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The Value of Photo Essays in News Communication: Postprint

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Abstract

As the media landscape evolves, audience demand for visual consumption continues to grow, increasingly highlighting the advantages of thematic photography in news communication. In many contexts, thematic photography proves more effective than text and even video in news dissemination—a consequence of both the compelling power of visual language and the integrity of comprehensive thematic photographic content. What, then, constitutes thematic photography? How should it be delimited? What are its constituent elements and expressive modalities? Grounded in practical application, this article undertakes a systematic examination of thematic photography with news reporting value, seeking to elucidate a clearer understanding of thematic photography and its value in news communication, and aiming to provide practically valuable reference for journalists and media editors engaged in thematic photography.

Full Text

The Value of Thematic Photography in News Communication

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Abstract: As the media landscape evolves, audience demand for visual content continues to grow, making the advantages of thematic photography in news communication increasingly prominent. In many cases, thematic photography proves more effective than text or even video for news transmission—a result of both the compelling power of visual language and the completeness of thematic photographic content. What, then, is thematic photography? How should it be defined? What are its constituent elements and modes of expression? Grounded in practical experience, this paper provides a fundamental examination of thematic photography with news value, aiming to clarify our understanding of thematic photography and its value in news communication. It is hoped that

this will offer practical reference for journalists and media editors engaged in thematic photography.

Keywords: thematic photography; news photography; shooting principles; photo editing; news communication

1. What is Thematic Photography?

Conceptually, thematic photography employs photographic techniques and a combination of images and text to concentrate on elaborating a single theme, providing complete, detailed, and profound depiction of the subject's spiritual essence and the nature of events. This approach enables relatively comprehensive, general, and in-depth reflection of the developmental process and outcomes of a subject [?]. Formally, thematic photography uses images as its primary medium, comprising multiple photographs accompanied by necessary textual elements such as titles, overviews, and captions. In terms of content, thematic photography presents a theme within objective reality through a 专题 approach, characterized by clear thematic focus, complete content, and in-depth expression. Categorically, it can be divided into documentary thematic photography and artistic thematic photography. Documentary thematic photography aims primarily to record objective real life, expressing actual conditions as its principle, and possesses characteristics of objective authenticity. Artistic thematic photography is based on the artist's subjective ideas as its creative purpose, representing a form of artistic expression through photographic means to convey thoughts and concepts. Thematic photography serving news communication mostly falls within the category of documentary thematic photography, with that possessing news attributes being termed news thematic photography. News thematic photography is a news reporting form directed at specific real-world subjects through interview, shooting, and editing, expressing news themes for communicative purposes with timeliness, objective documentation, and 传播 intent.

Examining the content and formal composition of thematic photography, the greatest distinguishing feature of documentary thematic photography from other photographic creations is its complete thematic expression and in-depth content 刻画, forming an organic combination of multiple images supplemented by titles, overviews, and caption text. Compared to single-image photography, thematic photography works must carry greater information volume and more explicit ideological viewpoints, consequently requiring greater shooting effort and higher standards. Documentary thematic photography possesses both news value and the capacity to downplay news characteristics, with shooting methods varying significantly depending on the content being expressed. When photographing a fixed objective subject, planning and preparation can be implemented systematically. Such projects allow relatively long shooting periods, with creative processes often spanning temporal and geographical limitations. For instance,

thematic photography projects such as Li Shaobai' s *The Great Wall* from the late 20th century, Li Nan' s *The Last Generation of Women with Bound Feet*, and Wang Fuchun' s *Chinese on the Train* were not completed in short time-frames [?]. Conversely, thematic photography of breaking news events does not afford photographers sufficient time and conditions, requiring them to capture the progression and typical content of emergencies as quickly as possible, then conduct supplementary shooting based on the captured material.

From the perspective of content and formal composition, thematic photography in news communication provides readers with more complete visual reading and deeper reflection, representing a preferred news creation and reporting method for many photojournalists and a frequently adopted news communication form by newspapers, periodicals, and online media. Although thematic photography takes the form of multiple images—ranging from as few as three to five to as many as over a hundred—not all photo series qualify as thematic photography. Ordinary photo series lack clear thematic expression, do not constitute a complete thematic story, and lack reasonable logical relationships and content unity among images. Such series cannot be called thematic photography. The fundamental difference between photo series and thematic photography lies in the former' s lack of in-depth consideration of an interview subject and the complete, unified expression formed through images and text. The basic conditions for thematic photography used in news communication include newsworthiness, thematic quality, visual expressiveness, and effective combination of images and text.

2. Principles of Thematic Photography Shooting

To explore the communicative value of thematic photography, it is necessary to understand its creative principles and examine its expressive power, thereby better utilizing and maximizing the role of thematic photography in news communication. Based on an analysis of the creative principles and expressive power of news thematic photography, this discussion excludes documentary and artistic thematic photography without news purposes.

News thematic photography is, first and foremost, a form of creative labor conducted under the premise of following news principles; therefore, it cannot and should not be defined by absolute rules. The scientific approach is to study and master the creative principles of news thematic photography, enabling practitioners to enhance news awareness and shooting capabilities, thereby creating excellent news thematic photography works. Following news principles requires adherence to authenticity and objectivity. Authenticity represents respect for news facts, while objectivity is the attitude toward reporting news.

Second, thematic photography must follow the compositional principles of prominent themes and complete content. A news thematic photography work resembles an article, possessing a theme, a content core, and a complete story. Interviewing and shooting must achieve clear themes, prominent cores,

and complete content, while visual expression and composition must feature typical image imagery, reasonable logical relationships, and appropriate textual expression.

Third, strengthening planning and improving shooting capabilities are essential. Necessary planning and preparation before shooting cannot be omitted. Thematic photography interviewing and shooting present a news subject from multiple perspectives and levels. Key tests of a photographer's thematic capabilities, experience, and skill include how to shoot a thematic photo series, how to design individual shots, and what issues to note when encountering breaking events. Thematic photography creation typically requires photographers to first understand background information about the subject, mastering relevant materials including visual documentation. Simultaneously, planning around the theme is necessary, including how to refine the theme, how to shoot the main image, how to arrange related shots, and how to approach the subject.

When encountering breaking events with reporting value, a photographer's first reaction should be reaching the scene as quickly as possible, getting as close as possible to key people and events, and capturing valuable content as rapidly as possible, followed by supplementary shooting of relevant information when conditions permit.

To produce excellent thematic photography works, relevant technical capabilities are crucial. Photographers must master and skillfully employ photography's unique visual language. Photographic works are created through camera functions, with image frames formed through optical and imaging principles—such as the 虚实 effects of imagery, the 画面 exaggeration produced by wide-angle lenses, and the perspective compression effects generated by telephoto lenses. These represent unique expressive characteristics and advantages of photography that constitute 不可忽视的力量 in technical expressiveness for thematic photography.

Strengthening shooting techniques is a key condition for completing thematic photography. In terms of visual language composition, attention must be paid to perspective variation and shot size distinction. Perspective variation typically refers to the photographer's shooting angle and composition methods, employing techniques such as long shots, medium shots, close-ups, extreme close-ups, high-angle shots, and low-angle shots. When facing different subjects and environments, photographers should possess the awareness to judge and adjust shooting perspectives and composition methods. Thematic photography must emphasize emotional and environmental expression in visual performance, which is key to detailed 刻画 of news subjects. Emotion refers to the instantaneous personal characteristics arising from human emotional changes, also manifested in relationships between people, including expressions, demeanors, and actions. Environment involves the utilization of setting—when photographing people, photographers must skillfully use environmental information to find optimal perspectives that highlight the theme, conveying location, time, and relevant information about where subjects appear in the image. Only through effective combination of both can image information volume and expressive power be

enhanced.

Focusing on the compositional relationships within thematic photography, a thematic photo series typically requires a typical thematic image that represents the thematic essence the series aims to express. Remaining images revolve around the theme, reflecting different levels of content to constitute complete thematic content and reasonable image hierarchy. Some auxiliary images need not possess independently complete content, expressing only partial information of the thematic content. Images must form interrelated logical relationships to create a complete thematic story.

3. The Expressiveness of Thematic Photography

Improving image and thematic quality is a topic concerning excellence, with the key being the creator engaged in thematic photography. Enhancing thematic photography's expressiveness means improving the creator's cognitive and expressive capabilities. The issue of thematic photography's expressiveness manifests in two aspects: first, the ability to compose content and express themes when shooting thematic subjects; second, the ability to cognize images and express lens language.

Common forms for thematic photography content composition include narrative, portrait, and series approaches, with commonly employed expressive methods including narrative, contrast, and serial techniques. Narrative methods suit news events or stories with beginnings, processes, and outcomes. Contrast methods compare the same news subject before and after changes, typically using the same viewpoint to show changes occurring across a certain time span. Serial techniques express series combinations of characters or scenes at the same level.

Regarding photographers' fundamental capabilities, shooting thematic photography typically requires two abilities. First is the capacity to examine shooting subjects with visual language—whether for planned thematic creation or breaking news shooting, necessary thematic conceptualization is required, which may be prepared before interviewing and shooting or developed when facing the subject. Second is the ability to express news subjects using cameras, primarily concerning technical aspects. We must clearly recognize that all shooting techniques are determined by consciousness; the photographer's thematic concepts, shooting level, and experience play decisive roles. Therefore, photographic consciousness determines photographic action and methods.

From the perspective of basic photographer capabilities, thematic photography requires photographers to possess two aspects of ability. First is the capacity to examine subjects through visual language. Both planned thematic creation and breaking news coverage require necessary conceptualization—some prepared before shooting, others developed during the interview process. Second is the ability to express news subjects through camera operation, which is primarily technical. We must clearly understand that all technical skills are consciousness-driven; a photographer's thematic vision, skill level, and experience are decisive

factors. Thus, photographic consciousness determines photographic action and methodology.

Any principles emerge from practice as 提炼 and summaries of practical experience. Understanding and mastering these principles forms the foundation of thematic photography creation, while breaking and creating principles represents the direction of continuous exploration in thematic photography creation.

4. The Editing of Thematic Photography

After completing thematic photography shooting, a crucial phase begins: editing. Analyzing the selection and editing principles of thematic photography from a workflow perspective helps examine shooting results and improve communication effectiveness. First is the photographer's initial selection process. Experienced photographers often develop thematic structures and hierarchies during shooting. After completing shooting, they conduct preliminary selection and editing based on prior plans, considerations during shooting, and media publication needs. How to select and how many to select often become 纠结 decisions. According to the structural characteristics of thematic photography works, selection should be based on standards of clear themes, prominent visual imagery, reasonable composition, accurate titles, and complete overviews and caption text. However, photographers often have the tendency to select too many images, reluctant to abandon similar content, sometimes allowing the desire to preserve their labor 成果 to affect the communicative effectiveness of edited thematic photography.

Photo editors then examine submitted thematic works according to media column requirements and capacity. Editors typically approach from three aspects. First, they review the photographer's image quality and thematic structure. Sometimes, if unsatisfied with the photographer's initial selection, editors may request additional images for reselection. Editors can often "rescue" images that photographers considered unsatisfactory. Second, they examine thematic structure, controlling image quantity and optimizing image combination hierarchy to ensure content completeness while emphasizing thematic conciseness and communicative effectiveness, avoiding redundancy in content, imagery, or perspective within the series. The principle of image selection is quality first, encompassing both shooting quality and structural quality. Shooting quality primarily examines visual imagery expression and whether image language application is unique and innovative. Control of image quantity depends on thematic expression needs—content that can be expressed in one image should not use two. Third is the crafting and refinement of titles, overviews, and caption text for thematic photography—an important creative link that cannot be ignored. Excellent titles and high-quality captions are important means to improve thematic photography quality; conversely, they can greatly diminish quality and communicative effectiveness.

Image selection and caption writing are usually completed independently by

photographers, though sometimes collaboratively with editors. Photo editors must also be grounded in communication purposes, consider media presentation methods, and be familiar with and participate in media layout design. Design is the final step in presenting thematic photography and should be considered part of thematic photography creation—its quality directly affects communication effectiveness.

5. The Value of Thematic Photography in News Communication

Clarifying what thematic photography is, along with its shooting principles, expressiveness, editing, and presentation, essentially clarifies the composition and unique visual information value of thematic photography, laying the foundation for addressing its value in news communication.

From a communication perspective, the communicative value of thematic photography works includes both the common value of general news works and the unique advantages distinctive to thematic photography. Common value lies in credible visual information transmission—a characteristic shared by both thematic and single-image news photography, which also possesses the textual communication value of headline news and short news. More prominently, thematic photography demonstrates complete and in-depth thematic value, determined by its information capacity and visual expressiveness. This represents thematic photography's advantage in deeply expressing news themes, constituting unique value exceeding general news reporting.

In terms of reading impact, visual information in news media 显然 attracts readers faster than text, representing a major advantage in enhancing attention and improving effective reading rates. The 组图 advantage of thematic photography better satisfies people's needs for in-depth visual reading of news information and psychological experience. Thematic photography's multi-angle attention and multi-perspective expression of news can enhance audience memory, while the visual impact and stable reading mode formed by typical instantaneous imagery also represent a major advantage of thematic photography in news communication.

Thematic photography records and expresses news themes through complete combinations of images and text, enabling news imagery to become a means of documenting history and endowing it with special historical value through the function of “viewing” history.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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