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The Insistent Image: The Photojournalistic GIF as a Storytelling Form in Online News

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ABSTRACT

Despite cultural associations with lighthearted social media interactions and humor, the GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) now appears in serious contexts as a legitimate form of online news, serving as a tool for documenting disasters, violence, and tragedies. The GIF's repetitive, silent nature diverges from traditional visual news formats, offering narrative potentials different from the "decisive moment" of still photographs or the linear duration of videos. This article investigates the GIF's unique storytelling format in tragic news coverage, leveraging insights from photojournalism and visual storytelling literature. Through visual analysis and in-depth interviews with Israeli news editors, this article explores the GIF's centrality in Israeli news organizations' adaptation to social media and the attention economy. Furthermore, the Israeli digital media ecosystem—characterized as a news-saturated environment of continuous negative news and high online news consumption—reveals the GIF as an emerging storytelling format with distinctive narrative strengths and constraints. Taken together, this context illuminates the ways in which GIFs' production surfaces critical ethical considerations in contemporary visual journalism.

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Introduction

On 31 May 2021, the digital edition of *Haaretz* newspaper published a camera-based GIF of the 2021 "Meron Crowd Crush" disaster (Figure 1) showing a dense crowd of ultra-orthodox Jews—men and boys—move continuously at high speed through what became known as the "Corridor of Death" at the religious site of Meron. This disaster killed 45 people and injured 150 due to lack of crowd control at a mass religious event, and was covered in all Israeli media. This mode of presenting a catastrophe with an endlessly looped moving image is unexpected and unconventional in visual journalism. Traditionally, photojournalism has told stories and created news narratives via photographs in printed newspapers and videos in television news (Newton 2001). Both these image-formats function as visual evidence with epistemological value: photographs show

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Figure 1. Screenshot of the GIF of the 2021 Meron Crowd Crush. The headline reads: "How Long Did It Take the Police to Realize that a Disaster Had Occurred in Meron? The Questions That Remain Open." Published by *Haaretz*, 31 May 2021.

a frozen moment captured from real life, while videos present a linear narrative through a limited evolving sequence of recorded moving images. Although the camera-based GIF seems like a hybrid format—merging photograph and film into a new visual form—it is distinguished by a unique characteristic: a short, repetitive, looped movement. This characteristic requires further examination, as it challenges traditional paradigms of visual storytelling in journalism. GIFs' looped, repetitive structure represents a significant departure from the established temporality of both still photographs and linear videos, potentially reshaping how news narratives are constructed and consumed in digital environments. Understanding GIFs' role in journalism is also crucial for comprehending how news organizations are adapting to attention-scarce digital ecosystems and platform-dominated distribution channels while maintaining journalistic standards. Moreover, the increasing use of GIFs to represent tragic or violent events also raises important ethical questions about the responsibilities of visual journalism in the social media age.

Though created in 1987 as a compressed image format, the GIF gained cultural significance in the 2010s following the expiry of the patent in 2003, making it universally available for use. GIFs evolved from simple animated images to powerful communication tools, primarily associated with popular culture and especially humorous exchanges on social media platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook (Eppink 2014; Miltner and Highfield 2017). This heritage makes the GIF's use in serious journalism particularly noteworthy, representing a significant expansion of a format with strong pre-existing cultural associations. With their low-resolution aesthetics and jerky, recurrent motion, GIFs are often used as witty or flippant expressions in self-presentation strategies and conversational "reactions" on social media: a "popularized attention-getting technique like self-branding" (Marwick 2013, 10). Hence using GIFs to represent news, especially in tragic or disaster cases, seems to contradict the serious tone of journalism; the mechanical, repetitive motion and absence of sound—reminiscent of the comedic cinematic "slapstick" genre—appear incompatible with the complex emotions of the depicted events.

This article identifies photojournalistic GIFs—created from photos or video—as a new camera-based form in online news, focusing on their use in representing tragic news. It takes as its case study a particularly intensive but also troubled context for tragic news: the Israeli media ecosystem, which is characterized by persistent negative news related to regional conflict, widespread smartphone usage and exceptionally high news consumption, with news websites and apps consistently ranking among the most popular online destinations (ISOC 2024). This context creates a very rich setting for exploring how GIFs function within digital journalism, especially when covering tragic or sensitive events where their repetitive nature raises important ethical questions. The article first highlights the GIF's unique short-looped movement by drawing on literature concerning photojournalism and visual storytelling (e.g., Barthes 1977; Caple and Knox 2012; Zelizer 2010), news production (e.g., Ilan 2019; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger 2018), and attention economy (e.g., Davenport and Beck 2001; Goldhaber 1997). Through visual analysis of sampled GIFs and in-depth interviews with senior online news editors, the article then addresses two research questions: What are the photojournalistic GIF's affordances in digital journalism? And in what ways do photojournalistic GIFs represent a unique technological and storytelling intervention that reconfigures the boundaries between visual representation, editorial agency, and ethical considerations in contemporary journalism?

Theoretical Framework

Visual News Storytelling Formats

The GIF joins established formats in online visual journalism—photography and video—whose historical emergence provides points of useful comparison. These formats are integral to news stories by functioning as visual documentation, illustrating verbal reports, and attracting attention. Photographs appeared in printed newspapers in the late nineteenth century, producing and shaping news narratives alongside text (Hall 2021; Zelizer 2010). Moving news images began as newsreels in the early twentieth century and developed into television news broadcasts in the 1950s (Bliss 2010).

The mechanical character of photographic and camera-based technologies—their seemingly automatic, lens-based capture process—led to perceptions of photographs and videos as the "most technically dependable means of representing visual reality" (Dondis 1974, 69–70). Historically, recorded images were increasingly treated as evidence and perceived as indexical and objective documentation (e.g., Åker 2011; Schwartz 1999). These images thus held epistemological authority, constituting visual knowledge about the world (e.g., Carlson 2019; Newton 2001). Although both formats served as vehicles for visual storytelling, each has unique capabilities. A photograph portrays a story through a frozen, silent, captured moment of reality that enables prolonged observation (Barthes 1981). This is what photojournalist Alfred Eisenstaedt called the "story-telling moment" (cited in Zelizer 2010, 2): a single still image inviting viewers to imagine the narrative flow. A video or a television broadcast, conversely, presents a story via a sequence of filmed occurrences accompanied by sound. This allows a more sensory experience (Sobchack 1992) and enhances the sense of "witnessing" events as they occurred in real time (Zelizer 2010). However, footage is time-limited, representing a linear progression with defined beginnings and endings that restrict viewing duration and narrative boundaries.

News photographs and newscasts were previously exclusive to newspapers and television. The internet, however, has merged these platforms. Online news sites make heavy use of visual elements like photographs, charts, maps, and animations, creating a convergence of newspapers, TV news, and the internet (Cooke 2005). They have also incorporated and reconfigured older formats, such as photo galleries (Caple and Knox 2012) and video: Bock (2012) found that by the end of the 2000s, journalists had adapted to include motion and sound in their storytelling, making video reportage an essential part of online journalism. Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen (2018) identified three main reasons for news organizations' investment in online videos: audience demand, platform prioritization (e.g., Facebook, Google), and potential advertising revenue.

The Smartphone and Social Media Era: Shifts in the Production and Consumption of News Images

The ubiquity of smartphone cameras decentralized news image sources beyond professional photojournalists and increased "citizen witnessing" (Allan 2013a; Mortensen, McDermott, and Ejaz 2023). The immediacy of news prioritized the publication of "raw" primary reports from the field over professional photography, creating an infrastructure for shifts in professional photojournalism's "rules" (Allan 2013b; Ilan 2024). These shifts affect visual aesthetics: less polished images serve journalistic reporting, especially during crises, with "much less emphasis on images having to be technically perfect" (Joshua Resnick cited in Mortensen, McDermott, and Ejaz 2023, 1162).

The use of smartphones and their transformation into information consumption devices has affected visual news production, increased online news growth, and changed news consumption habits (Newman et al. 2022). The prevalent use of smartphones as social media gateways has led young people to prefer consuming news there. This preference reflects technology's connection to content-consumption practices, as well as social media's ability to deliver news "anywhere and anytime" while accommodating young peoples' "brief and fragmentary reading patterns" (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018, 3524). The increasing popularity of smartphones and competition with social media for public attention has led news organizations to invest in "user experience" and smartphone apps. Organizations prioritize mobile news page designs and homepage structures, affecting perceived ease of use, engagement time, and overall user experience (Yu and Kong 2016).

The GIF thus emerges as a pre-existing visual format, established on social media, that can serve to negotiate transformations in news consumption habits, specifically the shift toward brief, mobile-first, visually-driven engagement patterns. Its increasing prominence in visual journalism, alongside photographs and videos, challenges several cultural assumptions but also corresponds with theories about traditional visual journalistic formats, such as visual attention, aesthetics, and temporality.

Visual Attention, Aesthetics, and Temporality

One strategy for evaluating professional photographic reportage was to determine a "decisive moment" captured by the camera: "the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms

which give that event its proper expression" (Cartier-Bresson 1952, 14). Video reportage, in contrast, communicates via a flow of images and sounds, promoting "disciplinary attentiveness," which entails "cognitively 'processing' a stream of heterogeneous stimuli" (Crary 2001, 77). This differentiation in ways of capturing attention appears in depictions of tragedy. Many studies have noted how photographs present calamities through freezing a moment, thereby stimulating imagination about the event's narrative (e.g., Sontag 2003; Zelizer 2010). In contrast, moving newscast images depict cause and effect (Bednarek and Caple 2012), capturing attention by emphasizing tragic sequences that show ongoing disaster (Blondheim and Liebes 2002).

These traditional media forms compete fiercely in the contemporary "attention economy" (Goldhaber 1997). Multiple images, the auto-play of embedded videos, push notifications, and perpetual content streams require strategic attention management techniques that enable news organizations to capitalize on audience engagement (Nixon 2017). Within this context, the repetitive movement of GIFs generates an eye-catching visual rhythm, echoing the "endlessly fascinating and repetitive … sites of attentiveness" produced by nineteenth-century devices like the zoetrope (Crary 2001, 271). Commercial GIFs, which pop up on websites, function as clickbait to "lure eyeballs to advertising" (McCarthy 2017, 117) for financial gain. Although the endless loop of the GIF certainly attracts attention, its repetitiveness also creates a sense of "stuckness" as part of its temporal structure.

The temporality of the GIF is important in two respects. First, various temporal characteristics have long been examined in relation to the formal features of distinct media, particularly photography and video. The stillness of photographs represents an absolute past or, in Barthes' words, "*That-has-been*" (1981, 77). In contrast, Doane (1990) defined the time of television as presentness, "*This-is-going-on*," deriving "from the flow and continuity of information" (222–223). Movement is essential to the temporal experience: "Time *is* only because something happens, and where something happens, there time is" (Bloch 1970, 124, italics in original). Hence, visual media in recorded videos and live broadcasts—featuring dynamic sequences depicting unfolding events—construct a developing linear storyline that parallels the continuum of existence. Keightley and Downey (2018) argue that digital technologies have not merely accelerated news delivery but fundamentally altered how audiences experience temporal flow, creating what they term a "cultural mode of time" that synthesizes social, personal, and historical temporalities. These transformations shift journalism from traditional linear historical time to a more fragmented digital temporality that privileges recirculation and recurrence over chronological progression (Barnhurst and Nightingale 2018). Nevertheless, such developments require an analytical approach based on temporal reflexivity, critically assessing which aspects of news presentation constitute genuine breaks from tradition versus continuations or hybrid forms (Carlson and Lewis 2019). Second, the material, organizational, and technological processes of news production also manifest temporal aspects. Immediacy, liveness, and preparation time have been conceptualized by Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger (2018) as "temporal affordances" in the news: "The temporal orientation of news narratives is shaped not only by topical characteristics of the stories but also by factors related to the medium in which the story is published" (19). Additionally, the accelerated news cycle and demand to produce constant updates for websites also influence the visual content and formats of news stories.

The temporality of the GIF is different to the stillness of the single photograph and the linear unfolding of video. Its looped movement creates a sense of the insistent recurrence of the present that is unresolved narratively. Consequently, as a networked image, the GIF enhances the definition of "liveness," and its endless motion resonates with the continuous scrolling of social media feeds, which also characterizes some online news interfaces in the smartphone era. As Kopelman and Frosh (2023) noted, there are "shifts in social media interfaces, notably the increasing ubiquity of short-form and looped videos as formats in a dynamic social media environment that is perpetually being *put into motion*" (10, italics in original).

Methods

This article explores (i) how photojournalistic GIFs operate as a media form within digital journalism, examining their distinctive narrative capabilities and representational strategies, and (ii) how GIFs depicting tragic content disrupt and reconfigure established paradigms of visual storytelling, editorial practice, and ethical framing in contemporary news production. It investigates camera-based GIFs specifically in the context of negative news, using a mixed-methods approach that combines the systematic categorization of news GIFs and in-depth interviews with senior Israeli online news editors who direct GIF production. As noted earlier, the Israeli media ecosystem offers a distinctive research context for exploring digital journalism formats in tragic and negative news coverage. Featuring persistent negative news cycles and regional conflict, this ecosystem is marked by consistently high levels of engagement intensified by geo-political factors: news websites are among the most popular of all Israeli websites (ISOC 2024). Additionally, pervasive smartphone usage among young Israelis—who predominantly consume mobile news (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2020) offers an ideal setting for exploring innovative visual storytelling techniques. These dynamics highlight the GIF's potential as an emerging visual storytelling format in an Israeli media landscape characterized by the *omnipresence* of news, both through the popularity of news websites and apps, and through the "ambient journalism" (Hermida 2010) and "incidental news" consumption (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018) that occurs on social media.

Sample of News GIFs

The research corpus was constructed in stages. First, an initial review examined the social media accounts and websites of 11 major Israeli news outlets from September 2022 to May 2023. Finding no GIFs on social media accounts, attention focused on Israeli news websites. Of the original 11—*Haaretz, Ynet, Jerusalem Post, Israel Hayom, Maariv, Mako, Walla!*, *Kan11*, *N12, 13TV,* and *14Now*—five were identified using GIFs on their homepages: *Haaretz*, *Ynet*, *N12*, *Mako*, and *Walla!*[1] A total of 541 different GIFs were sampled from the homepages of these five websites—the most popular in Israel (ISOC 2024)—representing various news organizations, including an elite newspaper (*Haaretz*), a popular "native" digital news website (*Walla!*), and online websites of mainstream television channels (such as *N12*). This range shows that GIFs are not restricted to only one kind of journalism (e.g., tabloid).

The term GIF is used here to refer to all moving camera-based images characterized by automated short-looped movement without sound. Technically, the sampled images include files with GIF, MP4, and WebP suffixes. However, in this research project these formats were categorized based on their shared viewer experience—short, silent, automatically repeating sequences—rather than technical distinctions. Additionally, the focus is on "camera-based" GIFs—those created from photographic or video material capturing physical-world events rather than computer-generated or illustrated content. This distinction is crucial because the indexical relationship between camera-based imagery and physical reality underpins photojournalism's epistemological claims and documentary value (e.g., Barthes 1981; Sontag 2003). "Camera-based" refers to visual content derived from any optical recording device (professional cameras, smartphones, surveillance cameras, etc.) that captures light reflected from physical scenes. The research excludes animated drawings, computer-generated animations, and heavily manipulated imagery where the indexical relationship to physical reality is altered or absent.

The sampling was performed once a day at the same time, five working days a week; identical GIFs presented on consecutive days for the same article were counted as one. Although the GIFs were sampled in parallel from the different websites, there are limitations to sampling GIFs in online news. First, web pages do not always look the same on computer and smartphone screens, and even the frequency of their use can differ: for example, *Mako*, a news outlet for a young audience, tends to use GIFs more often on its mobile webpage than on the desktop even though there is no consistency. Second, online news is dynamic, and web pages change and update constantly. Thus, the sample is not comprehensive, and some GIFs may have been missed.

The sampled GIFs were categorized into different kinds of news stories based on visual content and journalistic context gleaned from headlines and captions. However, unlike Tuchman's (1973) traditional classification of hard and soft news, which is mainly based on the temporal aspects of the reports, contemporary research increasingly questions these boundaries, recognizing more fluid distinctions (Sjøvaag 2015). Maares and Hanusch (2020) further complicate these boundaries in their research on social media platforms, particularly noting how Instagram has transformed lifestyle journalism into a "twilight zone" where traditional and non-traditional actors coexist and contest journalistic norms, with digital platforms creating additional layers of boundary ambiguity. Visual stories in this study have not been categorized by the immediacy of the represented story but by the depicted content itself, recognizing that visual formats like GIFs may challenge conventional typologies while still operating within recognizable journalistic frameworks. The categorization included both the denotative visual content and the textual caption, which anchored the represented scene's meaning (Barthes 1977; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2020), mapping sampled GIFs onto various news story uses. This classification served two purposes: establishing the range of different stories which GIFs are used for, particularly regarding whether GIFs were used for negative news; and providing an empirical basis for interviews with news editors and co-viewing examples.

Interviews

Unlike photographs or videos, which can be circulated "raw," GIFs are not "raw" images. GIFs require post-production—selecting sequences from photos or videos and editing

them into loops: hence it was necessary to interview news editors who are in charge of this process, and who decide what stories to use them for. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and May 2023 with five editors, one each from the five Israeli news outlets from which the sampled GIFs were collected: four chief news desk editors and one CEO of a digital news outlet (with responsibility for developing editorial practices regarding GIFs). All of the editors were men, and their professional journalistic experience ranged from 10 to 27 years. The interviews were modeled on approaches from newsroom research, which deal with the practices of professional photographers and photo editors regarding editorial processes, systemic decisions about news images, and their evaluation (e.g., Bock 2012; Gursel 2016; Ilan 2019; Mäenpää 2022; Nilsson 2017).[2] The first part of the interview focused on the use of GIFs on news websites. The second part explored decision-making, including ethical considerations. Notably, the interviews included co-viewing GIFs with editors. These co-viewing discussions explored the GIF's advantages over traditional formats, definitions of "good GIFs" in digital journalism, and editorial policies, decisions, norms, and ethical considerations. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and interviews were fully transcribed and thematically analyzed.

Findings

The 541 sampled GIFs represent various camera-based GIF uses in digital journalism. They were categorized by their primary visual themes to map different uses and inform the interviews with editors. The sample comprised three main categories—neutral news, leisure news, and negative news—each with subcategories (see Table 1). While categories sometimes overlap—a sports story could be "neutral" or "leisure" depending on framing—the primary journalistic angle in the accompanying text was used to determine the most appropriate classification (Boyle 2006). Neutral news ($N = 248$) includes subcategories of GIFs depicting: non-violent protests; gatherings and ceremonies; "talking heads" from interviews, press conferences, and public statements; health; nature, environment, landscapes, and animals; transport; and sports. Leisure news ($N = 179$) includes

Table 1. Distribution of sampled GIFs by category and subcategory.

Main category	N (%)	Subcategories	N (%)
Neutral news	248 (45.8%)	Non-violent protests	10 (1.8%)
		Gatherings and ceremonies	8 (1.5%)
		"Talking heads" (interviews, press conferences)	30 (5.5%)
		Health	7 (1.3%)
		Nature, environment, landscapes, animals	59 (10.9%)
		Transport	15 (2.8%)
		Sports	119 (22.0%)
Leisure news	179 (33.1%)	Gesturing, dancing, and singing	7 (1.3%)
		Lifestyle and beauty	19 (3.5%)
		Food	70 (12.9%)
		Popular cultural texts	83 (15.3%)
Negative news	114 (21.1%)	Armed and unarmed violence	73 (13.5%)
		Destruction	8 (1.5%)
		Natural/infrastructure disasters and tragedies	12 (2.2%)
		Transportation accidents	11 (2.0%)
		Crime and policing, and non-normative behavior	10 (1.8%)
Total	541 (100%)		

subcategories such as: GIFs depicting gesturing, dancing, and singing; GIFs accompanying lifestyle and beauty articles; GIFs on food; and GIFs generated from popular cultural texts. The third category, negative news ($N = 114$), includes subcategories of GIFs depicting: armed and unarmed violence; destruction; natural or infrastructure disasters and tragedies; transportation accidents; crime and policing; and non-normative behavior. To illustrate some of the negative news GIFs, the sample includes GIFs showing people falling into a sinkhole, physical attacks, a bridge collapsing, bombings, shootings, and more.

This representation of negative news (21%) highlights unexpected GIF usage—given their humorous cultural associations—and served as a basis for the interviews and discussions with news editors about their perceptions and practices. In photojournalistic GIFs, affordances represent potential uses and constraints *for editors* that emerge from the interaction between the GIF format's technical properties and the challenging viewing contexts of online journalism. Three main affordances were identified: attention capture (the GIF's capacity to attract viewer attention through repetitive movement), narrative condensation (the GIF's ability to distill complex events into brief, repeating visual sequences), and ethical boundary negotiation (the GIF's potential to both respect and challenge ethical norms of visual journalism through its unique temporal structure).

Pay (With Your) Attention!

Attracting attention is central to journalism, but competition for users' attention is more challenging in the smartphone and social media era (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018). As Leon, a senior editor, observed, "We are competing for [users'] time because the entire digital ecosystem is such that you can now be on the *Haaretz* app, browse Twitter, play Cut the Rope, or write an email." This competition intensifies in the social media era, characterized by a powerful sense that "something is constantly happening." Therefore, news organizations examine user experience on social media to optimize their websites: "If a good experience happens on social media," Leon admits, "we need to introduce similar things to our news website."

The need to attract attention on multiple different social media platforms, and to be accessible on mobile devices, produces a multi-front competitive arena. Nathan, another editor, called it "a battle for the audience," adding, "we need to ask ourselves how to make the user enter the content." All the interviewees stated that most of their users consume news through smartphones on a dedicated app or adapted site, and therefore their design considerations mainly relate to user experience on the "mobile version." The mobile homepage's visibility and presentation, including sizes, images, and headlines, are crucial; the editors see the homepage as the website's "showcase." As Leon said:

> Everything we give on the homepage is designed to attract attention. … GIFs are another way of attracting attention. A beautiful picture attracts attention; if there is a good title, it attracts attention, and if something is moving, it attracts attention differently.

Movement attracts attention, but heavy file-size videos on homepages can harm user experience. Enabling smooth video operation requires a robust, expensive web infrastructure, and GIFs provide a technical solution. As Adam noted, "GIFs are lightweight for the online system," while Gideon stated, "the GIF is simply a technical option to make a very 'short video,' a technical tool to do something more attractive."

GIFs attract attention in a unique manner: their recurrent movement captures users' attention, and their short duration acts as a teaser. According to Ido, GIFs signal to the user that a longer conventional video will appear after clicking. Within the networked attention economy, GIFs operate as clickbait that increases traffic to web pages. Ido revealed:

> The GIF is a kind of a teaser on the homepage … It is actually an eye-catcher … it creates interest and curiosity … This is the goal: users will enter, read, increase the number of entries, and grow the number of video views. In the end, it translates into money.

The intersection between the use of GIFs and the news organization's business models varied. For example, *N12* and *Mako* monetized GIFs as clickbait, leading users to full videos, which always began with advertisements. *Haaretz*, in contrast, used GIFs as standalone visual forms since their content is accessible only to paying subscribers, diminishing the imperative to capture users for embedded adverts. This financial consideration is also reflected in another editorial decision: to present blurred GIFs on the news homepage (3% of the total sample) even if it makes it difficult for users to decode the depicted scene clearly (Figure 2).

Since most of the sampled GIFs were created from a variety of video sources, amateur recordings from a smartphone camera or CCTV are sometimes the only visual evidence the news desk has (22% of the total sample). Therefore, instead of showing a blurred screenshot from a video and thus risking that the image will not attract enough attention for users to click, editors often prefer to use a GIF—even if it too is blurred. Ido recalled a decision to create a GIF depicting a violent incident against a person with disabilities from CCTV video documentation:

> I saw that there was a potential GIF since a screenshot [from the CCTV video] would be a bit blurry and therefore less powerful. So, [I decided that] it would be better to make a GIF showing the attack and the unusual violence.

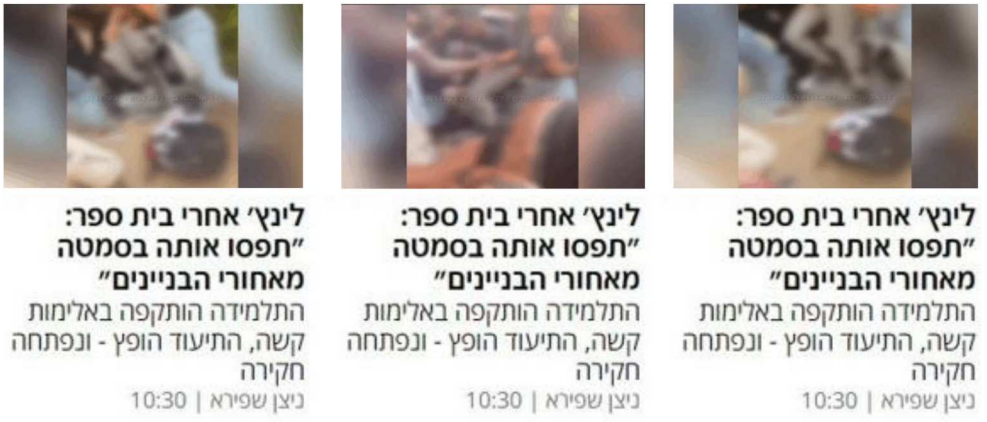

Figure 2. Screenshots from a blurred GIF next to the headline: "Lynching After School: 'They Caught Her in the Alley Behind the Buildings.'" In smaller font: "The student was attacked with severe violence; the footage was circulated—an investigation has been opened." Published on *N12*, 15 September 2022.

The decision to use a GIF rather than a still image reveals how the GIF can function as a "technical upgrade" of blurry videos, increasing the chance of attracting the viewer's attention by recurrent movement, even if blurry, rather than presenting a frozen and indistinct image. Co-viewing GIFs with the interviewees brought up criteria for what a "successful GIF" in journalism looks like. This professional evaluation emphasized the significance of the GIF's visual appearance, which includes clarity, length, and tempo, and the image–text relationship. According to the news editors, a felicitous GIF must show the depicted event clearly. The visual experience must be pleasant to the viewer's eye, and therefore, the GIF's movement cannot be too fast or too short, and the sequence needs to be well-stitched into a loop with as few jump cuts as possible. Due to their awareness of the physical agitation caused by perpetual recurrent movement, the editors avoid putting multiple simultaneous GIFs on their site's homepage. Leon shared:

> One of the problems with GIFs is that they sometimes create a kind of visual overload, so we try not to have more than one GIF scrolling on the phone … it can be irritating if you have one thing that moves in one direction and below there is something else that moves in the opposite direction.

In addition to the image and the movement, the editors referred to the accompanying captions. They claimed that these should match the depiction of the GIFs in order to anchor the viewers' interpretation of the visual representation and expectation of the type of news being presented to them. A successful GIF, however, can present the occurrence without needing a caption. In his evaluation of a GIF from *Haaretz* depicting a police officer putting his knee on the neck of a protester (see Figure 3)—an act visually reminiscent of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020—Adam noted:

> It is a GIF that works well because it is of good quality; it has a presence because they [*Haaretz* editors] put it in such a big square [frame], and it tells the story very well. I don't even have to read the caption because I understand what is going on.

The list of visual requirements for a successful GIF demonstrates its role in attracting attention through its instrumental technique of short-looped movement and visual-

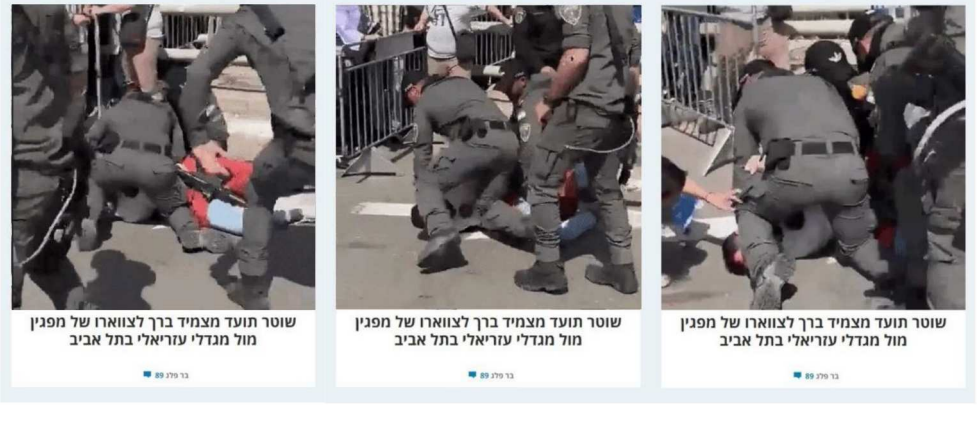

Figure 3. Screenshots of the GIF next to the headline: "A Police Officer is Recorded Kneeling on a Protester's Neck in Front of the Azrieli Towers in Tel Aviv." Published by *Haaretz*, 1 March 2023.

editing aesthetics. However, it also reveals how, through its visual content, the GIF becomes a form of visual storytelling that stands on its own.

"GIFs Are an Excellent Way to Tell a Story"

The GIF's short-looped movement enables the concise representation of an event that is also attuned to the primary physical mode of news consumption: scrolling. In Gideon's words:

> The GIF can tell a story according to your browsing speed on a website. When you scroll on a homepage, you take a second to look and then scroll down. In that second, the GIF can tell you a video story in its own way.

For online platforms, GIFs offer a suitable solution for succinct visual storytelling that goes beyond still images. For editors, GIFs are distinct from the format's humorous social media connections, functioning instead as reportage alongside photographs and videos: "GIFs are an excellent way to tell a story. We [in the news] are looking for many ways to tell a story, and indeed, the technology is ancient, but GIFs are a relatively easy way to tell a story" (Leon). Interviewees described GIFs as a concise form of a longer story; Gideon defined them as "the ability to convey a message in three frames which meets people's need to, on the one hand, watch a little video and, on the other hand, not waste time watching a video … The GIF distills moments." Indeed, GIFs seem to suit the "TL;DR" (too long; didn't read) reading practice that have been used in recent decades to create summaries of lengthy texts.

However, the GIFs short length is not the only significant aspect; recurrence is also crucial. Although the looped movement attracts attention, it also distills the news' item's "essence." Gideon noted, "A GIF is a way to intensify a story … to take a few moments of the [news] item and to intensify it," while Ido stated, "the GIF is the soundbite of the video." The GIF's short, repetitive motion underlines the highlights of a recorded event. Similarly, Adam said:

> The GIF is a journalistic tool for telling a story … .It perpetuates a moment … the heart of the story. It is very empowering and, in my opinion, a tool for dramatization. It is a tool that says: "Look, there is a big story here, and here is the moment from it that we want to show you. This is the moment. Pay attention and remember this because this is the story."

Establishing the GIF as an independent storytelling format within visual journalism invites comparison with traditional formats, and an examination of editors' preferences. For editors, the GIF sometimes tells stories better than photographs and assists in portraying narratives; unlike videos on online news platforms, "the GIF allows you to see the action straight away without ads or nonsense" (Leon). The preference for using a GIF rather than a photograph or video depends on whether there is meaningful movement in the recorded event.

Crucially, GIFs are not simply supplied to editors fully-formed but are deliberately constructed for specific storytelling purposes. Although news desk editors make decisions about GIF-creation, producers and graphic designers execute them. The news desk receives videos and photographs as "raw" material. Instead of displaying these as received, the producers offer several images representing the news items. Videos provide the most options, allowing producers to provide editors with video recordings,

screenshots, and GIFs. GIFs are created by cutting short sections from videos and binding their start and end points into endless loops, sometimes resulting in jump cuts. Creating GIFs requires skillful editing to minimize jump cuts, resulting in "live pictures" or cinemagraphs. As Adam explained, part of the decision to use GIFs is to "make the website more alive and breathing, to give life to the stories." GIFs are visual products created through editors' decisions regarding frame size, length, title, and which moments to highlight.

> The GIF maximizes the use of video. Even if it's from a video, a still image doesn't always tell the whole story. When there is documentation [video], when there is a powerful video, one frame is not enough to tell the entire story. Sometimes there is a certain movement of running over, shooting, or jumping from someplace … A GIF doesn't have to be something newsworthy; it can also be only visually beautiful … [and] give a taste to the user in several frames. (Nathan)

Despite human editors' central role, in 2020 *Mako* adopted an algorithmic system creating GIFs without human intervention and publishing them without prior editorial oversight. Instead of editorial teams constructing GIFs, algorithms sample the most clicked news videos, quantify the users' choices into data, identify which is the most viewed moment from the video item, and create a GIF from it. This technology means that users themselves "design" *Mako*'s homepage while the system creates GIFs without human editors. Although this algorithmic system seems revolutionary for workforce optimization, the visual results do not always create "valuable" GIFs but instead often feature GIFs of politicians making public statements or of "talking heads" (without sound).

Visualizing Tragic News with GIFs: Ethical Boundaries

Like photographs or videos, photojournalistic GIFs need to be newsworthy; their movement must be essential or interesting enough for online reporting. News editors emphasized the significance of short movement, enabling GIFs to attract attention and highlight key moments. The sampled GIFs visualize movement-based stories, such as sports, natural phenomena, and food preparation. However, using looped formats for negative news reveals a journalistic tension between capturing attention and storytelling. GIFs presenting violence, destruction, disasters, and tragedies raise ethical questions. The GIF's looped, sometimes jerky movement, often associated with humor, seems contrary to these news items' content and tone, while forcing users to watch unpleasant events repeatedly.

The cultural association of GIFs with humor does not prevent news editors from using them for negative news and tragedies. "We deal with news," says Leon, "and there is much disturbing news. Therefore, a GIF can be disturbing because of its themes, such as murder or a terror attack, but the visual itself is not disturbing; the theme is." All editors declared a commitment to professional ethical journalistic standards when using GIFs: "The head of a news desk must be sincere and not sin against the truth" (Gideon). Since GIFs are essentially edited formats, they claimed they "do not misuse GIFs in any way." Therefore, decisions about story types, moments to highlight, and movement length reflect ethical editorial considerations. Adam elaborated:

> I will use much more discretion when showing documentation of shootings, murders, traffic accidents, things like that, and sometimes I will choose to use a photograph with [an object or person marked for emphasis by] a red circle to tell the story because, in the end, these are tragedies and disasters … .I do not cooperate with the pornography of death. … We

> want to show the thing that the terrorists did, but we don't want to show the result. I mean, we don't want to show a body lying there, and we don't want to show you someone who has lost their life in front of the cameras. We can show it until it happens, and this is where we stop [the GIF sequence].

Since ethical considerations are typically addressed in the pre-publishing stage, *Mako's* algorithmic GIF-creation and publishing system, described above, gives rise to new challenges, since it limits human control over which news items appear as GIFs on the website. If *Mako*'s news desk receives a complaint about a disturbing GIF, it will be removed manually *after publication*. Ethical judgments are subjective, and decisions on presenting tragic news stories visually on the homepage vary among editors. For example, during the 12 April 2022 New York subway shooting, *Walla!* presented a GIF of a panicked fleeing crowd, while *Ynet* used a split still image (Figures 4 and 5).

Even though none of the sampled GIFs distinctly show blood or bodies, some GIFs are difficult to watch: dancing people falling into a sinkhole (*Walla!*, 26 December 2022) or people standing on a bridge that collapses into a river in India (Figure 6).

Current visuals push sensitivity thresholds; the endless repetition of tragedies creates troubling experiences. Although this repetition is a key characteristic of GIFs, showing tragic events in loops is a well-known practice from television coverage of ongoing events, when news desks must broadcast live but do not have enough images to show the public. As Gideon remarked:

> A GIF only serves us when there are four to five frames that really help tell the story … On television news, this is called a "carpet." What do we do? It's not a GIF, but we take a piece, such as three to four frames, multiply them, and show them one after another in a loop.

This repetitive visual presentation resembles what Blondheim and Liebes (2002) term "disaster marathons" in television—open-ended telecasts of major disasters interrupting

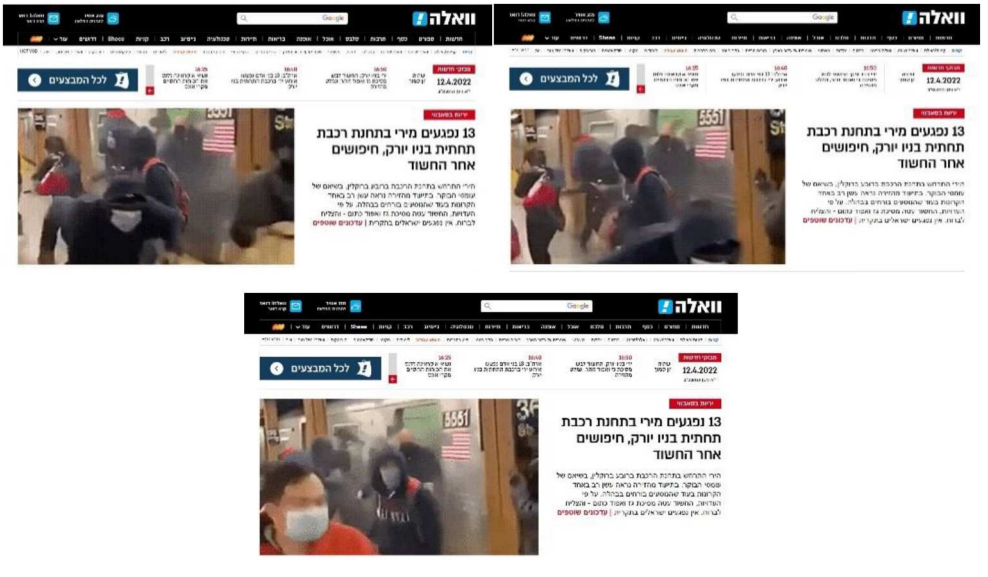

Figure 4. Screenshots from a GIF next to the headline: "13 Victims of a Shooting on New York City Subway, Searching for the Suspect." Published on *Walla!*, 12 April 2022.

Figure 5. A double screenshot on the homepage with the red caption "Live Broadcast" next to the headline: "Victims of a Shooting in the New York Subway: Armed Person in a Gas Mask Shot and Ran." Published on *Ynet*, 12 April 2022.

regular programming that repeatedly cycle through limited footage to maintain viewer attention during developing crises. While GIFs operate on smaller scales, they share this repetitive quality that maximizes the impact of limited footage while suspending narrative resolution. However, unlike television disaster marathons that eventually end when new information becomes available, the GIF's looped structure makes narrative suspension perpetual.

Ethical complexity also emerges from the GIFs' association with humor. Bergson's (2003 [1899]) argument that mechanical repetition produces comic effects can explain why GIFs have flourished as humorous forms. This creates dissonance when applied to tragic events

Figure 6. Screenshots from a GIF next to the headline: "Standing on a Shaky Bridge and Collapsing into the River: Documentation of the Collapse in India." In smaller font: "The dramatic moments of the disaster: The death toll rises to 134." Published on *N12*, 31 October 2022.

—a tension editors acknowledged. And while editors deliberately cut GIF sequences before showing tragic outcomes, the possibility of using content warnings, which is standard practice with graphic videos, was notably absent. GIFs occupy an ethically ambiguous position: more intrusive than still images yet perceived as less impactful than videos with sound. *Mako*'s algorithmic production system further complicates these considerations by removing human editorial judgment, shifting ethical responsibility from producers to consumers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from the content analysis and interviews demonstrate the GIF's evolution beyond social media and humor to become a legitimate format for informative and even traumatic content that enriches visual journalism. They reveal key affordances of the GIF which serve journalistic purposes, such as attention capture, narrative condensation, and negotiating ethical boundaries, with variations across news organizations reflecting traditional differences in editorial cultures. For example, elite newspapers like *Haaretz*, fully available only to paid subscribers, treat GIFs as high-quality visual storytelling forms within articles, not just on the homepage. In contrast, *N12*, primarily a television channel, uses GIFs solely on the homepage as teasers for full video reports, functioning as clickbait. Despite these variations, all interviewed editors consider GIFs concise visual storytelling formats with unique advantages—particularly short-looped movement—and have adopted them as part of digital journalism's adaptation to contemporary social media and smartphone ecosystems.

The GIF's emergence into documentary legitimacy highlights shifts in visual journalistic criteria. In the twentieth century, photographers were expected to capture moments of reality, their single photographs ideally possessing the aesthetic and compositional capacity to focus attention and generate narratives. With the GIF, however, the professional ideal of the "decisive moment" (Cartier-Bresson 1952) has expanded to become the "decisive *movement*." The short-looped sequence is now evaluated according to clarity, storytelling ability, intensification, and the attention it attracts through recurring movement. The selection of several moments and their intensification through endless repetition emphasizes editors' crucial productive role in the postproduction of journalistic images. As Solaroli (2015) notes, "within professional photojournalism, the practices of digital postproduction seem to meet the demands of an increasingly saturated 'visual economy' … and, as such, they could serve to 'intensify life'" (528).

The cyclical movement of the GIF functions as a new attention structure in the social media era. In contrast to the stillness of photographs, GIFs draw attention with their silent looped motion, serving as eye-catchers while potentially *agitating* the viewing experience. Considerations of user experience and the management of agitation—such as restricting the number of GIFs per scroll, the length of motion, and its smoothness—are now integral to the editor's role. Insistent repetition distinguishes the GIF from traditional visual narrative forms: it does not allow viewers to dwell on a single moment or imagine the unfolding of events as a photograph does, nor does it visually present a narrative through a linear progression with accompanying audio as a video does. Instead, the short, repetitive, silent image intensifies crucial moments of a scene through its relentless recurrence. The GIF operates like a "soundbite," a narrative intensifier that captures attention through perpetual motion. Significantly, an ideal

photojournalistic GIF must not only be concerned "with action, with 'temporal recency' and 'newsworthiness'" (Hall 2021, 68) but also with "GIF-worthiness." The selected moments must be crucial to the story's representation; according to the interviewed editors, a successful GIF tells the story without the need for a caption. The image must be clear, and the loop must emphasize the news item's significant movement.

Additionally, the absence of sound makes the GIF a form of "mimetic narrative," which "allows stories to 'tell themselves' through image" (Bock 2012, 605). This is a suitable storytelling form for online platforms consumed mostly on smartphones at different time and places. Interestingly, news GIFs can be conceptualized as possible evolutions of the "aggregate icon" in photojournalism (Boudana, Cohen, and Frosh 2023). Unlike singular iconic photographs that capture a definitive "decisive moment," an aggregate icon is produced through a collection of different images that collectively represent the same event in a kind of visual composite (for instance, the destruction of the World Trade Center in 9/11). Similarly, GIFs function not by providing visual specificity but by creating a general impression through their repeated frame sequences. Just as aggregate icons enable viewers to form a composite mental representation of an event across multiple images, GIFs condense a series of seconds into a single looping visual unit that conveys the essence of an occurrence rather than freezing it in a singular moment. The constant motion of the GIF does not allow the gaze to pause, functioning as a rolling schema of an event whose concision and movement are adapted to the scrolling and viewing pace of the smartphone.

Furthermore, as a looping image, the GIF promotes the principle of presentness and a feeling that "something is always happening"—a common experience on social media. The looped movement expands the temporal definitions of documentary imagery, generating a sense of liveness that contrasts with the absolute past of still photographs and also with the real-time transmission and constructed liveness of television broadcasts (Dayan and Katz 1992; Zelizer 2010). Additionally, the GIF's repetitive movement imparts an insistent sense of "pulsation" to the images, suggesting the vitality ("animation" in full sense of the term) of the medium, namely, of webpages and applications themselves. It even recalls the moving photographs of the *Daily Prophet*, the wizarding newspaper in the Harry Potter world whose magical moving photographs produce liveness in the inanimate medium of print.

The GIF's repetitive presentation of tragic news footage draws upon the same psychological principles as the television "disaster marathons," but with important differences. While live broadcasts are updated with unfolding events, the GIF is a silent, closed file. Critically, unlike television, which eventually provides narrative resolution, GIFs permanently suspend narratives in a crisis state. The interviewees stated that they uphold ethical standards by presenting the movement of key moments but not images of blood or corpses; however, the relentless movement towards a tragic climax can simultaneously hypnotize and distress by repeating a negative experience without relief. Insistently showing an event's movement but not its tragic result creates a sense of "stuckness" and prevents narrative closure and catharsis. This distinctive viewing experience raises important questions for future research examining how audiences psychologically process repetitive tragic content.

The ethical implications of GIFs in tragic news extend beyond editorial practices to theoretical considerations of how these formats mediate witnessing and trauma. The technical properties of repetition and silence may constitute an "aestheticization of

suffering" (Chouliaraki 2006), while Zelizer's (2010) "about-to-die" concept helps explain editors' choices to cut GIFs before showing tragic outcomes. Visual representations of tragedy typically create "subjunctive" spaces, allowing viewers to maintain emotional distance while processing traumatic imagery. However, the GIF's loop may produce the opposite effect—compelling viewers repeatedly to witness disasters without resolution or escape. This raises questions about viewer autonomy and consent. As Sontag (2003) notes, "images of the repulsive can also allure" (95), creating tension between journalistic duty and sensationalizing tragedy. The GIFs' endless loops potentially transform tragic moments into spectacles of perpetual recurrence, despite editors' intentions to avoid what one called "the pornography of death." The repetition without resolution inherent to tragic GIFs may parallel Freud's (1922) "repetition-compulsion"—the unconscious tendency to repeat traumatic experiences. Negative news GIFs can be understood to perform a technologized version of traumatic stress, simultaneously mesmerizing viewers and binding them to screens. This creates a mismatch between medium and message that raises questions about format appropriateness for particular news content.

In conclusion, the photojournalistic GIF is an informative, engaging, and succinct storytelling format. Its rise alongside photographs and videos as a legitimate visual format for online news signals how journalism is adapting to the endless scrolling and competitive data stream environments of the digital and social media era. Online news continuously incorporates technological innovations. The clearest example in the current research project is *Mako*'s use of algorithmic processes to create GIFs based on user activity statistics. This expansion in digital journalism leads to a phase in which users unwittingly "design" the visual representation of news: "Even as journalistic algorithms are made to fit existing models of news, they simultaneously alter how news can be imagined" (Carlson 2019, 1127; see also Ratner, Dvir Gvirsman, and Ben-David 2023). Online news will continue to adapt to changing digital environments, including viewing, reading, and visual representation practices: in the meantime, the short, silent, and looped movement of the GIF is becoming central to contemporary visual storytelling.

Notes

1. Although the same corporation owns *Mako* and *N12*, this article treats them separately since they compete and have two separate applications and websites that address different audiences: *Mako* up to age 35 and *N12* above age 35.
2. The ethics committee at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem approved this research project. Pseudonyms have been used to protect interviewees' identities.

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