where traditional photojournalism offers a single compositional moment, the video's power derives from its temporal completeness. The viewer does not receive an extracted moment but witnesses the full duration of the event unfolding in real time. From Floyd's initial interaction with the police officers to the moment his life was lost. This temporal quality generates alternative

interpretations that are structurally more challenging to sustain than a single still photo allows. It is analytically significant as the video's emotional impact is derived from the duration rather than compositional choices.

The dominant visual frame of the primary document is the witness frame. Frazier does not seek to compose or aestheticise the event, producing an involuntary testimony rather than a composed moral witness that characterises Nachtwey's photography in Somalia. Frazier's unsteady footage signals the authenticity of the involuntary testimony, thus giving credibility to the frame. The video presents itself as an indexical record rather than a constructed image to be received as such.

The subsequent professional photojournalism of protests followed more traditional visual frames. Images of protestors with raised fists, crowds flooding cities and slogans for justice deployed victim, solidarity and collective action frames in recognisable photojournalistic conventions, providing a visual archive that circulated internationally. Together, raw testimony translated into composed advocacy (Goldmacher, 2020; Pulitzer Prize, 2021).

Figure 4. Darnella Frazier, Pulitzer Prize Special Citation, 2021.
Note. Source: Pulitzer Prize.



Note. The Pulitzer Prize citation is reproduced here rather than a still from Frazier's video, taken on the same ethical grounds explored in Chapter 7. Frazier recorded as a witness in a deliberate advocacy decision rather than as a professional photojournalist.

5.3.3 Discourse Analysis

The discourse surrounding Floyd's death and its documentation followed a pattern reflecting and amplifying the visual record. The phrase "I can't breathe" – audible throughout Frazier's video, drawn directly from Floyd's own words – became the defining linguistic frame of the movement rapidly (Goldmacher, 2020). The power of the phrase is derived from its indexical relationship to the footage, representing the discourse of Floyd as a direct extension of its visual documentation, rather than a framing layer.

Media framing of Floyd's death diverged significantly along ideological lines, replicating the ideological divergence observed in the Trump assassination attempt case. Liberal and centre-left media outlets framed the video as evidence of systematic racism and institutional police violence, with verbal communications emphasising "murder", "lynching" and "systematic failure". Conservative-aligned media organisations contextualised the event within the questions of law enforcement, individual conduct and alleged criminal records of the deceased. Counter-framing did not deny the visual record but sought to displace the political conclusions drawn from it. This ideological divide in media discourse reflects the findings of Bos et al. (2019) in the Kurdi case, confirming that visual documentation does not produce uniform political meaning but is interpreted through pre-existing ideological frameworks.

Political and institutional discourse responded directly to the video's circulation. Within days of publication, elected officials in the US issued public statements calling for the prosecution of the involved officers in reference to Frazier's documentation (Goldmacher, 2020). Political discourse became filled with the language of policy demands – "police reform", "defund the police", "accountability" – also taken up in international contexts. Civil rights organisations, including the BLM Global Network Foundation, deployed the language of the video directly in donation appeals (Goldmacher, 2020; Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2020).

The context of citizen journalism, being the primary documentation, carries a distinctive discursive dimension that is absent in traditional photojournalism. Frazier's public statements became part of the political discourse surrounding the event, activating public attention towards the psychological cost of witness-documentation. Furthermore, her role prompted wider discussions about the obligations and burdens of the bystander who films rather than intervenes, constituting one of the case's most analytically significant contributions to the study's broader argument: the mechanism of photojournalistic discourse does not require professional production but does extract costs from those producing the visual media, regardless of professional status (Pulitzer Prize, 2021).

5.3.4 Measurable Outcomes

The measurable outcomes of Floyd's murder and the visual documentation surrounding it were exceptional in scale. Bail funds alone received a combined \$90 million in the two weeks following the video's circulation, while ActBlue processed over \$250 million to progressive causes and candidates in the same period, dwarfing any previous comparable mobilisation (Goldmacher, 2020). The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation received approximately \$90 million in 2020, the majority donated in the subsequent weeks following Floyd's death (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, 2020). A Pew Research Center poll conducted in June 2020 found that 67% of Americans expressed support for the BLM movement, a substantial increase from prior measures (Pew Research Center, 2020).

The international sphere of this uprising is particularly significant for the IR-level analysis of the study. Protests spread across over 60 countries in the weeks following Floyd's death (Usmani, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the statue of slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down (Harcombe, 2025). Demonstrations occurred outside the US embassies across Europe, Asia and Latin America. The transnational diffusion of a movement taking place in the United States demonstrated a mechanism of visual political contagion that operated through social

media platforms. This served as a major soft power loss to the US as international credibility had been reduced due to the neglect of political values (Nye, 2004). Visual documentation of a US event created a globally shared frame of reference where cities abroad could understand expressions of the same political demand.

Critically, the compassion fatigue outlined by Moeller (1999) is also observable despite operating over a longer period. Within eighteen months of the protests that took place in summer 2020, polling data on the support of the BLM movement had returned toward pre-protest baselines, legislative momentum on police reform had stalled in most US states, and media coverage had diminished substantially.

5.3.5 Citizen Journalism and the Transformed Ecosystem

The most analytically significant finding of the Floyd case is the mechanisms through which photojournalism creates impact. Visual framing, viral dissemination and behavioural response do not require professional photojournalists to operate, requiring only widely disseminated visual documentation that carries sufficient emotional charge and narrative coherence to activate a response. The production context is less analytically significant than the context of dissemination and framing dynamics.

This has significant implications for how photojournalism should be conceptualised in IR analysis. The gatekeeping function that determined which crises received visual coverage in 1992 had been substantially eroded by a near-universal smartphone camera access paired with social media distribution. However, algorithmic curation reintroduces new forms of gatekeeping where not all footage achieves viral salience and platform policies about graphic content determine which visual records reach which audiences.

5.4 Case Study 5: The Terror of War - Nick Ut (1972)

5.4.1 The Narrative and the Evidence

Nick Ut's photograph of a nine-year-old girl, Phan Thi Kim Phúc, running naked from a Napalm attack in Trang Bang, Vietnam, taken on the 8th of June 1972, is among the most analysed photojournalistic images of the twentieth century. It won the Pulitzer Prize and has been cited with remarkable consistency, across journalistic, political and scholarly accounts alike, as the image that shifted American public opinion against the Vietnam War and accelerated the US military withdrawal. In popular historical memory, the image functions as the paradigm case in photojournalism's political impact as the photograph that ended a war.

The available empirical evidence does not support this claim. Gallup polling data underscores that 52 per cent of Americans opposed the Vietnam War as early as 1968, four years before Nick Ut's photograph (Gallup, 1968–1972, as cited in Campbell, 2016). By the time the photograph had been published in 1972, 61 per cent of Americans told Gallup that the US military intervention was a mistake (Gallup, 1968–1972, as cited in Campbell, 2016). Opposition sentiments to the War had been building consistently across the four years preceding the image's publication, driven by casualty figures, the Tet Offensive of 1968, the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, and the sustained anti-war political mobilisation seen in the late 1960's and 1970s. The US military withdrawal had been underway for three years before the photograph was taken, with polling data showing no significant shift in anti-war sentiment following the publication of "The Terror of War".

Figure 5. “The Terror of War” (Napalm Girl), Vietnam, 1972.

Note. Photograph by Nick Ut. Source: Associated Press



Note. As a critical counterexample case, the Vietnam analysis does not follow the same structure as the other cases. The absence of traceable immediate behavioural output is itself the central analytical finding. Therefore, the analysis is organised around the post hoc fallacy and the alternative typology of cultural impact rather than the outcome-tracing framework applied elsewhere.

5.4.2 The Post Hoc Fallacy and What the Image Achieved

W.J. Campbell (2016) describes this pattern as the “post hoc fallacy of causation”, where the tendency to attribute historical change to iconic images occurs when the structural forces driving the transformation were already in motion. The Napalm Girl did not shift the American opinion on the Vietnam War, as the opinion had already changed. The image arrives as a crystallising symbol for a shift already largely complete. Its cultural salience derives from that crystallising function, not a causal one. Photographs that arrive at the crest of a wave of public opinion change may appear as creating the wave in retrospect, yet analytical work is required to establish differences in these cases through the application of rigorous context and outcome tracing.

The photograph’s visual power is inseparable from the story surrounding Nick Ut’s photograph in Trang Bang. Having taken the photograph, he put down his camera and drove Kim Phuc to the hospital.

“He put down his camera, and he rushed me to the nearest hospital and, that he saved my life. He's, my hero. We became a part of family. I call him Uncle Ut.” – Phan Thi Kim Phuc (Canadian Bible Society, 2025)

Kim Phuc herself has spoken extensively on the legacy of the photograph. Twenty-two years after the photograph was taken, she was appointed UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador in 1994 and established the Kim Foundation International, dedicated to healing child survivors of war, and repeatedly turning to the photo's meaning and capacity (*UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors*, 2025;). The picture underscores, from the subject's perspective, the mechanism central to photojournalistic impact. It presents the fact that's not an argument about suffering but about suffering itself, as the photograph's power derives from its indexical relationship to reality. Kim Phuc's framing of photographic truth as something that resists verbal substitution is a practitioner's confirmation, across five decades, of the thesis's argument that visual records operate through conditions in which verbal journalism cannot replicate.

This does not mean that the photograph was left without consequence. The case of Vietnam instead demonstrates a different type of photojournalistic impact where the concept of condensation symbols forms (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). A condensation symbol is an image that compresses the complex interplay of social tensions, values and morality into a single legible form that continues to circulate in public culture, performing political work long after the original event has occurred. The Terror of War photo is one of the most potent examples of condensation symbols of the twentieth century. It did not end the war in Vietnam, but for over fifty years, it has operated as a definitive visual that sheds light on the civilian costs of the American military intervention. Kim Phuc's UNESCO appointment confirms that its symbolic power generated tangible political utility across decades, constituting the political memory within which future crises are interpreted for future policy shaping.

5.4.3 Analytical Implications: Two Types of Photojournalistic Impact

The Vietnam case produces this thesis's most important analytical finding: the distinction between two qualitatively different types of photojournalistic impact. The first is immediate behavioural impact, characterised by measurable spikes in donations, policy announcements with explicit reference to photographic stimuli, and shifts in polling data following short time spans of publishing. This is observed in the Kurdi, Somalia, Trump and BLM cases. The second is defined by durability in cultural impact, where the photograph attains the role of constituting political memory, shaping how subsequent events are interpreted and defining the symbolic vocabulary through which crises are discussed publicly. This is the primary consequence of Napalm Girl, where measurement requires a different evidential framework, based on long-term political and cultural analysis rather than short-run donation or polling data. This distinction provides a significant implication for photojournalism's role and assessment in international relations. Studies focusing exclusively on immediate behavioural outcomes will systematically underestimate the cultural and political significance of images such as The Terror of War.

Chapter 6: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

6.1 Introduction

The five cases examined in Chapters 4 and 5 generate a series of findings that no individual case could produce. Through cross-case analysis, recurring patterns are revealed to understand how photojournalistic images produce behavioural outcomes, with significant exceptions that test and refine the theoretical framework, and a set of identifiable conditions determining whether photojournalism produces traceable effects versus diffuse cultural impact. This

chapter draws those findings together to propose a theoretically grounded conclusion about the interplay between photojournalism and audience behaviour in international relations.

6.2 Pattern 1: Victim Framing and the Identified Victim Effect

The victim frame is the most consistently documented mechanism linking photojournalism to humanitarian behavioural outcomes. Both humanitarian case studies deploy and draw on the predicted response as measurable NGO fundraising and political pressures increase. The identified victim effect, operationalised by Slovic et al. (2017), is confirmed by the evidence. Cross-case comparison provides further refinement: the Kurdi case, involving a three-year-old child, produced a sharper and more immediate spike than the Somalia case, involving adult victims in extreme deprivation. This differential is consistent with the hypothesis that child victim imagery activates the identified victim effect with particular intensity, as children carry connotations of innocence and vulnerability that adult subjects do not.

6.3 Pattern 2: The Hero/Martyr Frame and Within-Community Mobilisation

The photograph of the Trump assassination attempt provides the study with the primary example of the hero/martyr frame that produces measurable political consequences. Its comparison with the victim-frame cases produces a finding of significant theoretical interest. Unlike the victim frame's cross-partisan humanitarian appeal, the martyr frame generates intense in-community mobilisation. This is done through the energising of existing supporters, consolidation of political identity and the activation of the community's shared narrative of persecution, resilience and providential survival. Photojournalistic images do not affect all audiences equally, as the impact depends on the relationship between the frame deployed and the cultural codes already held by the receiving community.

6.4 Pattern 3: Compassion Fatigue, a Structural Constraint Across Humanitarian Cases

Across all cases involving humanitarian response, the compassion fatigue cycle becomes operative. The Kurdi case provides the most precisely documented version, as a fifty-five-fold increase in daily donations emerged during the week of publication, followed by a return to baseline levels within six weeks. The Somalia case exhibits the same structural trajectory over a longer period. The BLM case showed an extraordinary donation spike that was concentrated in the weeks following the death of Floyd, but was met with normalisation subsequently. This consistency across cases with a range of subjects, time periods and media ecosystems reinforces Moeller's (1999) characterisation of compassion fatigue as a structural feature of humanitarian media response. However powerful a photograph is, no single image can transcend these structural forces.

6.5 Critical Exception: Post Hoc Attribution

The case in Vietnam demonstrates that the most celebrated example of photojournalistic political impact is not supported by the available empirical evidence. This finding relocates the significance of the Napalm Girl asserted by the domain of immediate behavioural causation to the domain of long-run cultural and political memory. The risk that post hoc attribution introduces is that images are credited with the changes that are driven by structural factors, becoming a systematic hazard in this scholarship. The Vietnam case demonstrates why rigorous outcome tracing, polling data and political chronology are a methodological necessity rather than an optional supplement.

6.6 Conditions for Traceable Behavioural Impact

Drawing on the comparative evidence, five conditions are associated with the production of traceable behavioural outcomes. First, frame clarity: images deploying a single and unambiguous frame produce stronger and more consistent responses. Second, subject individualisation: the identified victim effect requiring a specific, named and humanised subject. Third, media salience and velocity: images must achieve high-salience placement through front-page publication, viral social media circulation, or both. Fourth, a receptive political environment: images function as catalysts for shifts already in motion rather than as originating forces. Where elite consensus is strong, even visually powerful images produce limited deviation from the established policy. Fifth, institutional mobilisation: images actively deployed by NGO's, political campaigns or other institutional actors produce substantially larger effects than those circulating without institutional amplification. Conversely, conditions associated with reduced impact include pre-sorting of the audience, prior compassion fatigue from sustained coverage of similar crises, media saturation by competing imagery, and the absence of institutional actors prepared to mobilise around the photograph.

6.7 The Distribution Infrastructure Has Transformed While the Mechanisms Have Not

Comparing Nachtwey's Somalia documentation (1992) with Darnella Frazier's Floyd video (2020) reveals a stark transformation in the infrastructure of photojournalistic distribution, causing the two cases to appear to belong to entirely different analytical spheres. In 1992, the ICRC granted Nachtwey access, AP distributed the wire image, editors made a publication decision, and then the audience received the images as fixed options to infer from. In 2020, a seventeen-year-old civilian bystander recorded an event on her smartphone, shared it on the social media platform Facebook, thus fuelling a global political movement. This infrastructural

transformation bypasses every institutional layer that Perlmutter (1998) theorised. Despite the shifts observed, underlying mechanisms operated identically across both cases. The identified victim effect (Slovic et al., 2017), agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing dynamics (Entman, 1993) and the compassion fatigue cycle (Moeller, 1999) produced the same patterns across a thirty-year time frame. What changed is the speed, the scale, and the structure of gatekeeping — not the fundamental psychological and political dynamics that turn a compelling image into an institutional response.

Chapter 7: Ethical Dimensions

7.1 Introduction

The power of photojournalism to produce the behavioural and political outcomes documented in the preceding chapters cannot be separated from the ethical questions that power raises. This chapter examines four interconnected and ethical dimensions: consent and rights of photographed subjects, dignity and the representation of suffering, the instrumentalisation of visual documentation in advocacy, and the responsibilities of photographers and media outlets.

7.2 Consent and the Rights of Subjects

The consent dimension is most acutely raised by the Kurdi case. Alan Kurdi was three years old and deceased at the moment he was photographed, incapable of consent. His father, Abdullah Kurdi, expressed support for the publication of the image, yet consent granted by a parent in the immediate aftermath of losing his entire family cannot reasonably meet the conditions of voluntary, informed and non-coerced consent that ethical professional frameworks require. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics requires that practitioners “minimise harm” and “consider long-term implications of the extended reach and

permanence of publication” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Applied to the Kurdi case, these frameworks generate genuine tension: the image generated documented humanitarian good— tens of millions of dollars in aid funding, a government policy announcement — yet the harm done to Alan Kurdi’s dignity by its publication as a dead child remains. Several major outlets rejected publication of the Kurdi photograph, citing these precise, analytically significant concerns.

Tim Carpenter’s essay *To Photograph Is to Learn How to Die* (Carpenter, 2022) offers philosophical insight into professional ethics frameworks, answering the question of the impact of photography on the photographer. Carpenter argues that photography is fundamentally a practice of confronting mortality; to photograph something is to acknowledge its presence and its passing. This approach illuminates Nick Ut’s decision in Trang Bang in 1972 to put down his camera and drive to Phan Thi Kim Phúc to the hospital, accepting the obligation imposed when in proximity to suffering. Carter’s suicide note represents the same confrontation in its most devastating form: the photographer who could not survive what photography had required him to witness (Carter, 1994, as cited in Marinovich & Silva, 2000).

7.3 Instrumentalisation of Suffering and Human Costs

The instrumentalisation of photographic documentation for advocacy purposes runs through all the humanitarian cases and reaches its most explicit state in the Trump case. The ICRC’s facilitation of Nachtwey’s access to Somalia represents a considered institutional decision to allow photographic documentation of famine conditions in pursuit of political pressure generation, necessary to save lives. On a strict consequentialist account, the instrumentalisation was justified by its outcomes. However, the photographed individuals were neither in a position to refuse participation nor informed of the strategic purpose their imagery would serve.

The psychological cost of instrumentalising suffering through the camera is nowhere more starkly documented than in the case of Kevin Carter. Carter won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for

a photo taken in 1993 in Sudan during the famine, depicting a malnourished child collapsed near a feeding centre with a vulture in the background. Two months following his acceptance of the prize, Carter took his own life. The note he left behind seared the history of photojournalism:

“I am depressed...I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain... of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners... I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky” – Kevin Carter, suicide note, 27 July 1994 (Carter, 1994, as cited in Marinovich & Silva, 2000)

Research into trauma and PTSD among conflict photojournalists has consistently documented elevated rates of psychological distress among those who spend extended periods documenting extreme violence. The Bang-Bang Club – Carter and three colleagues who documented the violence in apartheid South Africa – lost one member to a violent death in the field and one to suicide (Marinovich & Silva, 2000). Their shared experience highlights the human cost, frequently overlooked in scholarly analyses, of producing the photos this thesis examines.

James Nachtwey has reflected directly on this same complexity:

“The worst thing is to feel that as a photographer I am benefiting from someone else’s tragedy. This idea haunts me. It’s something I have to reckon with every day because I know that if I ever stop feeling the tragedy I am photographing, I will have lost my humanity” – James Nachtwey, (Hidas, 2024)

The analytical implication is significant as the same psychological mechanism that makes photojournalism powerful is the same mechanism that extracts an ethical and psychological price from the people who practice it. Carter’s final note, paired with Nachtwey’s reflection, highlights the burden from different endpoints within the same existential continuum.

7.4 Dignity, the Colonial Gaze and Sontag's Warning

Susan Sontag's argument, stated in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), explores how photographs of suffering risk producing in Western audiences a form of moral satisfaction at having witnessed, rather than genuine political engagement dealing with the causes of suffering. This is directly applicable to the humanitarian cases. Neither Kurdi nor the Somalia photographs produced sustained structural change within the political conditions generating the crises they recorded. The dignity sphere is further complicated when considering the colonial visual dynamics embedded in traditional Western photojournalism's documentation of suffering in the Global South. The Somalia case reproduces a visual power relationship where the context of the documentation belongs to the privileged, and the body on display belongs to the dispossessed (Sontag, 2003).

7.5 Responsibilities of Photographers and Media Organisations

The analytical conclusion of this chapter does not resolve the ethical tensions identified but produces a grounded observation about responsibility. No single incident may solidify the complexity of this responsibility more concretely than Nick Ut's decision to bring injured Kim Phuc to the hospital, crossing the boundary between witness and participant. His photograph became one of the most powerful moral arguments against the Vietnam War, but he did not want to let the act of documentation limit his responsibility. For individual photographers, professional responsibility extends beyond accuracy and technical excellence to encompass an awareness of the political and humanitarian ecosystems in which their images will circulate. For media outlets, their editorial decisions on whether to publish iconic images of suffering are de facto political decisions that produce measurable consequences. For NGO's that deploy imagery for fundraising or political purposes, the cases examined raise the question of whether

organisations that benefit institutionally from images of suffering bear responsibility for their subjects beyond the moment the shutter closes.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Answering the Research Question

This thesis sets out to understand the extent to what extent photojournalistic imagery shapes audience behaviour toward humanitarian causes and political outcomes in international relations. This study suggests that the answer rests on the evidence of five case studies examined through an integrated theoretical framework: photojournalistic imagery shapes audience behaviour significantly, measurably and conditionally.

In the humanitarian domain, the evidence is most consistent and precisely documented. The Swedish Red Cross's 55-fold daily donation increase and the Canadian government's \$100 million matching fund announcement following the publication of the Kurdi photograph (Slovic et al., 2017). The unprecedented surge in racial justice donations following Floyd's death represents documented, quantified and institutional responses to photojournalistic stimuli (Goldmacher, 2020). At the same time, the compassion fatigue cycle imposes structural limitations as effects are intense and temporary rather than moderate and sustained, unable to produce durable structural change in political conditions within the crises they document.

In the political domain, the evidence is heavily complicated and qualified. The Trump photograph produced extraordinary within-community mobilisation yet lacked a cross-partisan humanitarian response. The BLM documentation – produced by a citizen journalist – generated transnational political spillover effects on a scale that professional photography had never achieved in the modern era. The Vietnam case demonstrates how one of the most celebrated

examples of photojournalistic causation does not survive empirical scrutiny, underscoring the risk of post hoc attribution in this field.

8.2 The Conditions Framework

The comparative analysis in Chapter 6 produced the most original analytical contribution of the study: a framework of conditions associated with the production of traceable photojournalistic behavioural effects. Frame clarity, subject individualisation, media salience and velocity, receptive political environment, and institutional mobilisation are each present in the cases producing traceable behavioural effects — and notably absent or weakened in the Vietnam case, which is consistent with the framework's prediction that their absence limits photojournalism's immediate causal impact. This framework does not provide a predictive model, but rather outlines analytical tools for assessing, in any given case, the key conditions photojournalism must undertake to improve the likelihood of their work functioning as a significant variable in IR-level outcomes.

8.3 The Typological Distinction: Immediate and Cultural Impact

The Vietnam case introduced a distinct and essential aspect for the assessment of photojournalistic impact, where immediate behavioural impact is in contrast with durable cultural impact. Images such as the Kurdi photograph produce a behavioural impact, whereas Napalm Girl produced the latter. Both are analytically significant, operating through differing mechanisms that require their own evidential frameworks. A study focused exclusively on cultural significance risks the post hoc attribution error.

8.4 Contributions to IR Theory

This study makes three contributions to the scholarly literature. First, by developing and applying an integrated analytical framework to contemporary case studies with measurable

outcome data, demonstrating the framework's applicability, thus suggesting its extension to future cases. Second, the proposition and defence of a typological distinction contrasting immediate behavioural and durable cultural photojournalistic effects. Third, it documents and theorises the transformation of photojournalistic impact in the social media era. The study acknowledges the acceleration of agenda-setting effects, the erosion of traditional gatekeeping and the emergence of citizen journalism and proposes the conditions framework as an analytical tool for navigating the transformed media landscape. Taken together, these findings provide empirical support for the constructivist proposition established in Chapter 2: that photojournalistic material constitutes, rather than merely reflects, political reality. This then produces shared meanings through which events acquire institutional significance, known as the image-to-institution pathway that purely materialist accounts of international relations cannot accommodate.

8.5 Limitations

The case selection is not a random sample, as the study is weighted towards cases with documented consequences. The analysis is weighted toward Western and English-language media contexts. Quantitative outcome data varies in quality across cases. A counterfactual issue arises without a certain resolution – what would have happened without the existence of these specific images? These limitations do not invalidate the results of the study, but it is worth noting the established boundaries in which the findings should be interpreted.

Notably, the selection bias in the case design merits explicit acknowledgement at the conclusion. The five cases were chosen, in part, due to their consequences being sufficiently documented to allow for outcome tracing. This means the study cannot speak to the vast majority of photojournalistic images that circulated without generating comparable outcomes or records. The framework of conditions proposed in Chapter 6 describes what these cases had in common, but it does not establish that those conditions are sufficient to produce effects

wherever they are present. The study has, by design, optimised for analytical depth over generalisability, and conclusions made should be read accordingly.

8.6 Future Research Guidance

Several directions follow from the study's findings. First, longitudinal research tracking donor behaviour and political sentiment over years rather than weeks following an image's publication would substantially advance understanding of the compassion fatigue dynamic. Second, a comparative analysis of non-Western media systems would test whether the framing mechanisms and outcome patterns identified are specific to Western democratic cultures or operate universally. Third, the role of AI-generated imagery in photojournalism demands scholarly attention, as audiences are at risk of distrusting media outlets due to a lack of ability to distinguish photography from synthetic images. The truth-claim that underlies photojournalism's emotional capacity is fundamentally threatened, as well as the conditions for effects documented in this study, not to apply.

8.7 Closing Reflection

Photographs do not speak for themselves, but through the frames they are constructed within, the platforms that distribute them and the political contexts deploying and receiving them. To understand their role in international relations is neither to overstate their autonomous power nor to dismiss them as epiphenomenal – mere illustrations of changes driven by other forces. Rather, it is to examine with rigour which conditions allow images to move people, and what that movement means for the policies, funding decisions and political upheavals that follow. This thesis has argued that this examination belongs at the centre of modern International Relations scholarship.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Cross-Case Comparative Data Table

The table provides a structured overview of the five case studies across key analytical categories to support Chapter 6’s cross-case analysis.

	Alan Kurdi (2015)	Somalia / Nachtwey (1992)	Trump Assassination Attempt (2024)	George Floyd / BLM (2020)	The Terror of War/ Vietnam (1972)
Photographer/ Documentarian	Nilüfer Demir (DHA)	James Nachtwey (Magnum)	Evan Vucci (AP)	Darnella Frazier (citizen journalist)	Nick Ut (AP)
Subject	Alan Kurdi, Syrian refugee crisis, deceased child	Famine victim, Somali civil war	Donald Trump, attempted assassination survivor	George Floyd, murdered during police arrest	Phan Thi Kim Phúc, Napalm attack survivor
Primary Frame	Victim	Victim	Hero/Martyr	Witness/Victim	Victim
Primary Distribution Channel	Social media, then press	Wire service, print editorial	AP wire to press then campaign appropriation	Facebook then social media virality	Wire service then print editorial
Media Ecosystem	Early social media era	Pre-internet broadcasting	Algorithmically amplified on social media	Algorithmically amplified on social media	Pre-internet broadcasting
Key Measurable Outcomes	55-fold SRC donation spike, CAD \$70,000 PWRDF increase, Canadian government \$100M matching fund	Operation Restore Hope, UNSC Resolution 794, congressional hearings	\$6.6M GoFundMe, \$138.7M July 2024 campaign total, Biden campaign fundraising pause	90M BLM foundation, protests in 60+ countries	No measurable shift in polling data, UNESCO appointment 1994, decades of cultural circulation
Evidence of Compassion Fatigue	Return to near-baseline SRC donations within 6 weeks	Gradual decline post-intervention, long coverage cycle	Fatigue less applicable to martyrdom, within community mobilisation sustained	BLM support polling returned toward baseline within 18 months, legislative stall	Not applicable as case involved in cultural impact rather than humanitarian spike
Type of Impact	Immediate behavioural	Immediate behavioural, sustained policy response	Immediate political, within community	Immediate political, transnational	Long-term cultural & political memory
Post Hoc Attribution Risk	Low, donation data is precisely timestamped	Moderate, policy process pre-existed coverage	Low, fundraising is directly timestamped	Low, donation data is timestamped & protests directly followed	High, confirmed post hoc fallacy & opinion data predates photo

Appendix B – Visual Frame Analysis Matrix

The matrix presents the compositional variables applied in the systematic visual frame analysis described in Chapter 3.3; each case study image is mapped.

Variable	Alan Kurdi (2015)	Somalia / Nachtwey (1992)	Trump Assassination Attempt (2024)	George Floyd / BLM (2020)	The Terror of War/ Vietnam (1972)
Primary Subject Centrality	Central, isolated in frame	Central, surrounded by minimal context	Central, surrounded by agents	Dispersed across video duration	Central, running towards photographer
Subject Gaze Direction	Away from camera, averted	Towards photographer, ambiguous	Towards crowd, upward	Unavailable (video)	Toward photographer (direct)
Implied Physical Proximity	Close & intimate register	Close & confrontational	Medium, narrative distance	Variable across video duration	Medium-close, urgent
Colour Register	Contrast, red against sand	High contrast, black & white	Patriotic colours, red, white & blue	Variable across video duration	Tones of fire/dust
Subject Agency	None, deceased & passive	Near absent, transported by others	High, fist raised & defiant	None in primary figure, active in protest photography	Low, fleeing & reaching arms
Contextual Markers	None – beach provides no context	Minimal - neutral institutional background	High - flag, crowd & secret service	Minimal in Frazier video, varied in protest records	High – fleeing figures & soldiers
Emotional Register	Grief & quiet horror	Moral witness in proximity	Defiance, triumph over threat	Horror & moral urgency	Anguish - raw & physical pain
Frame Category	Victim	Victim	Hero/martyr	Witness (primary document), victim/solidarity (protest)	Victim
Condensation Symbol Potential	Moderate, culturally potent but temporary	Low-moderate	High, icon of political survival	Moderate, movement symbol	High, sustained over decades

Appendix C – Donation & Fundraising Data Summary

The table consolidates the quantitative behavioural outcome data referenced across the case study chapters for ease of reference. All figures are drawn from the sources as cited in the study and bibliography.

Case	Organisation/ Fund	Pre-photo baseline	Post-Photo Response	Time Frame	Return to Baseline	Source
Kurdi (2015)	Swedish Red Cross – Syrian Campaign	~\$3,850 USD / day	~\$214,300 USD / day	Within 7 days of publication	~ 6 weeks	Slovic et al. (2017)
Kurdi (2015)	PWRDF (Canada)	~\$80,155 CAD over 3 years	~\$70,000 CAD additional	Within a few days	Not documented	Vis & Goriunova (2015)
Kurdi (2015)	Canadian Government match funding	N/A	~\$100M CAD	Announced within weeks	Policy, not applicable	Vis & Goriunova (2015)
Floyd / BLM (2020)	Bail funds / ActBlue	N/A	\$90M bail funds; \$250M ActBlue	Two weeks post-virality	Not precisely documented	Goldmacher (2020)
Floyd / BLM (2020)	BLM Global Network Foundation	Not published	~\$90 million USD in 2020	Majority in weeks post-Floyd	Polling returned to baseline within 18 months	Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (2020)
Trump (2024)	GoFundMe, Butler shooting victims	N/A	\$ 6.6M USD	Within days of attack	Not applicable	Fahrenthold (2024)
Trump (2024)	WinRed campaign fundraising	Prior campaign daily average	\$138.7 million	July 2024 (monthly total)	Not applicable	Weissert (2024)

Note. The baseline figures are not available for all cases due to differences in disclosure practices and the historical period of each case. The Somalia (1992) case is excluded from this table as no equivalent quantitative donation data were published in retrievable form. The measurable outcomes for that case are policy-level rather than donation-level, outlined in Chapter 4.3.3.

Appendix D – Glossary of Visual Frames

The following definitions specify how the three primary visual frames are operationalised in the systematic visual frame analysis conducted throughout the study. The analytical categories applied interpretively to the case study imagery are not intended as exhaustive or mutually exclusive descriptions of photographic meaning.

The Victim Frame deploys the subject as vulnerable and suffering, implicitly dependent on a third party for aid. The victim frame achieves its impact through the individualisation of the subject through identifiable and humanising components that convert into an emotionally legible person. Compositionally, the victim frame typically employs physical proximity, spatial isolation of the subject, as well as an absence of contextual markers, introducing political complexity to register emotions of grief and anguish. The victim frame is mostly associated with humanitarian response in this thesis, activating the identified victim effect theorised by Slovic et al. (2017).

The Hero/Martyr Frame presents the subject as one who has suffered but has transcended it through acts of defiance, survival or endurance. The subject is not simply a passive recipient of struggle but an active figure whose response calls on their community to recognise and act. Compositionally, the hero/martyr frame frequently involves an upward gaze or gesture, political or identity symbolism and the presence of suffering paired with resistance. The hero/martyr frame is most closely associated with communities with the capacity to mobilise politically in the study, generating intense response among audiences that share a political belief or identity, while simultaneously producing a limited cross-partisan empathic response.

The Threat Frame presents the subject as dangerous, a source of insecurity, requiring a response from the viewer or institutional actors. The threat frame motivates responses of security-seeking rather than empathy or humanitarian action. While the threat frame does not constitute a primary analytical category within the case studies examined, it does operate as a

counter-framing mechanism across several cases. Most notably, in the ideologically divided reception of Alan Kurdi, a nationalist media outlet reframed the photograph to emphasise the security implications of the refugee crisis over the humanitarian crisis.

The Witness Frame presents the subject's situation through documentation prioritising indexical authenticity over compositional construction. Where the victim and hero/martyr frames achieve their impact through deliberate aesthetic choices, the witness frame's power is derived from temporal completeness, and the viewer accompanies the event unfold in real time, rather than receiving an extracted moment. The witness frame typically involves the documentarian to be an unprofessional bystander, absent of compositional indicators that capture the authenticity of the testimony. In this thesis, the witness frame is applied to Darnella Frazier's recording of George Floyd's death, in which the emotional and political impact is generated by immediacy and duration of the visual media rather than the construction of its frame.