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Picture a Pandemic through Journalism

Innovating Visually to Regain Trust and Achieve Empathy

DORA SANTOS-SILVA

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Picture a Pandemic through Journalism: Innovating Visually to Regain Trust and Achieve Empathy

Dora Santos-Silva,[1] ICNOVA / NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented massive media coverage—an infodemic, as described by the World Health Organization (WHO). This environment of news overload and fatigue, a disorder of information, and an abundance of numbers and projections related to this health crisis was both a challenge and an opportunity for journalists to innovate in storytelling to rebuild trust, connect emotionally with the audience, and achieve empathy through storytelling. This article examines editorial strategies used in the journalistic coverage of COVID-19, focusing on visual storytelling to engage the users through trust and empathy. The corpus included feature stories with a solid visual component published in 2020 and 2021 in the New York Times, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021 in Public Service Reporting for the pandemic coverage. Findings show that trust is achieved visually through data visualizations with an explanatory approach and empathy through in collaborative stories and videos.

Keywords: Visual Storytelling, Empathy, Emotional Journalism, Media Innovation

Introduction

Users' apathy has been a challenge for journalists for many years. Since the media entered the digital environment with so many competitors, such as social media, partisan media, and disinformation, maintaining a relationship with users has become more complex because literally everyone demands their attention. So, the media have been innovating for many reasons: to expand the brand, engage users, achieve sustainability, seeking "new combinations," using Joseph Schumpeter's ([1934] 2012, 78) words to define innovation. But now, they also must get people's attention to their reason for existence, regain their trust and authority in the news field, and draw their attention to what matters the most through empathy. Visual storytelling may have a role in this.

Storytelling is understood as "a set of techniques and strategies used to tell and share a story to create added value to the news and generate public interest" (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2020, 72), allowing any type of language and format. In that case, a visual story is told primarily through visual media, such as photographs, videos, illustrations, infographics, or data visualizations.

The media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to journalists. In addition to the daily news, which caused an overload of information and potential indifference, there was a need to go further, explaining what that abundance of data meant—what was going on in hospitals, in homes, on the streets, how to show death—in a more in-depth, long format coverage, which is included in a category of journalism defined as feature journalism or feature stories. These stories, in a digital environment, also needed a significant visual component. Consequently, there was a need to innovate visually because, on the one hand, we had the traditional visual framing potential of a catastrophe, such as deaths and hospitals; and on the other hand, new forms of storytelling based on visualizations of actual data and projections.

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[1] Corresponding Author: Dora Santos-Silva, Avenida de Berna 26-C, Communication Sciences Department, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade NOVA de Lisboa (NOVA FCSH), Lisboa, 1069-061, Portugal. email: dorasantossilva@fcsh.unl.pt

This article examines the editorial strategies used in feature stories with a solid visual component to engage users through trust and empathy published in the *New York Times* in two moments of 2020 and 2021. We started from the hypothesis that the characteristics of this health crisis and the professional skills needed to cover it, from dealing with data and projections, interviewing experts and daily relating to institutional sources, was an opportunity for journalists to regain authority and innovate in storytelling. Two research questions are addressed: 1) How are the media picturing the pandemic to regain users' trust? 2) How are the media picturing the pandemic to achieve empathy?

Findings show that trust is achieved visually through data visualizations with an explanatory approach and empathy through amateur photos in collaborative stories and videos.

Rebuilding Trust in Journalism

In January 2020, three months before the pandemic explosion, Richard Fletcher, a Senior Research Fellow of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, predicted that trust in the news would worsen before getting better: "When it comes to public trust in the news media, it seems things tend to get worse before they start to get better" (Fletcher 2020, 31). Fletcher was simply observing data from *Digital News Report* 2020, Reuters' Institute annual report, about national levels of trust in the news media across eighteen countries since 2015: they had fallen by an average of five percentage points. In the last years, research has been suggesting that media trust is falling or that a high percentage of people are news avoiders or do not trust the news (Strömbäck et al. 2020).

Although it is not clear, as Anya Schiffrin (2019) stresses, to what extent digital technology has damaged trust in media, we can point out some changes in the digital environment that have impacted journalism's credibility. First, there has never been so much information available from so many different sources; traditional news media are no longer the only channel to reach the public and have to compete with literally everybody to get their attention, including partisan media, political actors, and other players actively engaged in precisely undermine news media trust. Second, social media are highly engaged and become the primary way for the public to access the news since the news media started giving away their content for free on these platforms. Third, information disorder is a challenge both for citizens, who cannot always distinguish fake news from real news and are highly influenced in this polarized era, and the news media, that share some of the platforms where this misinformation is spread (and also contribute to that sometimes). The result of all this is a fragmented audience, confronted with an excessive amount of information at the surface, or news overload, relying less on traditional media as a source of information and choosing the ones that "confirm their attitudes and beliefs" (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 140).

A news media ecosystem that people believe in is essential to democracy; at the same time, trustworthy news media implies that they fulfil the primary purpose of journalism: "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2004, 16). So regaining people's trust in the news is essential. The question is how to do that.

A recent report by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, entitled *Overcoming Indifference: What Attitudes towards News Tell Us about Building Trust*, throws another key variant into the discussion:

> The challenge news media and journalists face if they want to earn the trust of this part of the public is not necessarily overcoming entrenched hostility but addressing something perhaps even more insidious: indifference. The issue here is not so much a deep-seated difference of opinion over the value of news so much as a relative lack of interest in what news is or ought to be. (Toff et al. 2021, 60)

The research team examined three groups of people with different levels of trust about the media: "generally untrusting," "selectively trusting," and "generally trusting." They found that the first one tends to be the least knowledgeable about journalism, the most disengaged from how it is practiced, and the least interested in the editorial decisions. This group is indifferent to journalists and journalism. Although it is not entirely in the hands of journalists to change that (disinformation, politicians, and organizations in some countries also contribute to the lack of trust), Fletcher (2020, 31) argued that, in the end, it is a matter of quality: "people with low trust in the news media don´t want it to be fundamentally different—they just want it to be better."

Emotions and Empathy in Visual Storytelling

One of the ways for the news media to reconnect with their audience is through emotions. It is not a word related to sensationalist journalism or clickbait titles. It plays a central role in journalism that seeks to rebuild an emotional connection with their audience to regain their trust and provoke emotions, like empathy, regarding some news. Trust is actually a basic emotion.

We can integrate this approach into the idea of an "emotional turn," an expression created by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2020, 75) to encompass the "increasingly nuanced and diverse investigation of the role of emotion across contexts of production, text and audience engagement with journalism," although emotion has been seen as a threat to journalism's standards and research about it is still scarce. Wahl-Jorgensen argues that journalism has always taken into account the role of emotion and this has been further enhanced in a digital environment: in production contexts, that is the way journalists relate to sources (for example, in traumatic contexts) or anticipate audience reactions to specific photographs, stories, or newspaper covers; in narrative structures, for example, combating indifference and evoking emotions such as empathy, sadness, joy, enthusiasm; and in the involvement of the audiences, that is in the reinforcement or creation of a tie with them. Seven years earlier, this researcher was already talking about a "strategic ritual of emotionality" in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 129). She analyzed Pulitzer Prize-winning articles between 1995 and 2011 and concluded that emotion was present in multiple ways, including anecdotal leads, personalized storytelling, and expressions of affect.

Charlie Beckett and Mark Deuze (2016, 1) also consider emotion to be a "crucial building block of good journalism": it can be used, for example, to create the user's engagement experience with the news and retain their attention. For that, we need to understand what drives users to respond, share, comment, and engage. We know that the media are predominantly mobile and personalized; we are deeply attached to them; journalism is part of people's lives because it is in those platforms. According to the authors, the news can expand the user's level of choice, information, involvement, and understanding, but also be confusing, disorientating, and even upsetting, leading to a disconnection between journalism and its publics.

Empathy is a mediation that facilitates seeing someone else's perspective, feelings, and experiences. In visual storytelling, empathy became the center of the conversation with virtual reality and 360º videos because of the possibility of putting the user in a virtual space, but the media do not have the sources to do that often. Empathy can also be achieved with other visual resources.

There are numerous conceptualizations of empathy, but within social psychology, it may refer to an emotional or cognitive response (Hodges and Myers 2007). Emotional empathy has three components: first, feeling the same emotion as another person; second, referring to one's feelings of distress in response to perceiving another's plight; and third, feeling compassion for another person. Cognitive empathy, on the other hand, assumes we cannot access other people's minds, so it "refers to the extent to which we perceive or have evidence that we have successfully guessed someone else's thoughts and feelings" (Hodges and Myers 2007, 297).

Sometimes, empathy is used synonymously with sympathy. Still, Hodges and Myers (2007, 296) explain the difference between these two emotions: "empathy is often defined as understanding another person's experience by imagining oneself in that other person's situation: One understands the other person's experience as if it were being experienced by the self, but without the self actually experiencing it. A distinction is maintained between self and other. Sympathy, in contrast, involves the experience of being moved by, or responding in tune with, another person."

The most used definition of empathy in recent scientific articles in the field of media (related to virtual reality), according to Foxman, Markowitz, and Davis (2021), is from Mark Davis. He described it as one's responsiveness to the experiences of others and the ability to relate to others' points of view or perspective-taking. This American researcher in behavioral science is also known for his development of a multidimensional individual difference measure of empathy (the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, IRI) that took into account both cognitive and emotional responses: "Rather than treating empathy as a single unipolar construct 8i.e., as either cognitive or emotional), the rationale underlying the IRI is that empathy can best be considered as a set of constructs, related in that they all concern responsivity to others but are also clearly discriminable from each other" (Davis 1983, 113).

Foxman, Markowitz, and Davis (2021) show that, in the media field, empathy is a social, psychological, and technological phenomenon and propose the following definition that we take into account for this article: "Empathy is a psychosocial dynamic that, when mediated, can facilitate proxying the thoughts, feelings, experiences, sensitivities, or perspectives of another entity, to the degree that technology behaviour and social characteristics make such perspective-taking salient" (Foxman, Markowitz, and Davis 2021, 2183).

Recently there has been great enthusiasm for generating empathy through immersive media, especially virtual reality and 360º videos, because they allow users to walk in someone else's shoes. For example, it is possible to experience the lives of the prison population, such as in the *Guardian's* "6x9: A Virtual Experience of Solitary Confinement,"[2] released in 2016; or to be at a Syrian refugee camp, following a day in the life of a 12-year-old girl named Sidra, with the virtual reality short movie *Clouds Over Sidra,*[3] released in 2015. The metaphor "empathy machine" started to be used in association with virtual reality after the enthusiastic speech of Chris Milk, the director of *Clouds over Sidra*, in a Ted Talk entitled "How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine" (Milk 2015). He argued: "[Virtual reality] connects humans to other humans in a profound way I've never before seen in any other form of media, and it can change people's perception of each other" (Milk 2015).

However, in the visual storytelling field, research on empathy overflows technology. We cannot forget that the expression "empathy machine" used by Milk was probably inspired by the American film critic Roger Ebert, who said, early in 2005, "Movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts."

For example, in an experimental study in the scope of a doctoral thesis (Midberry 2016) with the purpose of investigating whether a human-cost-of-war frame versus a militarism frame of images from the conflict of Syria would evoke more significant amounts of empathy and prosocial behavior, findings reveal that the visual frame has substantial effects on the level of empathy participants experienced. Participants who viewed images with the various human-cost-of-war (human suffering) visual frames reported higher levels of empathy and were more likely to seek out additional information about the conflict than participants who viewed images with a militarism frame (soldiers, military actions, etc.).

Findings from another study in the USA show that the reader needs empathetic connection when dealing with large-scale distant suffering, such as the case in the study: mass violence in

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2016/apr/27/6x9-a-virtual-experience-of-solitary-confinement.
[3] https://www.with.in/watch/clouds-over-sidra/.

Africa. Stories with personification, followed by those with photographic images, had the most vigorous emotional response on readers; simply reporting the news is insufficient (Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga 2017).

COVID-19: An Opportunity for Visual Stories

As the World Health Organization (WHO) and other entities, including the United Nations, UNICEF and UNESCO, highlighted in a joint statement in September 2020, COVID-19 is the first pandemic in history mediated on a massive scale by digital technologies and social media. Consequently, the same technology that allows citizens to keep connected and informed is "enabling and amplifying an infodemic that continues to undermine the global response and jeopardizes measures to control the pandemic" (WHO 2020). The word "infodemic" was first used by WHO in February 2020 to describe an "an over-abundance of information—some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it."

In this context, COVID-19 was both an opportunity and a challenge for journalists: on the one hand, citizens needed to stay informed and seek credible sources and, consequently, journalists had a chance to re-establish a bond and gain credibility and trust; studies on news behavior in times of crisis show that people need more information. On the other hand, an information overload can lead to news avoidance or apathy.

Recent research on news behavior regarding COVID-19 in the Netherlands (Bruin et al. 2021) and the UK (Kalogeropoulos, Fletcher, and Nielsen 2020) show that people consumed more news in the first months of the pandemic and looked for information in a variety of sources. Still, there was an increase in people avoiding the news in the following months due to information overload and news fatigue.

At the end of September 2021, the cumulative number of COVID-19 confirmed cases had reached 231 million, and the cumulative number of deaths was more than 4.7 million (WHO 2021). The first death was reported in early January 2019 in Wuhan, China, and three months later one million people worldwide have already been infected. From the beginning, journalists had to rely on official sources to report the number of virus cases, deaths, recoveries, among other numbers, and specialists to share projections on the virus's progression or the impact on the economy.

The most important and regular information about COVID-19 was data-driven, meaning related to numbers: number of infected citizens, number of deaths, number of patients hospitalized or in the ICU, tests administered, vaccine trials, local or international numbers, projections. This was also a challenge because "behavioral research suggests that this kind of information can diminish empathy" (Maier, Slovic, and Mayorga 2017, 1015). People more readily respond to a single person in desperate need than to mass suffering. These researchers define this as a paradoxical response but also a cautionary lesson: while statistics can be used to convey the enormity of a crisis, they also may overwhelm and thereby undermine response.

In this scope, data journalism, data visualization, and explanatory journalism were innovative editorial strategies used by newsrooms to make sense of these numbers. To explain is to go beyond delivering information to audiences: "[to] tell audiences what the news means" (Ryfe 2019, 206). Journalists also bridged the gap between experts and audiences. Data stories or data storytelling are a new form of storytelling: "data journalism as a process has the ability to reveal the story within data, and data visualization as a product—a visual representation— enables its users to see this story" (Weber, Engebretsen, and Kennedy 2018, 191). In this new form of storytelling, data is the core of the story. There are new structures and forms of story design, different kinds of interactivity, visual communication is gaining center stage, and a compelling visual design is more successful than text-centric stories (Weber, Engebretsen, and Kennedy 2018). There are also two other important features: the meta-story, i.e., the

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transparency of the data, and new communicative purposes, such as explaining and "argu[ing] visually by providing empirical evidence" (Weber, Engebretsen, and Kennedy 2018, 198), which can be related to communicating the truth.

Pentzold, Fechner, and Zuber (2021) also speak of predictive newsmaking as part of the work because covering COVID-19 was based on estimates of the virus's progression: "the crisis offered an opportunity to demonstrate data journalism's ability to provide useful forecasts that rest on the best available data and calculations and outshine less rigorous forms of projection" (Pentzold, Fechner, and Zuber 2021, 1370). Wu (2021, 1314) also points out two tendencies in the news writing and presentation stage: "to use data as an explanation in the story rather than the crux of the story, and to rely on experts to convey what the data means." Data visualization is also related to credibility. Melike Uluçay, Melek, and Özyurda-Ergen (2020), who investigated the role that data visuals in media coverage played on the risk perception of the public during COVID-19 in Turkey, found that the users do not question the credibility and reliability of the data presented in visuals and perceive several risk elements on them related to the pandemic.

In this environment, there was a need to innovate visually: on the one hand, there was the traditional visual framing potential of a catastrophe, such as deaths, hospitals; and on the other hand, new forms of storytelling based on visualizations of accurate data and projections.

Research Design

This article examines the editorial strategies used in the feature stories with a solid visual component to engage the users through trust and empathy published in the *New York Times* in two moments of 2020 and 2021: between March 1 and May 31, 2020, and the same period in 2021. The first period was chosen because it corresponds to the first international media peak concerning COVID-19, arising from the need to inform and explain to users what was happening: the first significant feature stories were published in it. The second was chosen to correspond to the same period in 2021 and another media peak in several countries (many entered second confinement).

We considered a feature story a journalistic piece that does not fit in the "hard news" category because it deepens a topic, explains, reports, or profiles a person. A feature story with a robust visual component is considered a story primarily told by visual media (in this case is a visual story) or a story where visual media are essential for its understanding or presentation.

We started from the hypothesis that the characteristics of this health crisis and the professional skills needed to cover it, from dealing with data and projections, interviewing experts, and daily relating to institutional sources, was an opportunity for journalists to regain authority and innovate in storytelling. Two research questions are addressed: 1) How are the media picturing the pandemic to regain users' trust? 2) How are the media picturing the pandemic to achieve empathy?

In addition to being a reference newspaper with a history of innovation, the *New York Times* was chosen as a case study for three other reasons: first, it won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021 in Public Service Reporting for the coverage of COVID-19, in addition to awards also related to pandemic coverage, such as the Murrow Award for the video *Lord Have Mercy: Inside One of New York's Deadliest ZIP Codes*[4] or being a finalist in an Online Journalism Award 2021 for the feature series *Tracking COVID-19 in American Nursing Homes*[5]; second, it has a history of awards in visual storytelling; third, it compiled and released for free series data from state and local governments and health departments in an attempt to provide a complete record of the ongoing outbreak.

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[4] https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007097093/coronavirus-st-johns-hospital-far-rockaway.html.
[5] Access the project entry in https://awards.journalists.org/entries/tracking-covid-19-in-american-nursing-homes/.

Findings and Discussion

Between March 1, 2020, and May 31, 2020, the *New York Times* published 7,224 articles, 248 interactive graphics, and 283 videos on the topic COVID. In the same period, in 2021, 3,051 articles, 152 interactive graphics, one image slideshow, and 148 videos. These are the data that appear if we search by the topic COVID in the media search field. It is clear that not all visual formats correspond to the *New York Times*' production. Most of the articles in the interactive graphics section correspond to daily maps with the distribution of infection and deaths by COVID-19 by US state.

Due to many articles, we selected the feature stories with a vital visual component that stood out in these periods: special reports, multimedia stories, and series. These kinds of pieces require preparation and teamwork. Any visual elements that were not the *New York Times*' production, as in the case of videos, were excluded. Videos that did not deepen topics, i.e., video news, were not considered. In total, we identified thirty-nine feature stories: twenty-five in 2020 and twenty-two in 2021. Eight are videos, nine are multimedia stories using two or more different visual media, three are focused on simulations with 3D web features, and nineteen are based on data visualizations (from bar charts and interactive maps to illustrations).

Whenever an article was part of a multimedia package or series (with the exception of videos, which have a life of their own), we considered only the multimedia package or series presentation, not counting the articles. Articles do not have a visual component that stands out. This is visible, for example, in the online memorial series "What Memory Looks Like"[6] (April 6, 2021), which includes fifty-four articles, or "Who We Lost"[7] (March 5, 2021), which included approximately forty interviews. The series visual presentation reverses the logic, bringing all the articles together and highlighting the visual element of all. The findings allow us to identify five trends.

Two Approaches: Explanatory Visuals and Empathy Visuals

Most of the feature stories found are based on data visualizations with an explanatory function. The formats chosen to make sense of the data are primarily interactive or animated maps, bubble charts, illustrations, and line charts. They are feature stories with great depth, rigor in the numbers, and total transparency concerning the sources, reflected in the visuals, which only professionals can do. The same goes for feature pieces based on simulations with 3D web features: they explain a process or show something so that the users can understand it better. This suggests that this journalistic coverage, with innovative features and relying on the values that differentiate the journalism profession the most, could be a way for journalists to regain their authority and users' trust. The feature stories with a greater degree of empathy, making us see the impact of COVID-19 from the perspective of others, are primarily composed of portrait, amateur and ambience photos and videos.

Data Visualizations as a Guide, Roadmap, and New Approaches to Numbers

In line with the number of feature stories based on data visualizations, COVID-19's visual coverage was marked not by photographs but by infographics, interactive maps, and other ways of visualizing data, such as illustrations. These data visualizations had several functions: to guide the user through the story chronologically, to show changes over time and new approaches to numbers, to explain a process, or to make relations between numbers.

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[6] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/well/covid-death-grief-loss.html.
[7] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/05/us/covid-deaths.html.

For example, in the feature story "An Incalculable Loss"[8] (May 24, 2020) that the *New York Times* produced to mark the day when America has reached a grim milestone in the coronavirus outbreak, each figure represents one of the 100,00 lives lost until then. Some of the figures had a real name and a quote or micro profile. Navigation is marked by scrollytelling, and the user finds out how many people have died each month in the US from February to May through the visual stain that thickens and a text caption. The piece is visual-centric, not textual-centric, in that the texts are just a support for visual interpretation.

The story "How the Virus Got Out"[9] (March 22, 2020) is fully interactive. It represents the coronavirus spread visually, first in China, from that country to the rest of the world, and then within the US. The *New York Times* reporters analyzed the movements of hundreds of millions of people to show why the most extensive travel restrictions to stop an outbreak in human history haven't been enough. Data obtained from the movements of cell phones.

The feature story "Incarcerated and Infected: How the Virus Tore Through the U.S. Prison System"[10] (April 10, 2021) is a multimedia story where data visualizations stood out and is an example of a new approach to numbers. Starting in March of 2020, the *New York Times* reporters tracked every known coronavirus case in every correctional setting in the United States. They measured the pandemic's impact on prisoners using records requests and interviews with people from all corners of the system: people and their families, prison wardens, jailers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and civil rights groups. Through an interactive map, it is possible to visualize the number of Inmate infections, deaths and infection rates in US correctional facilities (federal and state) by state. Another graph, a line graph, shows us the infection rates in state prisons compared to infection rates in state populations.

Visual Stories Based on 3D Features with an Explanatory Approach

The feature stories identified in the sample based on simulations with 3D web features act as visual arguments or explain a process. "This 3-D Simulation Shows Why Social Distancing Is So Important"[11] (April 14, 2020) is an example of the first. Created using research data from the Kyoto Institute of Technology, it offers one view of what can happen when someone coughs indoors. Cough produces respiratory droplets of varying sizes. Larger droplets fall to the floor or break up into smaller droplets. Everything that has happened since then is visually simulated to demonstrate the reasons behind the imposition of social distance. The feature story "How Safe Are You from Covid When You Fly?"[12] (April 17, 2021) is a simulation of the interior of a plane and what happens inside when it is full of passengers to show how risky it may be to board a flight now, starting with how air circulates in a plane.

Death Visualized through Loss, Generating More Empathy This Way

Although this article does not compare visual coverage of health crises, it is evident that the digital resources allowed two innovative formats in the coverage of COVID-19: online memorials and collaborative narratives represented through amateur photographs or videos that citizens sent for journalists. Online memorials are series in which people who died are remembered—in the case of "Who We Lost" (March 5, 2021)—or objects that represent this loss, as in "What Memory Looks Like" (April 6, 2021). Therefore, these photographs sent by the citizens who have lost their relatives or share the objects representing their losses are amateur in most cases. As a result, visual narrative is collaborative because it results from a

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[8] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/24/us/us-coronavirus-deaths-100000.html.

[9] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/22/world/coronavirus-spread.html.

[10] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/10/us/covid-prison-outbreak.html.

[11] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/14/science/coronavirus-transmission-cough-6-feet-ar-ul.html.

[12] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/17/travel/flying-plane-covid-19-safety.html.

collaboration between journalists and citizens. Both are ways to generate more empathy because the photos are authentic, unfiltered, and users know they were sent by people who lost someone important to them. The visual presentation is usually in grid form. This is a new way of showing death, so ethically criticized in previous crises. This time, death is represented through online memorials and loss, that is, what death means for the ones that are alive.

Of course, identified visual coverage can be related to death or the suffering that COVID-19 causes, but the angle is the environment: hospitals, nursing homes, poor housing conditions, and everything that entails human resources to take care of these people. The goal is not to show death and suffering, focusing on the person, taking away their dignity. What we see is the hospitals' capacities being tested or the impact of living far from medical care The feature articles "The Bleak Heart of the World's Deadliest Coronavirus Outbreak"[13] (March 27, 2020) and "Behind the Lines of Britain's Covid War"[14] (March 1, 2021) are examples of these approaches.

Videos Placing the Users in Someone Else's Places

Five of the videos identified in the sample are part of the *New York Times* series *COVID-19 in America*. Others are simply indexed to the topic *Coronavirus Pandemic: Latest Episodes*. The special reports aim to place the users in an immersive environment as if they were in that space living what they see, close to the concept of "empathy machine". In "People Are Dying: 72 Hours Inside an N.Y.C. Battling Coronavirus Hospital"[15] (March 25, 2020), we have a rare insider's view of an overstretched ER in New York City, the epicenter of the country's COVID-19 outbreak. In "'Lord Have Mercy': Inside One of New York's Deadliest ZIP Codes"[16] (May 2022, 2020), the users accompany the professionals at St. John's Hospital in Far Rockaway from those picking up bodies that arrive in refrigerated trucks to those in the front line of care to those arriving at the hospital or those who are surrounded by patients intubated, especially the ones who came from nursing homes. Finally, in the video *"Essential" Migrant Farmworkers Risk Infection and Deportation*[17] (March 25, 2021), users are transported to fields where undocumented farmworkers work. Although they were considered a priority in the vaccination process, the *New York Times* reporters explain why they are so difficult to reach.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed editorial strategies used in the journalistic coverage of COVID-19, focusing on visual storytelling to engage the users through trust and empathy. The corpus included feature stories with a solid visual component published in 2020 and 2021 in the *New York Times*. The theoretical framework showed that trust levels are falling. The digital environment played a role in this decline because of the number of information sources that fight for users' attention and the phenomena of news overload and consequent news avoidance and users' indifference. This article also advances some lines of research that focus on the role that emotions can play in building trust and empathy.

Based on these assumptions, it was shown how COVID-19 has already proved to be an opportunity to innovate in journalistic coverage due to the characteristics of this health crisis that require professional work such as dealing with data, projections, deaths, and presenting

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[13] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/27/world/europe/coronavirus-italy-bergamo.html.

[14] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/01/world/europe/uk-covid-pandemic.html.

[15] https://www.nytimes.com/video/nyregion/100000007052136/coronavirus-elmhurst-hospital-queens.html.

[16] https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007097093/coronavirus-st-johns-hospital-far-rockaway.html.

[17] https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007583626/covid-vaccine-undocumented-farm-workers.html.

them through visual stories. This showed the need to innovate visually and, therefore, the legitimacy of this research.

Findings show that visual communication is gaining center stage in journalistic storytelling. The thirty-nine identified feature stories are, for the most part, visual-centric. Feature stories with a solid visual component on COVID-19 can be divided into explanatory visuals and empathy visuals. In the first case, most are data visualizations intended to guide, explain or guide the user. Feature stories that generate the most empathy use amateur photos given by citizens who lost their relatives for online memorials published by the *New York Times*. Another way to reach empathy is through videos that put the users in someone else's places, mostly in hospitals, in the skin of health professionals.

Findings suggest that the *New York Times* used visual stories to regain trust and reach empathy. In fact, the media brand confirms this idea in the justification they give for some of their most notable projects in the COVID-19 coverage.

> The coronavirus pandemic has forced us to act during a time of tremendous uncertainty. At the beginning, little was known about the virus itself or how it was moving around the world. We didn't know who was dying or why. We didn't know what we should do. Our visual stories filled in the gaps for readers at crucial moments by painstakingly uncovering new information and presenting it as a thoughtful mix of words and graphics. Each piece involved tireless original reporting, and required painstaking work to find data far beyond what was available from official sources. Graphics were central explanatory elements of the work, leveraging the internet's full potential to help people understand such a vast story. And each story drew impassioned responses from patients, family members and officials. (New York Times, 2020)

About specifically reaching empathy, the *New York Times* argues: "Our memorial to 1,000 Americans who lost their lives to the coronavirus provoked an outpouring of empathy and became an emblem of our collective grief" (The New York Times, 2020).

Lastly, regaining the users' trust means users become empathetic with journalists' work, perspectives, and values. So, in the end, being an umbrella emotion, empathy can be the most significant challenge for journalism.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dora Santos Silva: Assistant Professor, Communication Sciences Department, NOVA University of Lisbon—School of Social Sciences and Humanities (NOVA FCSH), Lisboa, Portugal

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