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The semiotics of images in healthcare settings: documentary ethics and institutional communication in the third sector.

The semiotics of the image in healthcare environments: documentary ethics and institutional communication in the third sector

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SUMMARY

This article examines the intersection between visual semiotics, documentary ethics, and Public Relations in the context of Third Sector healthcare institutions. The research problematizes the construction of photographic narratives in hospital environments, highlighting the tension between the structural need to raise philanthropic funds and the categorical imperative to preserve patient dignity. Through scrutiny grounded in sign theory, the sociology of communication, and bioethics, the study proposes guidelines to mitigate the overexposure of vulnerability. The essay demonstrates how the strategic management of corporate image and the standardization of iconographic collections sent to the press are vital to establishing a communicational ecosystem based on resilience, replacing the rhetoric of trauma with a visual pedagogy of hope and agency.

Keywords: Visual Semiotics; Documentary Ethics; Institutional Communication; Third Sector; Health Photography.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersection of visual semiotics, documentary ethics, and Public Relations within healthcare institutions in the Third Sector. The investigation problematizes the construction of photographic narratives in hospital environments, tensioning the structural need for philanthropic fundraising with the categorical imperative of preserving patient dignity. Through scrutiny grounded in sign theory, communication sociology, and bioethics, the study proposes guidelines for mitigating the overexposure of vulnerability. The essay demonstrates how the strategic management of corporate image and the standardization of iconographic collections sent to the press are vital to establishing a resilient communication ecosystem, replacing the rhetoric of trauma with a visual pedagogy of hope and agency.

Keywords: Visual Semiotics; Documentary Ethics; Institutional Communication; Third Sector; Healthcare Photography.

INTRODUCTION

Image production in healthcare settings operates in a zone of extreme epistemic sensitivity.

and moral, in which the photographic lens acts simultaneously as an instrument of clinical recording,

A tool for social mobilization and a vector for building institutional reputation. Within the scope of

Third Sector, philanthropic organizations intrinsically depend on visibility for the

sustainability of their projects, using documentary photography and photojournalism as bridges.

Cognitive differences arise between the reality of the hospital bed and civil society. However, this visual transposition...

It requires a methodological rigor that transcends mere photographic technique, entering the domains of...

bioethics and communication theory, in order to prevent the legitimization of a social cause from occurring to

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at the cost of the objectification of the sick individual. The analysis of this phenomenon requires the application of analytical tools of visual semiotics to decode how the signs of illness, of
Care and healing are structured and interpreted by the public. Classic and contemporary authors.
They warn of the polysemy inherent in photography, in which the denotative message is often
subverted by pre-existing cultural connotations. The central challenge of Public Relations.
Contemporary art consists of orchestrating a visual narrative that, without omitting the gravity of the paintings,
Clinically, let's encode resilience and hope. This scientific essay proposes to dissect the mechanisms.
from this discursive construction, establishing parameters for institutional communication that
Harmonize persuasive effectiveness, corporate standardization, and the inalienable respect for vulnerability.
human.

1. Semiotic Foundations of Medical and Documentary Photography

Decoding images in healthcare contexts requires, first and foremost, the application of the triad.
Peircean (icon, index, and symbol), since clinical photography continuously transitions between
these three categories of the sign (Peirce, 2005). The representation of a weakened body acts
iconographically due to the morphological similarity, but its communicative power lies in its
Indexical nature: the image is the physical trace of the illness or trauma that occurred in front of the lens.
When transferred to the promotional material of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO),
this same image ascends to the category of symbol, coming to represent abstract concepts such as
"need," "charity," or "hope," depending on the textual anchoring adopted by the team of
communication.
Roland Barthes (1980), in his digressions on the phenomenology of the image, establishes the dialectic.
between the *studium* (cultural and informational interest) and the *punctum* (the detail that wounds and pierces the
(observer). In documentary hospital photography, the structural risk lies in the probability of a
pathology or invasive medical apparatus completely capture the viewer's gaze, transforming the
pain in the only possible *punctum* . Visual semiotics applied to health seeks to balance these elements.
ensuring that the *studium* (the context of humanized care and the institution's infrastructure)
Do not be overshadowed by the stark visual impact of isolated suffering.
Historically, the photographic gaze upon the clinical environment has been influenced by what Foucault...
(1979) termed it "clinical gaze" (or anatomical-clinical gaze), characterized by the objectification of
The patient is reduced to a biological anomaly or an object of scientific study. The transition from
Purely medical photography, when used in documentary photography geared towards Public Relations, requires...
Deconstructing this hygienist paradigm. The lens must shift the focus from the symptom to the subject.

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by incorporating individuality and subjectivity into the composition, elements that have been historically suppressed.
from 19th-century pathology textbooks.

Susan Sontag (2003), in criticizing the cultural metaphors attributed to illnesses, warns about the
The destructive power of stigmatizing representations. In Third Sector communication, literacy
The visual presentation of content creators is imperative to avoid perpetuating archetypes that associate
Certain illnesses are linked to irremediable fatality or moral guilt. The selection of framing, the distance
Focal length and depth of field are syntactic choices that determine whether the patient will be read as
passive victim of circumstances or active protagonist of one's own therapeutic process.

Therefore, the construction of iconographic collections by philanthropic institutions constitutes an exercise.
Advanced pragmatics of signs. The effectiveness of the message depends on a deep understanding.
...how the audience deciphers equipment, uniforms, and facial expressions. A simple venous access.
Peripheral lighting, depending on the lighting and angle used, can indicate the beginning of recovery.
Pharmacological or the pinnacle of helplessness. Controlling this polysemy is the core of the responsibility.
communicational, requiring Public Relations departments to act not only as
media disseminators, but also semiotic curators of others' pain.

2. THE ETHICAL FRONTIER: VULNERABILITY VERSUS SENSATIONALISM

Photographic practice in intensive care units, wards, and outpatient clinics clashes.
inevitably, this is in line with the dictates of bioethics, which requires the formulation of a visual deontology.
Specifically, the photographic representation of individuals temporarily deprived of their autonomy.
Physical and, at times, cognitive limitations impose the need to safeguard human dignity above all else.
any fundraising goal. Kantian ethics, applied to this scope, dictates that the
The patient can never be instrumentalized; that is, their image cannot be used exclusively.
as a means to a corporate end, even if the ultimate goal is to make the hospital viable.

The phenomenon academically criticized as *Poverty* Porn or exploitation.
Trauma finds fertile ground in unregulated philanthropic communication. Chouliaraki (2006)
describes how the hypervisibility of extreme and stark suffering is used as a tactic of
Shock is used to provoke instant altruism. However, the overexposure of human misery generates...
In the medium term, what sociology defines as "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999). The public,
bombarded by degrading visual stimuli, he develops cognitive desensitization.
Neutralizing empathy and transforming documented pain into mere background noise in the ecosystem.
media-savvy.

To counteract this sensationalist drift, the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE)

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The use of one's image must evolve from a mere legal shield into an ongoing ethical contract. - Martha
Rosler (1981), a leading figure in the critique of traditional documentary photography, questions the asymmetry of power.
between the person holding the camera and the person confined to the bed. Real informed consent.
This assumes that the person being photographed understands the nuances of the digital circulation of their image. Institutions
Leading-edge thinkers have adopted renewable or time-limited consent, recognizing that
A recovered individual may not wish for their past vulnerability to be perpetuated.
aeternum in the organization's campaigns.
Mitigating sensationalism is also achieved through the rhetoric of omission or omission.
(hors-champ) frame . The decision about what should be excluded from the display is as crucial as the
of selecting what will be framed. Photographing the hands clasped between a nurse and a patient.
in a terminal state, setting aside the face disfigured by the illness, constitutes an ethical choice that
It preserves the subject's identity while communicating, with extreme symbolic power, excellence.
of the palliative care provided by the institution. Visual modesty is not antagonistic to information.
documentary; on the contrary, it elevates the quality of communication by demanding greater poetic sophistication.
and metaphorical, from the photographer's perspective.

Standardizing the code of conduct for photojournalists and contracted *freelancers* is, therefore...
Therefore, it is non-negotiable. The communications department must establish strict protocols that
prohibit the intrusion of moments of acute emotional fragility, such as immediate grief or
Invasive resuscitation procedures. The role of Public Relations, in this context, is to shield
the patient against the predatory impulse of news images, ensuring that the generated collection reflects
A humanistic approach to documentation, guided by the premise that clinical fragility does not negate rights.
to reserve and decorum.

3. Public Relations and the Construction of a Resilience Narrative

Public Relations, viewed through the lens of the two-way symmetrical model proposed by Grunig and Hunt.
(1984), work in the Third Sector as architects of institutional dialogues based on transparency.
and in mutual benefit. Transposing this model to the visual sphere implies the formulation of
campaigns that do not emotionally blackmail *stakeholders* (donors, partners, society and
(State), but invite them to participate in a rehabilitation process. The visual anchor of
Modern campaigns have undergone a methodological shift: the aesthetics of relentless scarcity are being replaced.
through the iconography of clinical confrontation and overcoming.
Framing Theory , originating from the sociology of Erving Goffman (1974) and
Further developed by Entman (1993) in media studies, it is the central theoretical tool in this transition.

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Framing a reality involves selecting certain aspects of a perceived situation and making them narrative.
The most salient points in a communicative text. When choosing slightly *low-angle* angles.
(From below upwards) or at eye level, documentary photography in healthcare gives the patient back the psychological empowerment. The person represented ceases to be a mere extra in their own tragedy and
It is now framed as a subject endowed with agency and the capacity for recovery, thanks to
Institutional support provided.
From the point of view of the grammar of the image, lighting and color schemes play important roles.
Fundamental syntactic elements in the construction of this narrative of hope. The illumination of institutions of
Health is often poorly managed, relying on high color temperature fluorescent lamps, which
It generates images that convey asepsis, isolation, and artificiality. The documentary photographer
A qualified professional subverts this spectrum by introducing warmer reflected lights or by taking advantage of...
Natural light enters through windows. The presence of earthy, golden, or sunny tones injects the
visual archetype of human life and comfort in environments whose architecture was designed
primarily for surgical functionality purposes.
Visual storytelling in philanthropic campaigns gains academic depth when structured in a way that ...
longitudinal form. The capture of a single moment of pain, static and decontextualized, is
semantically weak compared to a photographic series or an accompanying essay
The patient's journey. Showing the evolution, from diagnosis and treatment difficulties to...
Medical discharge and the return to family life forge a lasting emotional bond based on...
Tangible results. The donor doesn't just fund a hospital bed; they fund a successful outcome.
of an ongoing narrative.

This strategy does not mask the reality of suffering, but contextualizes it as a stage.
Transitional (when possible) embedded in an efficient solidarity network. Communication
Institutional structure, supported by these principles, consolidates the NGO's reputation as an entity.
decisive, ethical, and technically capable of transforming adverse social realities. The image of
Resilience, therefore, is not a deceptive advertising ploy, but a methodologically sound reflection.
built upon the institution's central purpose: to restore the health and autonomy of individuals under
your care.

4. Standardization and Management of Corporate Image in Healthcare

Maintaining an ethical and consistent corporate image requires that the company's visual communication...
The organization should not depend on improvisation or the peculiarities of isolated camera operators.
Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) state that visual identity alignment is the foundation of reputation.

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Corporate. In hospital settings within the Third Sector, this standardization manifests itself through from the creation of a Visual *Compliance* Manual . This normative document should detail the standards. technical, ethical, and aesthetic requirements, serving as a roadmap for the internal team of communication, press offices and partner media outlets.

Media relations is one of the most sensitive aspects of this management.

When news outlets request images to illustrate reports about overcrowding,

Due to endemic diseases or a lack of government resources, the institution risks having its physical space... used merely as a backdrop for systemic catastrophes. To protect itself, the Public Relations sector must maintain a rigorously curated institutional image bank (digital Press Kit),

Legally pre-approved and up-to-date. Proactive provision of high-quality iconographic material.

Technical quality discourages unauthorized fundraising and ensures that the institution controls the... main framing of the news story that will feature your name.

The management of metadata embedded in photographic files (IPTC and EXIF standards) emerges. as a crucial step in information governance. The handling of patient photographs

This constitutes the manipulation of sensitive data under the premises of contemporary legislation. data protection laws (such as the LGPD in Brazil or the GDPR in Europe). Rigorous cataloging should Include the deadline for informed consent, usage restrictions (e.g., images restricted to...). annual reports, but prohibited for social media) and the occlusion of textual information visible to The background of the images, such as medical records or monitors containing vital data of non-consenting third parties.

Internal training and visual literacy for clinical staff are mandatory extensions of this policy.

Standardization. With the ubiquity of *smartphones,* nurses and doctors are working,

inadvertently, as independent content producers in exclusion zones. The institution

It needs to engage its employees through regular training on crisis communication and

Digital ethics, clarifying the legal and reputational repercussions arising from non-publications.

Authorized on digital platforms. The visual manual must be integrated into the organizational culture. as a safety protocol as rigorous as hospital infection control standards.

In crisis management situations, such as allegations of malpractice or large-scale health crises, the

A pre-established policy of photographic standardization acts as a containment barrier.

An organization that has already built a visual foundation based on transparency and technical-ethical rigor possesses... greater reputational resilience. In these extreme circumstances, the release of institutional images

It cannot sound defensive, but it must function as expert documentary evidence of the integrity of the procedures adopted, endorsing, through photographic support, the official narrative of

Public relations.

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5. The Sociocognitive Impact of Philanthropic Campaigns

Philanthropic campaigns based on documentary photography transcend their immediate objective.
fundraising; they play a crucial educational role in shaping the imagination.
Social impact on public health. Cognitive psychology, combined with neuroscience, investigates how
Certain visual structures activate biological mechanisms of altruism. Studies on
Mirror neurons indicate that humans internally mimic the emotions expressed on faces.
observed. Photographs of patients exhibiting microexpressions of gratitude or serenity induce
A more constructive, empathetic response than images framed by terror, which can trigger...
Mechanisms of repulsion or cognitive avoidance as a defense mechanism for the viewer.
The theory of the "identifiable victim effect" (Slovic, 2007) corroborates the effectiveness of photojournalism.
humanized. Research shows that individuals are substantially more likely to perform
financial donations when faced with the image and individualized story of a single person,
to the detriment of statistical graphs or photographs of anonymous crowds in situations of
disaster. Excellent institutional photography understands this cognitive mechanism and acts in
The threshold between the singularity of the isolated case and the universality of the condition being addressed, making the
A financially viable systemic problem can be solved through an engaging connection with a unique individual.
Postcolonial and decolonial critiques of humanitarian photography have put these campaigns under strain.
To ensure the elimination of intersectional biases. In Third Sector actions focused on global health,
It is imperative to dismantle the iconography of the "white savior" *(white savior complex),* in which doctors
People from hegemonic nations are portrayed as active agents who save peripheral patients.
invariably victimized and passive. The new academic vanguard in Visual Communication demands
a horizontality in the representational plane, in which local communities, professionals
Native people and their families should be recognized as collaborative partners in restoring order.
sanitary.

This critical advance leads to the emerging concept of "participatory photography" or methodologies.
Collaborative visuals. Pioneering organizations are beginning to provide cameras directly to patients.
family members or members of the assisted community, reversing the logic of authorship and clinical oversight.
This epistemological inversion allows the narrative of recovery to be told in the first person.
Public Relations assumes a secondary curatorial role, ensuring that the generated collection...
Maintain the commercial viability of the campaign without compromising its non-negotiable authenticity.
The protagonist's perspective.
The responsibility of philanthropic institutions ultimately extends to the ecology of the ecosystem.
health information. The images released actively contribute to the destigmatization of conditions.

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chronic and psychiatric conditions in the eyes of the public. By designing campaigns that harmonize rigor
With its aesthetic values, inviolable ethics, and socio-cognitive validation, the Third Sector not only guarantees its...
Operational continuity; educates society about the complexities of human care.
Photography ceases to be a visual toll paid by the patient in exchange for treatment and becomes established.
as a documentary heritage that ennobles both the one who was healed and the one who...
He offered the tools for healing.

CONCLUSION

Research on the semiotics of images in healthcare settings reveals that the production of
Photographic collections for Third Sector institutions constitute one of the communication exercises.
Corporate governance is more complex and ethically demanding than ever before. As demonstrated
through the theoretical framework that links Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, and modern bioethics, the
The camera lens does not capture neutral ontological truths. It produces visually charged statements.
of indexical and symbolic weight, which have the tangible power to restore dignity or deepen the
Vulnerabilities of individuals situated in contexts of extreme clinical and existential fragility.
The ethical imperative of patient protection forms the indispensable backbone of any effort.
of public relations in this niche. The vehement refutation of sensationalist aesthetics and of
"Pornography of poverty" is not just a moral stance, but also a demand.
Scientific study grounded in the sociology of compassion. Emotional exhaustion caused by images.
Shocking and predatory tactics prove ineffective in the long run. Organizations are required to be more sophisticated.
intellectual property used to raise funds and government support, while respecting autonomy and consent.
dynamic of the individuals portrayed.

The shift in the discursive anchor, which moves the exclusive focus away from anatomical-clinical pathology towards
Human resilience and infrastructural excellence represent the maturation of strategies for
communication. The conscious manipulation of syntactic elements such as lighting, composition and
Depth of field, linked to the precepts of Framing Theory, enables...
Communicators design visual narratives that celebrate recovery and agency. This pedagogy
of hope, constructed through longitudinal images and contextualized narratives, alters
positively impact cognitive perceptions and the engagement of funders and civil society.
In parallel, the corporate management of these institutional images establishes the boundary between
Dangerous amateurism and safe professionalism. The implementation of visual *compliance* manuals,
meticulous indexing of metadata to ensure compliance with data protection legislation.
Data and the continuous visual literacy of internal teams form a vital institutional shield.

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By providing rigorously curated images to the external press, institutions mitigate the risk of that their charitable missions be distorted by invasive or purely editorial approaches. mercantilists, maintaining control over the emission and intention of their vital symbols. The ultimate impact of these policies goes beyond the microcosm of fundraising, reaching the... sociocultural superstructure. By adopting decolonial approaches and flirting with photography Through participation, the Third Sector reconstructs the iconography of collective care, eliminating asymmetries. of power and reductive archetypes. The philanthropic organization thus becomes a broadcaster responsible for public health, employing humanized photojournalism as a tool for combating chronic stigmas and educating the masses about the value of life and the supportive infrastructure of clinical support.

Given the socio-technical horizon that extends to the end of the current decade, it is predicted that the scrutiny The question of the authenticity and ethical integrity of the images will be intensified by the facilities provided by computational manipulation. However, the answers to the dilemmas of communication Hospitality does not reside in technological updates, but rather in deepening its roots. semiotic, anthropological, and philosophical aspects are discussed throughout this essay. The consolidation of Theoretical leadership in the field of visual communication will require, more than ever, unwavering advocacy. that the effectiveness of the institutional message is inseparably subordinate to complete respect, unconditional and unrestricted to the human condition.

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