

Who's Behind the Lens?
An Exploration of Access, Relationships, and Storytelling
in the Production of Photographs of U.S. Presidents
by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Media Studies

Title: Who's Behind the Lens? An Exploration of Access, Relationships, and Storytelling in the Production of Photographs of U.S. Presidents

This dissertation investigates the lived experiences and perspectives of 14 U.S. presidential photographers – both those granted access within the “velvet rope” at the White House and those who remain outside it. The study illuminates the roles of Official White House photographers and still news photographers in the press corps, their perceptions of their role, and the potential impact of their work on the American public. Based on a multifaceted qualitative approach incorporating historical context, theoretical perspectives, interviews with renowned photographers, exploratory focus groups, and a close reading of selected photographs, analysis uncovered core themes of access, relationships, and storytelling as critical factors in presidential photography. By using elements of grounded theory, this research integrates framing and visual rhetoric theories through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory. Findings reveal how access to the inner circle of the presidency provides photographers with unique perspectives, enabling them to create compelling narratives that can impact public perceptions. Through both journalistic and documentary photography, these photographers function as storytellers and documenters of history. Furthermore, collaborative relationships between photographers and presidents emphasize the intricate interplay of trust, authenticity, and representation. Focus group findings suggest that the viewing public is likely unaware of the differences between the roles of news photographers and Official White House photographers and why the roles matter and that viewers/readers rely on their own interpretations of visual indicators in photographs to determine the role of the photographer. Participants interpreted behind-the-scenes moments to have different tones than photographers believed they were conveying. They also expected to see the president in professional moments rather than in relaxed moments. A close reading of selected photographs confirmed that, although similarities and differences in photos taken by White House and news photographers are difficult to interpret in small sets,

differences in their framing and the visual narratives presented are evident. This dissertation addresses a gap in research by exploring the connections among photojournalism ethics, the history of presidential photography, and the creation of political imagery of U.S. presidents.

Keywords: Presidential photography, Photojournalism, Historical documentation, Political imagery, Access

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“I was one of the first people he wanted to make sure that I would work for him,

and I told him, and here I am a 27-year-old guy;

I looked him in the eye, and I said,

‘I’ll do it if I can report directly to you

and have total access to everything that’s going on in the White House.’

He stopped smoking his pipe, and he said,

‘You don’t want Air Force One on the weekends?’

and he gave me the job under my terms.”

- David Kennerly

This dissertation investigates the lived experiences and perspectives of United States presidential photographers, both those granted access within the metaphorical “velvet rope” and those who remain outside it. Although previous studies have delved into aspects of photojournalism ethics, the history of presidential photography, and the creation of political imagery, a gap still needs to be explored in the connection between all three. Specifically, there has been limited inquiry into the changing roles of Official White House photographers and news photographers, their perception of their roles, and the impact of their work on the American public. This study illuminates a critical yet under-researched aspect of practices for photographing the president from both the news photographer and Official White House photographer perspectives. This dissertation employed a multifaceted approach incorporating historical context, theoretical perspectives, and qualitative data gathering and analysis, revealing that themes of access, relationships and storytelling are critical to how the president is

photographed and to determining what images reach the public. This study reveals how access to the inner circle of the presidency provides photographers with a unique perspective, enabling them to create compelling narratives that can impact public perceptions. Through both journalistic and documentary photography, these photographers function as storytellers and documenters of history. Furthermore, collaborative relationships between photographers and the presidents they photograph emphasize the intricate interplay of trust, authenticity, and representation.

The research has evolved from its original conceptualization. Initially, I sought to focus on the issue of propaganda-style photography produced and released by the White House and whether the general public could differentiate between photographs taken by Official White House photographers and press photographers. However, as I went deeper into the literature, I learned it is a complex and murky topic to explore, and I realized I needed to know if there were, in fact, any differences and what determined how photographers worked with the president. This research was further developed after an informal interview with Lucian Perkins, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who worked as a staff photographer at The Washington Post for more than 20 years. During this conversation in February of 2021, Perkins raised the question about whether there are significant differences in coverage between news photographers and Official White House photographers. Over the course of developing this dissertation, it became apparent that the propaganda accusations were primarily levied by news photographers and those in the news media, prompting the need to investigate the perspectives of Official White House photographers as well as news photographers. An exploratory factor was included in order to begin to understand the general public's opinions

regarding the work produced. It is important to investigate presidential photography and those who produce it because public access to the president is limited and we therefore rely on the visual communication, visual literacy, and ethics of these photographers to create an impression of the president.

Positionality

My background as a former freelance photojournalist and my identity as an American informed my positionality in this study. Having worked as a freelance photojournalist, I have gained first-hand insight into the complexities of photographic storytelling and the ethical considerations inherent in visual representation. I have a long-standing interest in photography as a mode of historical documentation and storytelling, which ties back to the time I spent in my grandmother's attic rifling through boxes until I found a dust-covered slide carousel and spent weeks staring at an empty wall awash with projections of a time long past. Surrounded by boxes of forgotten vacation slides, I became enamored with the storytelling that a photograph can offer. Also, as an American citizen, I bring a cultural and contextual understanding of the socio-political landscape within which presidential photography operates. Additionally, as someone with Hungarian roots, I feel a deep connection to photography, inspired by the country's rich history in the medium. Renowned Hungarian photographers such as André Kertész, Robert Capa, and László Moholy-Nagy have left an unforgettable mark on the global photography landscape and on my perspective. My experiences and background have sensitized me to issues such as access, narrative construction, and the ethical responsibilities of photographers. This perspective influences my examination of the images produced by both Official White House photographers and press pool photographers, guiding my analysis of their work and perspectives.

Definition of Key Words

At this point, it is important to clearly define several words as they are used throughout this dissertation.

Photographer: Photographer is a general term that encompasses those who practice all forms of image making with a camera.

Official White House Photographer: An Official White House photographer is a professional hired by the White House to visually document the activities, events, and daily life of the president of the United States and their administration.

News Photographer: A professional employed by news organizations to provide factual information through photography and other visual formats. This term is used interchangeably with “photojournalist,” “visual journalist” and “press photographer.”

Press Corps: The White House press corps, often referred to simply as the press corps, is a group of journalists assigned to cover the activities, events, and announcements related to the president of the United States and the White House.

Press Pool: The White House press pool refers to a group of journalists selected from the press corps in a rotating pool system.

Historical Context

In the historical context of presidential visual communication, several key developments have shaped the way U.S. presidents manage and utilize their public image. Portrait photography debuted in American presidential history with the daguerreotype of newly elected President William Henry Harrison in 1841 (Krainik). Before this, a series of painters portraying each president was standard practice. The transition from painted

portraits to photography marked a significant shift towards capturing more realistic and detailed likenesses of presidents, as exemplified by the photographic images of President Abraham Lincoln, who appreciated the power of photography in relation to his political image (Finnegan, 2005; Horrocks, 2014). The first five presidents were never photographed (Altschuler & Meleis, 2010), and Presidents Martin van Buren, William Henry Harrison, and John Tyler were never photographed (Bredar & Souza, 2010, p. 41). Unfortunately, the present location of the daguerreotype portrait of President Harrison is unknown. The lost image is of considerable historical importance, as it represents the first photograph of a United States president taken while in office (Krainik, 2012). When President Theodore Roosevelt entered office in 1901, photography became a powerful political tool used beyond historical record keeping. President Roosevelt was a pioneer in recognizing the potential of photography for political purposes, as he understood that visual imagery could effectively convey his messages and engage the public (Greenberg, 2011). By doing so, he set a precedent for future presidents. Prior to Roosevelt's presidency, American presidents did not fully comprehend photography's role in promoting an agenda on behalf of the democratic masses (Greenberg, 2011). When he became president, Roosevelt was a skilled visual communicator who "relied on the camera to construct his political image and recognize the power of the camera to advocate his policy agenda" (Finnegan, 2021, p. 113). In response to the growing complexity of news media and increasing organizational and technological requirements, White House officials decided to establish a structure for news operations. The communications office became responsible for sharing the president's image and messages with the public, a crucial aspect that has been

important since the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. Establishing structured communications operations within the White House underscores the importance of effective communication strategies for shaping the president's image and messaging to the public.

The role of the White House photographer has transformed significantly over time from that of the original government photographers who were brought in from the U.S. Army Signal Corps, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Navy photo office (Bredar & Souza, 2010) to photograph handshake lines and state dinners. Almost none of these photographers told a complete story about a presidency (Bredar & Souza, 2010). When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, he brought with him an understanding of the importance of image (Walsh, 2018), and Cecil Stoughton was brought on board full time specifically to photograph the president and his family. However, this role was not primarily a documentary position. Occasionally, Stoughton was asked to shoot motion picture film which, on one occasion was used to help President Kennedy improve his golf swing (Bredar & Souza, 2010). He also attended a fashion show in New York at Chez Ninon and bring back a visual report of the fashion so that the first lady would not distract from the show itself (Bredar & Souza, 2010). In 1964, the Lyndon B. Johnson administration employed Yoichi "Oke" Okamoto, who received unprecedented access to the president, allowing for a more comprehensive and candid photographic record of the presidency. The White House and the president himself have been significant subjects in photojournalism since its advent, but Yoichi Okamoto's entry into the White House marked the implementation of a documentary effort. Okamoto was the first photographer to request this kind of access to the

president, transforming the photographer's role into one that chronicles the presidency for history (Finnegan, 2021, p. 163). His role marked a massive jump in the evolution of presidential photography. Although the White House and the president himself have been significant subjects in photojournalism since its advent, Yoichi Okamoto's entry into the White House in 1964 marked the implementation of a documentary effort. Yet, while Okamoto was the first photographer to receive unfettered access to any president, President Johnson demanded to see and approve all photographs Okamoto produced and to sign off on every photograph released to the public. Johnson provided Okamoto with a job in the press office and an office in the West Wing. However, the administration was hesitant to add Okamoto to the White House payroll due to the possibility of journalists alleging that Johnson was using government funds to promote himself (Grossman & Kumar, 1981, p. 113-112). Okamoto worked only for the president, and only the president could tell him to leave a room. This approach starkly contrasts President Richard Nixon's relationship with his photographer, Oliver "Ollie" Atkins. "Richard Nixon initially refused the idea of an official photographer but was then convinced of the value of recording activities of the White House for posterity" (Finnegan, 2021, p. 164). In a striking example of this tension, CBS footage from August 8, 1974, shows Nixon's stance on access the night President Nixon delivered a live address announcing his resignation from office to the public. The CBS television cameras were rolling before the broadcast began, allowing for set up and testing of cameras and lights. Books such as *Ultimate Insiders*, *The President's Photographer: Fifty Years Inside the Oval Office*, and *Photographic Presidents: Making History from Daguerreotype to Digital* discuss this moment, and it bears mentioning again here:

As the video begins, a member of the CBS crew sits in the president's chair to check the lighting. President Nixon then appears, and the crew member leaves his seat. Nixon jokes: "Hey, you're better lookin' than I am; why don't you stay here?" as he sits down with a copy of his speech. "Blondes, they say, photograph better than brunettes. That true or not?" he again jokes, referencing the CBS crewman's hair. After checking that there's a backup camera and the lights are set correctly, President Nixon jokes about his aging eyes and then notices someone off-camera to his right; smiling, he says, "That's enough. Thanks." Nixon explains to the CBS crew: "My friend Ollie always wants to take a lot of pictures. I'm afraid he'll catch me pickin' my nose." This is followed by awkward laughter from the president. "Ollie" is Oliver Atkins, the president's Official White House photographer. Nixon quickly says, "He wouldn't print that, though, would ya, Ollie? Yeah." Off camera, Atkins's reply is inaudible. Then the president gets more severe with his photographer: "No, you can take a long shot, but no, that's enough, really." Nixon runs through the start of his speech, and less than a minute later, he addresses his photographer again: "Ollie? Now, only the CBS crew now is to be in this room during this. Only the crew." Nixon cuts off Atkins' response: "No, there will be no picture. No. After the broadcast. You've taken your picture; didn't you take one just now?" Atkins answers, "Yes, sir." Nixon continues: "That's it. Because you know, we don't want to be ... we didn't let the press take one, so you've taken it, you, just take it right now." Pausing with his script, Nixon poses, and then: "You got it? Come on. OK." After a few clicks of the off-screen camera, an agitated Nixon says: "I'm gonna make the other photographers mad; I've given you too many. That's enough, OK?" Minutes later, he went live on CBS to announce his resignation. In the minutes leading up to one of

the most historical moments of presidential history, Nixon berated his photographer and kicked him out of the room.

The Gerald Ford administration brought documentary photography efforts back when President Ford hired former A.P. photographer David Kennerly in 1974. Kennerly subsequently hired the first photo editor to the White House. Following President Ford, President Jimmy Carter chose not to have an official photographer, but no president has gone without one since. By the time the Reagan administration entered the White House in 1981, presidential rhetoric had truly taken a visual turn (Erickson, 2000, p. 131).

While photography at the White House is not new, according to Finnegan (2021), “the role of White House photographer emerged in late 2003 as an increasingly important countervailing force” (Finnegan, 2021, p. 162) due to the shift to digital photo technology. Visual imagery is essential in political communication (Schill, 2012, p. 133). Political communication can be defined in several ways but for the purpose of this study it follows definitions set forth by McNair (2011) who followed Graber’s (1981) approach. It is defined simply as “purposeful communication about politics” that incorporates all forms of communication in the political sphere between politicians, other political actors, non-politicians to these actors, and communication about these actors and their activities (McNair, 2011, p. 3-4). This definition covers not only verbal and written communication but visual communication that constitutes a political ‘image’ or identity (McNair, 2011, p. 4). Newsmakers consider not only the words but also the messages they convey visually. The role of visual communication in the White House has been impacted by the growing intricacy of news media and technological progress, as

demonstrated by presidents like Ronald Reagan, who understood the significance of strategically chosen images in political communication. Creating a structured communications office within the White House also played a part in enabling effective management and disseminating the president's image and messages to the public (Grossman & Kumar, 1981; Erickson, 2000; Schill, 2012). As the White House Photo Office developed, so did the White House's understanding of how to use the media. Since its implementation the organizational structure of White House communications efforts has undergone significant changes, allowing the president to effectively manage, sustain, and occasionally capitalize on his relationships with the media (Grossman & Kumar, 1981).

Access to the president comes with rules, and "the rules," as it were, are regularly unwritten and learned on the job. The access granted to news photographers is more restricted and even this access can vary among news photographers depending on several factors. New news photographers are often expected to learn on the job without receiving briefings about White House operations from other reporters or their editors (Grossman & Kumar, 1981, pp. 33-34). As the digital age began, the Obama administration's use of social media platforms like Flickr marked a significant shift in how they shared presidential photos with the public. This shift is evident in the strategic use of visuals by administrations, such as the Trump Administration, which utilized socially mediated images to build an image of success, power, and leadership, thereby legitimizing his administration through storytelling and persuasion (Strand, 2018).

Managing presidential imagery creates opportunities for pitfalls and mismanagement, which has been seen a few times throughout White House history. On

January 20, 2009, Barack Obama took the oath of office as the 44th president of the United States, an event marred by a hiccup in the oath-swearing process. Due to a misstep by Chief Justice Roberts, who rearranged some of the words in the oath, Obama paused and briefly hesitated before continuing. The oath was re-administered during a private ceremony held the next day at the White House to address any constitutional concerns regarding the legitimacy of his presidency. The president's photographer, Pete Souza, was the only photographer present at this re-administration of the oath. This decision reflects what would become the norm in the relationship between the Obama administration and press photographers. President Obama's photographer had unprecedented access to him, and due to advances in technology, the administration utilized the online platform Flickr along with social media in its advent to release photos, thereby circumventing press photographers. The Obama administration's tightening of access given to journalists at the White House also opened the door for criticism from those with less access. In a 2013 *New York Times* op-ed, Santiago Lyon, vice president and director of photography at The Associated Press at the time, wrote:

“Until the White House revisits its draconian restrictions on photojournalists’ access to the president, information-savvy citizens, too, would be wise to treat those handout photos for what they are: propaganda.”

By bypassing traditional media outlets, the administration could directly control the narrative and the images presented to the public. However, this approach drew criticism

for potentially restricting press access and raising concerns about using official photographs as propaganda. As the “social media presidency” flourished, it brought the understanding that the administration would no longer squirrel away official White House photos in archives and museums, nor was the president bound to news media in order to disseminate a message. Circumventing the news media and sharing seemingly spontaneous behind-the-scenes images directly with the public (Finnegan, 2021, p. 175), the Obama administration controlled the door to the presidency that the public could access.

Understanding how photojournalists perceive themselves while at work is crucial for appreciating the role of photography in shaping public opinion and promoting democratic values. Having news photographers in the White House is part of the routine of journalism operations. The White House needs press conferences just as much as the press does. “Presidents stage photo opportunities to influence, manipulate, entreat, entice, amaze, or otherwise assume power over witnesses” (Erickson, 2000, p. 139). The disruption of standard practice at the White House during this time may have signaled a shift in how the Obama administration managed its image, branding, and storytelling (Gleason & Hansen, 2017). While Americans value freedom and access to information, most of the public is unaware of the media traditions and rituals at the White House.

By controlling which photos are released to the public and the news media, the White House attempts to define the parameters of discourse though they cannot control viewers’ interpretations of the photos (Gleason & Hansen, 2017, p. 67). The exclusion of news media photographers does little to change the historical record of events.

However, it significantly impacts the White House's perception as almost paranoid in its image management. When politicians work in the dark, the public can only imagine what they are not seeing (Gleason & Hansen, 2017, p. 67).

By approaching this research from a visual communication perspective this dissertation research offers a deeper understanding of the evolution of the photographer's role in visual communication about the president, the current state of presidential photography, and its implications for the American public. The progression of presidential photography highlights significant shifts in the role of White House photographers, transitioning from documentarians to critical players in shaping the presidential image. This evolution reflects broader changes in media and technology, which have influenced how presidents manage and utilize their image to engage the public. By understanding the strategic use of photography by presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump, it underscores the significance of visual communication in documenting history, political messaging and public perception management. This research explores the complexities and responsibilities of Official White House photographers and news photographers, providing insights into how their perceptions of their roles impact their work.

Project Conceptualization

This dissertation began with a conceptual framework rooted in framing and visual rhetoric theories. As the research progressed, it became clear that the two theories could not adequately interpret the data and that more theoretical themes were at play. Using an iterative, inductive approach common in qualitative research, the grounded theory approach revealed fresh perspectives on framing and visual rhetoric theories as

expressed through symbolic interactionism. Qualitative research was the appropriate approach for this study because it facilitated a deep dive into the complexities and nuances of the photographers' roles. Using interviews, focus groups, and close reading methods allowed for the capture of rich, in-depth insights. Unlike surveys, which typically yield standardized, predefined responses, qualitative methods facilitate open-ended exploration, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives in a nuanced manner. Ultimately, by embracing qualitative inquiry, this study reveals rich insights into the evolution and implications of the Official White House photographer's and news photographers' roles, thereby contributing to the collective understanding of this complex topic.

The next chapter presents an overview of the theoretical framework for this dissertation, integrating relevant threads in framing, visual rhetoric, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theories. Chapter 3 delves into the concepts and research related to visual communication, visual truth, visual literacy, public trust in journalism, professional codes of ethics, access at the White House, political imagery, and image management. This overview recognizes the existing research gaps, particularly in understanding how photographers perceive their roles and how this influences the outcome of their work. To bridge these gaps, the research questions presented in this study concentrate on photographers' self-perceptions, the differences between official White House and press photographs, audience interpretations, and the potential impact on public opinion. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with photographers, exploratory focus groups, and meticulous close reading of photographs. Chapters 5 and 6 explain protocols for each of the three

methods and present key findings of the research. The discussion chapter interprets these results in the context of the literature and visual rhetoric theory, framing theory, and symbolic interactionism. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the study, highlights implications for ethics in presidential photography, offers insights into the broader impact of visual communication in politics, notes limitations and suggests future research. Ultimately, the dissertation enhances and deepens understanding of a photographer's role in presidential image making from their perspective and the potential impact of their work on public perception of the U.S. president.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Framework

“... even back in the day, we had carrier pigeons take our film in New York, honest to God, off a ship during the Reagan years back to New York City.

It's pretty crazy how far it's gone.” - Doug Mills.

As noted above, this chapter presents key threads of framing, visual rhetoric, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theories as the conceptual basis for the research.

Framing Theory

The works of seminal sociologist Goffman (1974) and communication scholar Entman (1993) greatly influenced my understanding of framing theory. In news media, frames are critical in shaping how events and phenomena are perceived, identified, and labeled. A frame is a particular aspect of reality that is emphasized or highlighted over others, significantly impacting the public's beliefs (Bateson, 2000; Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 1999). Either intentionally or unintentionally, news stories can be framed in various ways to emphasize specific information and deemphasize

other aspects, thus promoting a particular perspective on an issue (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Frames provide an interpretive path for processing information and occur pervasively in mass media. Entman's (1993) application of selection and salience follows Goffman's examination of frames, which positions them both externally and internally to the mind. Frames exist in social settings, including the media, and serve as cognitive shortcuts for information processing (Goffman, 1974). Framing theory in political photojournalism underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping public perception and discourse through the strategic presentation of images and narratives. This theory posits that how political events and figures are framed through photographs or accompanying text can influence how audiences interpret and react to the information presented. As Entman writes: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). He adds that frames occur in "at least four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture" (p. 52). This dissertation research focuses on communicators, who "make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say, guided by frames (often called schemata) that organize their belief systems" (p. 52). Specifically, this research examines the processes through which photographers – the communicators – frame their roles in making photos of U.S. presidents.

This dissertation applied framing theory to analyze interviews with photographers to develop a coding procedure for understanding how they frame their roles and depict

the president. Framing theory was used to identify contextual frames by considering institutional norms, personal experiences, and editorial policies. I explored how photographers positioned themselves as storytellers, documentary photographers, or photojournalists and examined their understanding of their differences. Additionally, I used framing theory to analyze how photographers viewed the White House as an institution and their relationship with the administration to gain a deeper understanding of how they viewed their role as photographers. This research uncovered how they conveyed their decision-making processes and responsibilities by closely examining their language.

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis examines the influence of these frames on how photographers capture and present images of the president, including understanding the tensions between press photographers and the White House and the broader implications of these framing decisions on public perception of photographs and presidential imagery. The goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the photographers' perspectives and the factors that shape their professional practices. The four research questions in this dissertation, detailed below, utilize framing theory in various ways. The first question investigates how photographers perceive their role, aligning with the notion of frames as guiding belief systems. Bock (2021) notes that "the person using a camera must operate within a social system to gain access to a scene framing the moment in terms of angle, view, and distance while also working within a social system that grants access, or embodied gatekeeping," (p. 13). Social interactions shape how the visual image is constructed, and in turn shape the way it is used in discourse (Bock, 2021, p. 13-14). The second question explores similarities and

differences between Official White House and press photographs, reflecting on how different frames are employed. The third question examines how viewers interpret content and tone in these photographs, interpreting the frames presented, and the fourth question assesses how these interpretations impact public views of the president, illustrating the practical implications of framing theory in visual communication. By exploring the intricate processes through which photographers frame their photos and their roles, this study delves into the institutional norms, personal experiences, and editorial policies influencing visual narratives.

Visual Rhetoric Theory

Visual rhetoric extends traditional rhetorical principles to visual communication and analyzes how images persuade and influence audiences. Visual communication can shape perceptions and reinforce social hierarchies (Berger, 1973). Visual rhetoric involves understanding cultural codes and symbols that evoke ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) (Miles, 2023). Initially defined by Aristotle (1967), these three modes of persuasion are employed to sway audiences. Ethos, which pertains to the speaker or writer's trustworthiness and credibility, is established through their expertise, knowledge, experience, and moral character. Pathos, which appeals to the audience's emotions, can be achieved through storytelling, vivid language, and emotional examples. Logos, the appeal to logic and reason, involves using facts, statistics, logical arguments, and clear reasoning to persuade the audience (Miles, 2023). The concepts of denotation and connotation (Hall, 1980) further emphasize the layered meanings in visual communication by establishing that there are literal, surface-

level meanings (denotation), and symbolic, cultural meanings (connotation) embedded in visual communication (ibid).

The main objective of rhetoric is to discover successful methods for persuading an audience and shaping their viewpoints (Blair, 2004). On the other hand, visual rhetoric uses a visual language that is different from spoken language, and understanding this language requires awareness of cultural codes, conventions, and symbols (Berger, 1973). The core components of visual rhetoric involve the symbolic nature of language and communication, connection with the message, and persuasion through associations with surrounding symbols and the environment (Burke, 1950). In political photography and photojournalism, visual rhetoric shapes the portrayal of figures, such as U.S. presidents, and contributes to political narratives and public perception (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Edwards, 2012).

The visual conventions employed in newspapers during presidential debates can exacerbate conflicts or create a false sense of balance, influencing the public's perception of the candidate's performance (Chun, 2018). The dissemination of the Situation Room photograph during the Osama bin Laden raid in 2011 illustrates how visual rhetoric can construct an image of presidential authority and decisiveness, contributing to the visual aspect of the rhetorical presidency (Wright, 2011). The photograph, taken by Chief Official White House photographer Pete Souza and released by the White House, shows President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and other senior officials gathered around a table in the Situation Room. They are intently watching a live feed of the raid in Pakistan. The expressions on their faces are serious and focused, conveying the gravity

of the situation at hand. Hillary Clinton is notably covering her mouth, which adds to the palpable tension in the room. Notably, the photo contains a blurred and unreadable portion of sensitive information on classified documents. In addition to individual photos, visual rhetoric is utilized to construct a cohesive narrative over time. In the first 100 days of the Trump presidency, visual messaging distributed through digital platforms such as Flickr emphasized the strategic use of images to convey political narratives (Chun, 2018). The Trump administration's photos emphasized themes of power, authority, and nationalism, often showcasing the president in commanding and solitary poses, contrasting with the more inclusive and collaborative imagery prevalent during the Obama administration (Chun, 2018). Despite the historical emphasis on verbal discourse, the inclusion of visual images in the study of rhetoric has become increasingly significant, underscoring the impact of visual culture on contemporary media and the public sphere (Foss, 2004).

This dissertation examines how professional photographers employ visual rhetoric when depicting U.S. presidents. By analyzing their decisions, verbal descriptions, and metaphors, the study seeks to understand the extent to which photographers exhibit knowledge of visual rhetoric and subsequently how they frame their photographs. This approach focuses on how photographers use visual elements to construct and convey political messages consciously or subconsciously, thereby influencing public perception and understanding. Visual rhetoric theory contributed to the development of a coding scheme to identify evidence of photographers' visual rhetorical decision-making processes and rhetorical choices when photographing the president. The approach focuses on the discussions of composition, lighting, and story

choice, as these visual elements are critical in shaping the narrative and aesthetic quality of their photographs. Ultimately, the visual rhetorical analysis of these interviews provides a nuanced understanding of the participants' messages and the ways in which they used visual elements to communicate them. By analyzing the visual rhetorical decisions of photographers, this research provides insights into how photographers contribute to constructing presidential images and authority through their visual storytelling, ultimately influencing public understanding and opinion.

Symbolic Interactionism

As discussed previously, during the data analysis stage, it became evident that the framing and visual rhetoric theories were insufficient to fully understand the extensive data collected. Through a grounded theory approach (discussed in more detail below) symbolic interactionism (S.I.) theory emerged to offer a more profound comprehension of how photographers perceive their roles and construct meaning through photographs. Consequently, this theory serves as the central framework in my research, bringing together both visual rhetoric theory and framing theory to comprehensively understand how photographers' interactions and visual choices form presidential photos. S.I. helps explain how photographers perceive their roles while photographing presidents. S.I. posits that people construct social realities by interpreting symbols and language in social interfaces (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Mead (1934) emphasized how an individual establishes their sense of self by internalizing societal norms. Blumer (1969) expanded on Mead's (1934) concept of self as a product of social exchanges by introducing the term "symbolic interactionism" and positing that meanings are actively negotiated and constructed through social interactions. Language, in particular,

emerges as a critical medium through which individuals negotiate and construct these meanings, shaping their perceptions and actions (Fink, 2015). This ongoing process of meaning construction exemplifies the fluidity and adaptability of social reality.

In this research, which explores photography as a visual language of negotiated and constructed meaning, symbolic interactionism offers a lens through which to examine photography and photographers' decisions and for understanding the process of meaning-making through making photographic images. Despite their role in documenting and preserving moments, photographs can contribute to a voyeuristic relationship with the world, equalizing diverse experiences and sometimes diminishing the significance of events by reducing them to still photographs (Sontag, 1977). S.I. connects visual rhetoric and framing theories by concentrating on photographers' interactions and the intent behind their choices. It offers a framework to examine how photographers' visual rhetoric and framing decisions are impacted by their interactions with their subjects, audience, and the institutional context of their profession.

Grounded Theory

Elements of Grounded Theory were used in order to approach the data with an open mind. Grounded theory allows theories to emerge organically from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This dissertation used methodological elements of grounded theory to iteratively develop codes and analyze the data, facilitating the emergence of theoretical insights that build upon existing theories, particularly in the context of framing theory and visual rhetoric, and, as analysis progressed, symbolic interactionism. One of the critical aspects of grounded theory is the coding process, which includes open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2009). First, data are broken down into distinct parts,

examined for commonalities, and then reassembled in new ways by linking codes to one another and establishing relationships between categories and subcategories (Saldaña, 2009). Initially, I focused on coding for photographers' visual choices including composition, lighting, angle and perspective, and post-processing procedures. I also coded for interpersonal relationships and decision-making ranging from whom to photograph and knowing when to enter or exit a room. Next, I grouped related codes under the broad categories of "framing decisions" and "visual rhetoric decisions." The final step involved identifying and systematically relating a core category to other categories to form a cohesive framework (Saldaña, 2009). As I worked through these categories and their interrelationships, symbolic interactionism emerged as a unifying theory, integrating the visual and contextual elements within a framework that emphasizes creating meaning through social interactions and using visual elements and frames and symbols. Grounded theory not only facilitated a sophisticated and systematic coding process but also revealed the central role of symbolic interactionism in understanding photographers' perspectives and practices. In the following chapters, where relevant, I will discuss in more detail how I used the grounded theory approach in this study.

This integrated approach reveals the dynamic interplay among framing, visual rhetoric, and social interaction, contributing to a deeper understanding of presidential photography and its potential impact on society. The theoretical model below shows the connections among framing theory, rhetoric theory and key concepts in research literature (discussed in Chapter 3), leading me to Symbolic Interactionism as the unifying theory.

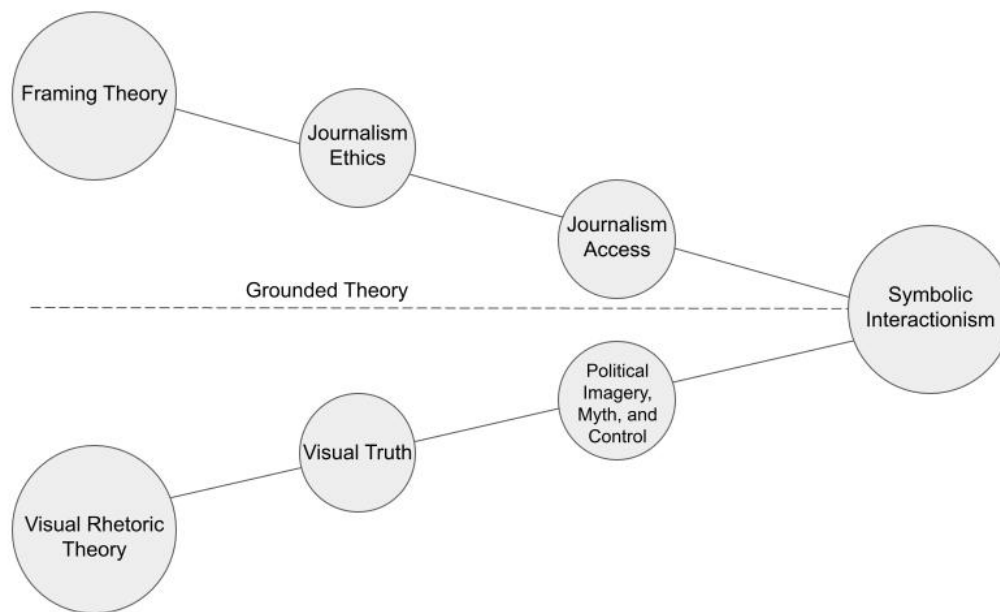


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Using a grounded theory approach to understand how photographers use framing and visual rhetoric in their roles allowed symbolic interactionism to emerge as a unifying theory, contributing valuable new perspectives to visual theory. Symbolic interactionism offers a lens to understand how photographers define their roles and how their visual rhetorical decisions frame their photographs and potentially shape the public's perception of U.S. presidents. The next chapter of this study will review research literature and concepts relevant to this study and present the research questions that emerged through the application of theory and discovery of gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3 - Review of Literature and Core Concepts

“The best moments of a photo op [are] before and after,
when they’re yelling lights. That’s when you get a real moment.

So, you have to make do with what you have,
and you start piecing together this visual package of what this person is,
and that could take a year, or you could do it in a day.” - Stephen Crowley.

This chapter reviews a range of core concepts and research that inform this dissertation. First, the chapter examines visual communication literature, introducing concepts of visual truth and public perception, visual literacy, aesthetics, photography and access at the White House, and the shaping coverage of the U.S. President. Then, the chapter reviews concepts within photojournalism: ethics, public trust in journalism, coverage of the president, and access to the president. Finally, this chapter identifies research gaps in the literature and poses research questions designed to address some of the gaps.

Visual Truth and Public Perception

Due to the many variables in photography, such as camera angle, use of light (or dark), focus, and timing, photos are always an interpretation of reality rather than a depiction of reality itself. Although photography is a mechanical process, it does not automatically reproduce reality (Berger, 1973). Every visual portrayal of an event is presented with some subjective choice, whether through selecting a particular image or framing (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 16). Photographs themselves can be regarded as inherently deceptive in the field of visual politics since they merely give viewers a

glimpse of the world while acting as an “eyewitness authority” (Bleiker, 2018, p. 12).

This underscores the nuanced nature of visual interpretation and the role of images as persuasive tools within broader societal narratives. A dozen photographers could take a photo of the president during a press conference, and there could be a dozen different perspectives, although the subject matter is the same.

Moreover, it is essential to note that the presence of a photographer inherently alters reality, challenging assumptions of objective representation. In fact, as Bock (2021) wrote, visual research largely ignores the role of “the body” in constructing photographs. Even though attention is paid to the subjective decisions that go into creating visual communication, it is usually only the output that is researched (p. 17). According to Goffman’s (1971) work, when a person is around others, they have a “promissory character” in their activities (p. 14). He explained that when in the immediate company of others, one’s actions imply an obligation to provide something of value in return. When taking a photograph, the photographer needs to trust that the person is presenting their true self. While photojournalists strive for accuracy, the very act of photography involves subjective choices and manipulation of light. Media studies scholar Arthur Berger (1998) wrote that photography is paradoxical. It promises truth but can often be used to distort the truth. He wrote that “pictures may not lie, but liars (that is, those who manipulate the truth with their images) take pictures -- so we find ourselves necessarily ambivalent about the images that photography brings us” (Berger, 1998). In her book *The Burden of Visual Truth* (2000) visual ethicist Julianne Newton presented the concept of a “reasonable visual truth,” which she defined as the best information a human being can discern and disseminate. In later scholarship (2020),

she called attention to the definition's assumption that people want to discern and disseminate the truth, altering her definition of reasonable truth to include the caveat that a reasonable truth is the best information that socially responsible, ethical people who seek to understand what is true can discern and disseminate. Journalism encourages audiences to ignore or forget the "sweaty, messy, and contentious process" that goes into producing a final piece, perpetuating "the belief that the camera's output is "truth" (Bock, 2021, p. 1). Applying the idea of a reasonable truth to presidential photography, one could argue that reasonably true photos of presidents are made by socially responsible, ethical photojournalists and Official White House photographers who seek to document and represent presidents as authentically and accurately as possible.

The discussion on photojournalism and truth in visual communication is multifaceted, reflecting the complex interplay between societal expectations, ethics, and the inherent subjectivity of photography. Discussing the psychology behind iconic and memorable photos would constitute another dissertation. However, it is essential to briefly explore the mental processes involved in viewing images to understand the significance of photography. As mentioned earlier, Stuart Hall (1980), a highly influential cultural studies scholar, proposed the idea of encoding and decoding messages in media. The encoding of a message takes place when it is produced, and the sender creates a system of coded meanings based on how the intended audience understands the world. Decoding entails the interpretation of received messages, which can be verbal or non-verbal, such as interpreting emotions or body language (Hall, 1980). Encoding and decoding messages can happen unintentionally through the transmission

of information across generations (p. 140). Hall identified three possible positions from which audiences decode messages: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated code, and the oppositional code (p. 142). The dominant-hegemonic position refers to accepting the messages without question, while the negotiated code involves accepting some parts of the message and rejecting others. On the other hand, the oppositional code involves interpreting the message contrary to what was intended. Hall emphasizes that significant political moments occur when events that were previously decoded in a negotiated way begin to be interpreted in an oppositional manner (p. 144).

According to Newton and Williams (2016, p. 332), visual memories can substantially impact our perceptions more than verbal memories. Once these visual images are stored in our memory, they can be perceived as genuine or authentic and can shape our intuitive understanding of the world (Newton & Williams, 2016). Murray Edelman's exploration of symbolic politics and political psychology sets the stage for the elusive nature of truth itself (1985, p. 19), especially within visual political communication studies. Historically, photos have served as evidence or proof of claims that an event happened or that someone was present; they are documents that can support claims (Schill, 2012, p. 129). Amid the complexities, there has been an inherent trust in the ethical standards of journalism, anchoring the public's reliance on the accuracy and authenticity of journalistic images. While viewers may create their own meanings, journalistic photos have carried an implied promise of authenticity grounded in societal expectations and professional ethics (Wheeler, 2002). This is due, in part, to the professional contract they enter with a news organization, which will be discussed further in later sections of this literature review. The public has been able to assume that

images presented as journalistic truthfully depict objects, events, or people that existed in real time and space (NPR). The rise of doctored images or manipulated scenes violates the expectation held of journalistic images and has, therefore, shaken public trust in journalistic images. Although the mode in which the public receives news is shifting to digital devices and away from print or T.V. (Liedke & Wang, 2023), the news was long the material that the public used to learn and think about the world, and the information was expected to be reliable (Fosdick & Fahmy, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

The framing and presentation of images influence viewer perceptions, shaping interpretations intuitively and cognitively. Research shows that, for example, viewers tend to perceive individuals photographed from a low angle as more active, powerful, and dominant (Kraft, 1987; Mandell & Shaw, 1973). Additionally, various aspects of the image, including composition, lighting, proximity, and setting, can serve as visual cues for viewers (Schill, 2012). Factors such as motion, camera proximity, and background can shape viewers' perceptions of the subject's traits and mood conveyed in the image (Schill, 2012, p. 128). Unfortunately, informing viewers of the visual techniques, such as angles, used to showcase power does not impact their judgments of power (Merkt et al., 2022). Moreover, these visual techniques are not just isolated factors of photography but are part of a larger context in which the role of photojournalists and the ethical implications of their work come into play. As previously discussed, the evolution of photojournalism underscores the nuanced understanding that images are not records of reality, but are interpretations of reality shaped by many factors. From the ethical dilemmas faced by photojournalists to the inherent biases embedded in photography,

the discourse surrounding visual communication at the highest levels of power captures a distinct tension between subjectivity and objectivity. It highlights a reliance on photojournalists to follow professional ethics.

The American public's perception of truth in photojournalism is complex, shaped by the perceived credibility of images and the professional standards maintained by photojournalists. However, since the invention of cameras in the 19th century, photos have been subject to manipulation. Hippolyte Bayard made one of the first documented manipulated photos after his work in photographic development techniques was overshadowed by the announcement of the daguerreotype process by Louis Daguerre in 1839 (Lerner, 2014). In 1840, Bayard created a staged photograph titled "Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man," where he depicted himself as a drowned man with a note expressing his disappointment in not receiving enough credit for his invention (Getty Museum, n.d.).

The rise of citizen photojournalism has further challenged professional photojournalism's authority and raises additional questions about authenticity and truth, complicating the field (Allan & Peters, 2015). A study investigating photo credibility did show that the public perceives photographs taken by newspaper-staff photojournalists as more credible and believable than stock photos (Mortensen & Gade, 2018). This perception is likely due to the professional values, such as ethics and objectivity, that underpin journalism (Mäenpää, 2014). However, the digital transformation of the media landscape has complicated this perception, as the public is now exposed to a mix of professional and citizen journalism, challenging the traditional values and practices of photojournalism (Greenwood & Thomas, 2015; Mäenpää, 2014). Furthermore, the rapid

influx of artificial intelligence (A.I) applications, which make it possible to instantly create images that look as real as ethically derived photojournalism, compounds the challenges to understanding how the public responds to realistic images. Although this dissertation does not examine practices of overt manipulation of photographs, it is essential to acknowledge that how industry professionals respond to the challenges facing truth in visual journalism will be critical to sustaining the public's trust in the truthfulness of photojournalism (Mortensen & Gade, 2018). Collectively, these factors contribute to a nuanced understanding of the public's perception of truth in photographs, emphasizing the interplay between image authenticity, the context in which images are consumed, and the evolving standards of truth in visual representation.

Visual Representation

Visual culture scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) defined representation as using language and images to create meaning about the world (p. 12). They wrote that visual images have been used “to represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts” (p. 13). Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) believed that digital media would positively unite the world into a global village and coined the phrase “the medium is the message” (1964), which emphasized that the medium used to convey a message is more important than the message itself. This idea is particularly relevant in political communication, where visual representations play a crucial role. Visuals are a powerful tool of communication, as Bock (2021) wrote, “To see is to know; think of how we even use the phrase “I see,” to mean, “I understand,” (p.2). Visual representations are important in political communication and

are part of the reason televised debates became normalized (Edwards, 2012). Audiences, and in turn, voters, read into a candidate's internal traits, such as their character, sincerity, and potential for leadership, when viewing such debates (Edwards, 2012, p. 681). Due partially to this, it is crucial to consider how a politician is represented in the media because these representations and viewer interpretations can impact a voter's opinion of a candidate. In political communication, representation can refer to several other aspects of communication than the above. For instance, representation in politics can often refer to which demographics are more important to various politicians. This importance can, of course, influence the visual media representation of such groups. Claiming to represent all Americans is often a lofty and impossible-to-achieve goal because presidents inherently represent the constituency that elected them. According to Erickson (2000), presidents frequently address politically influential and marginalized audiences through their rhetoric and political actions. They do so to gain political support and sometimes to create a hegemonic impression of shared powers and political inclusiveness (Erickson, 2000, p. 363). The idea of representation invoked here refers to how the world is reflected to us via various attempts to mirror the world. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) wrote that "we only make meaning of the material world through specific cultural contexts" (p. 13). Often, we are doing so through visual communication, as visuals help us navigate through the world and constructed images make up much of what we consume (Bock, 2021, p. 3)

A key aspect of what makes images unique and effective in their communication of ideas and what they represent in society is the emotional aspect. This is done, in part, by incorporating elements of visual rhetoric such as angles, lighting, and framing.

Images of particularly traumatic events complement news coverage to create a public understanding of them, as they are often too difficult for most people to imagine (Bleiker, 2018). Visual communication can inspire hope by illustrating positive outcomes and potential solutions, making the public believe their actions can trigger significant change and a brighter future (Dunaway, 2018). Research indicates that people tend to be drawn to positive emotional appeals featured by political candidates in visual communication (Homan & Schumacher, 2023). These images act as if they can bridge the emotional gap for audiences by expressing emotions more efficiently than words (Bleiker, 2018, p. 9). Focusing first on the broad idea of photography and visual communication, Grabe and Bucy (2009) wrote that decoding visual information happens almost automatically (p. 15). They wrote that this is especially true when viewing intensely negative images that correspond with genuine threats posed to Americans. These images “demand viewer attention and mobilize cognitive resources for processing” (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 16). As mentioned briefly, how people interpret images varies considerably based on cultural contexts. Because audiences bring different experiences and associations to the table, visual images are often interpreted differently than how the image’s creator intended them. Different interpretations do not necessarily mean that a person is misinterpreting an image or that the image was unsuccessful in the producer’s endeavor. Audiences create meanings themselves by consuming the image (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 46). As stated above, the process of decoding messages is unique to each individual, and their interpretations can align with the intended meaning (dominant-hegemonic or negotiated code) or diverge (oppositional code), demonstrating the dynamic relationship between media producers

and consumers in shaping interpretations and meanings (Hall, 1980). As photography developed in the nineteenth century, so did politics as we know it today. Due to this, photography became an integral player in the American political arena (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 95). As both fields began to develop with the advancements of technology, it became clear that controlling political images in the news was a primary goal of politicians (Bennett, 2016, p. 105). As such, journalists became key players in the political arena, whether they liked it or not, and whether politicians wanted to acknowledge them as holding this role (Cook, 2005).

Most images are created with an intended meaning by the producer (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 45). Even journalists who document what happens in front of their cameras impart an intended meaning of the truth, as there is no singular 'truth', but rather multiple interpretations shaped by various perspectives and contexts. Often, intentionally or unintentionally, news photos present persuasive visual factors that can impact a viewer's interpretation of the represented subject or situation. In visual communication, the term 'iconicity' is frequently used when discussing particularly salient photographs. According to Dahmen and Morrison (2015), photographs have a unique ability to "stick with us" and eventually become imprinted as a photographic icon of a moment or historical event (p. 659). As a photo becomes widely circulated and eventually associated with a subject or emotion, it becomes iconic. The iconicity of political photos can significantly impact the public's opinion, especially when the focus of political coverage is on the character traits of a politician (Edwards, 2012, p. 684). Numerous studies have shown that audiences tend to forget information shared verbally much more frequently than information shared visually (Bleiker, 2018). The visual

representation of political leaders can become a potent source of information referencing facial expressions and the associated emotions of that expression, which are essential to nonverbal communication and shared understanding (Edwards, 2012). However, it can also lead to distrust of information further down the road. Photographs may eventually be regarded “with suspicion” due to “their ability to tap a non-rational aspect of experience, particularly in relation to propagandistic uses of symbols and so-called emotional triggers” (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 21). Creators frequently use symbols to tap into the emotional aspect of visual communication. Bennett (2016) wrote that words are used as symbols for objects and ideas, whereas “[f]lags, emblems, and uniforms are symbols of nationalism, group identity, or authority” (p. 102). Even people can represent a symbolic topic such as patriotism (Bennett, 2016). This point brings up an important observation about the president as a spectacle. The presidential spectacle occurs because audiences perceive the president as someone who performs the role of president (Erickson, 2000, p. 357). Symbolic messages become even more potent in political communication when people supplement the facts and feelings necessary to complete their interpretation of an image (Bennett, 2016, p. 110). While photos first use symbols to represent ideas or beliefs, perhaps subconsciously, the image itself can become the symbol. One could argue that this is when an image turns into an icon. Over time, a historical event can be recognized primarily by a photographic representation called to mind rather than by its political content (Bleiker, 2018, p. 8).

Herein lies the rhetorical power of images and, therefore, the need for continued research on visual communication in politics. Photojournalism “locks in” the moment and makes audiences think of many historical events as a singular image or visual

symbol (Edwards, 2012, p. 683). It is vital to consider the symbolic representations presented in an image and then created by an image. In doing so, scholars can better understand the emotional reactions created by political visual communication. These emotional reactions need not be recognized by the audience in order to be effective. For example, Crigler and Heyron (2017) wrote that subliminal messages in political communication can cause voters to process information without being aware they are doing so (p. 669). These subtle influences highlight the necessity for engaging content to capture and maintain public interest. If the news were boring, no one would consume it. Therefore, as Maltese (1994) wrote, "News is drama, and drama thrives on conflict" (p. 1). If the photos of high-ranking politicians were merely that of entertainment interest, then the "truth" issue would not be as important. However, political photos presented in the news media are often treated and viewed as "real." Bennett (2016) wrote that even images with "the most dubious links to reality" can cause people to take action in the real world and thereby affect elections, "the acceptance of oppressive laws or ideas, the labeling of social groups, support for ill-considered wars such as the Iraq War, or tolerance of chronic social and economic problems" (Bennett, 2016, p. 101). Politicians can effectively distract the news media from other issues that would be big on a slow news day by successfully spinning a story or piece of information. While reporters may want to monitor the government's actions and keep the public informed of its performance, they are often bound by the economics of news production to chase the more dramatic story (Graber & Dunaway, 2018). The White House consistently wants to be viewed from the most flattering angle possible in the news, or at the very least, to avoid being shown in an unflattering light (Graber & Dunaway, 2018, p. 227). In doing

so, they raise issues of accountability and trust in the visual representation received by audiences and reporters themselves.

As a tool for capturing reality, photography is inherently subjective, as framing, lighting, and perspective choices influence the result. Additionally, the photographer's presence alters the scene they document, compounding the subjectivity. The ethics and professional standards upheld by photojournalists are critical in maintaining public trust, yet the potential for manipulation and the rise of citizen journalism introduce skepticism. The encoding and decoding of visual messages further complicate the interpretation of photos, with audiences' cultural contexts and personal experiences shaping their understanding. The dynamic interplay among the creation, dissemination, and reception of visual content highlights the significance of continued research in visual communication, particularly in political imagery and journalism ethics. Understanding these processes is vital in navigating the evolving media landscape and sustaining the credibility of photojournalism.

Visual Literacy

Examining the foundational concepts that shape the collective understanding of visual communication is essential. Visual literacy is a crucial factor in this regard, particularly in the modern, technology-driven society we live in today. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) underscores the growing significance of visual literacy in today's visually saturated world, noting its role in enabling individuals to engage in visual culture fully and enhancing their capacity to evaluate and generate visual information critically. Visual literacy is an interdisciplinary skill set encompassing the capacity to interpret, negotiate, and derive meaning from visually presented information

(ALA). John Debes, a co-founder of the International Visual Literacy Association, defined visual literacy as a collection of vision-related competencies developed through sensory experiences (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997). Debes emphasized that these competencies enable individuals to discern and interpret visible phenomena encountered in their surroundings, whether actions, objects, or symbols, natural or artificial. Similarly, Marlene Avgerinou and John Ericson (1997) argue in *A Review of the Concept of Visual Literacy* that visual literacy encompasses a broad spectrum of abilities, including the ethical and practical creation and dissemination of visual information. They highlight that visual literacy extends beyond passive consumption to encompass active engagement in creating and ethically using visual media, identifying visual thinking, communication, learning, and design as fundamental components.

The idea that photography can be considered a language emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Research compared specific elements of photography, such as camera angle, light contrast, number of lights, background tone, and print density, to other codified languages in order to define and dissect the “grammar” of photography (for example, Kepes, 1944; Tannenbaum & Fosdick, 1960). This comparison extends beyond metaphor, offering avenues for seeking solutions to shared challenges across disciplines (Fosdick & Fahmy, 2007). The subjective nature of photography underscores the significance of visual literacy regarding understanding political photography. As Berger (1998) writes, the variables requiring decisions by photographers illustrate the complexity of photography and why it goes beyond being merely a record of reality. As stated above, these decisions encompass factors such as viewpoint, framing, composition, angle, lighting, and focus. Recognizing and understanding photography’s

rhetorical and production aspects is essential for effective communication, tying back to the core of visual literacy.

Visual Aesthetics

Understanding visual aesthetics is integral to studying photography and photojournalism because a photograph's artistic and expressive components can influence how messages resonate with audiences (Petrovici & Szabo, 2018). Visual aesthetics encompasses artistic elements like composition, color, and style, all of which enrich the storytelling process of journalistic photos (Vissers & Wagemans, 2023). These factors hold particular significance, given the pivotal role of composition and aesthetic value in capturing audience attention and effectively communicating messages (Caple, 2012). Visual aesthetics bolster the storytelling power of photojournalism by rendering content more engaging and credible (Berezhnaia, 2018).

Public Trust and Journalism Ethics

Public confidence in American journalism has steadily waned since the early 1970s, signaling a prolonged skepticism regarding the media's role in democracy (Schudson, 2022). Numerous factors contribute to this dwindling trust, including the collapse of traditional business models in the news media, sensationalized coverage such as "clickbait," and the perception that influential individuals with personal agendas control the media (Lee, 2018; Quackenbush, 2012). Overall, when assessing the trustworthiness of news stories, the majority of U.S. adults consider multiple aspects such as the news organization publishing it, the sources cited in the story, their gut instinct, the person sharing it online, and the specific journalist reporting it, according to

research conducted by PEW Research Center (Gramlich, 2021). Republicans have historically been more likely than Democrats to perceive news coverage as biased, with Republicans more likely than Democrats to believe that news coverage favors one side (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). Most of those who perceive a bias in news coverage attribute the bias to news organizations rather than individual journalists (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). The primary reason cited for unfair news coverage is the pushing of a political agenda (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). Confidence in journalists' intentions and abilities remains low, with fewer than half of U.S. adults expressing confidence in journalists to act in the public's best interests or believing that other Americans have confidence in the institution (Gottfried et al., 2020). Moreover, while most Americans expect news to be accurate, a significant portion believe that news organizations generally attempt to cover up mistakes when they occur (Gottfried et al., 2020). Concerns about the future of journalism as a public trust underscore the need for transparency, integrity, and engagement with the public (Dickson & Topping, 2000; Lewis, 2019; Heyamoto & Milbourn, 2018) The scrutiny of presidential images in photojournalism further emphasizes the importance of this research, as these visuals play a crucial role in shaping public perception and trust in both the leaders and the media that cover them.

Professional journalists adhere to ethical guidelines on authenticity, sensitivity, and integrity (Lavoie, 2010; Zguri, 2014; Yaacob & Mohamad-Saleh, 2018). These guidelines prioritize truthfulness in visual communication and address the ethical challenges posed by a digital world. The primary objective of visual journalism is to inform and communicate knowledge to the viewer, much like a headline or lede (Newton

& Williams, 2006, p. 336). The shared cultural understanding that journalists present the “truth” of an event to the best of their ability did not simply form out of thin air. Founded in 1909 (SPJ n.d.), the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) wrote a code of ethics in 1926 emphasizing four fundamental principles: seeking truth and reporting it, minimizing harm, acting independently, and being accountable and transparent. Building upon this, the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) implemented its code of ethics, emphasizing truthful representation while avoiding manipulating images to deceive or mislead (NPPA n.d.). Violations of the ethical standards set for journalism will likely lead to termination, reflecting the seriousness with which news organizations regard ethics. For example, in 2006, Reuters discovered that photographer Adnan Hajj had digitally altered photographs of the Israel-Lebanon conflict to exaggerate its effects. As a result, Reuters removed all of his photographs from their database and strengthened their guidelines on photo manipulation (NBC News, 2006). In 2014, the A.P. severed ties with freelance photographer Narciso Contreras after he disclosed that he had removed a video camera from the corner of a photo taken while covering the war in Syria (Estrin, 2014).

The book *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach* features several scholars who offer insights into the ethical considerations that journalists must navigate. Since journalists must adhere to professional ethical codes, the public views them as public servants rather than just members of a profession. Therefore, publishing a story that serves only the interests of a particular company, without any value to the public, would be an improper use of the professional expertise of the journalists involved, even if it were completely accurate (Elliot & Ozar, 2014, p. 12). Visual journalists, in particular,

are responsible for accurately portraying events within the social context of journalism, striving to present a reasonable truth amid subjective challenges and awareness of visuals' influencing power (Newton & Williams, 2006). A successful visual journalist observes and captures "decisive moments," a concept introduced by Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952). These fleeting moments occur when aesthetically pleasing elements converge within a frame, showcasing the most compelling or intriguing moment of an event or other significant occurrence (Newton & Williams, 2014, p. 336).

Understanding journalistic ethical guidelines is crucial, particularly given the professional backgrounds of interviewees and the subsequent research findings detailed in later sections. The debate over whether photography reflects reality or reflects the photographer's subjectivity highlights the ethical complexities inherent in media photography, emphasizing the need for a careful balance between authenticity and sensitivity in journalistic practices (Miller & Dahmen, 2020).

Photography and Access at the White House

Still photography plays a pivotal role in documenting White House events, serving as a critical tool for ensuring transparency, historical accuracy, and public engagement.

Independent documentation by journalists is crucial as it provides the public with a view of presidential activities, allowing citizens to witness events without the mediation of White House image management strategies and gatekeepers (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017).

The watchdog role, understood and valued by visual journalists, underscores the importance of photojournalism in maintaining a check on presidential power by documenting events in an unbiased manner (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017). The Obama administration's approach to image control, involving excluding photojournalists from

certain events, illustrates the tension between the White House's desire to manage its image and the press's role in providing a transparent view of the presidency (Gleason & Hansen, 2017).

The media play a crucial role in communicating with the public. The White House relies on media outlets and social media platforms to share its message, while the media depends on access to the White House for information. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal work emphasizes the media's pivotal function in shaping the public agenda by prioritizing particular issues over others, a process known as agenda-setting. We, as human beings, cannot grasp the totality of news in the world and therefore "rely on the media to search and sift reality for the most important happenings" (McNair, 2011, p. 47). Further complicating the concept of "truth" as noted above, through agenda-setting the media also define a political 'reality' (McNair, 2011, p. 67-68). The White House communications team can also serve as an agenda setter by strategically orienting media attention toward specific topics and crafting narratives that align with its objectives. Consequently, news organizations act as both a source of pressure on the president and an indispensable resource for governance (Kumar, 2003). Visual journalism helps build a collective visual memory of events (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017) and impacts public opinion formation, including perceptions of government, national security, civil liberties, and support for military actions (Fahmy & Wanta, 2007). Professional photojournalists assigned to cover events and activities at the White House play a crucial role in capturing the president's public image, as they are among the select professionals responsible for sharing information about the president with the public. The White House press corps, a small group of journalists based in Washington

D.C. who are assigned to cover presidential news, face daily challenges in obtaining information and covering various political issues (WHCA). Access is a significant challenge, with varying levels of restrictions impacting a news photographer's ability to provide photos of the president to the public. The press serves as a watchdog, ensuring governmental accountability by reporting on actions and policies to the public (Bennet et al., 2007). However, access policies often hinder this role, as evidenced during the Obama administration, when restrictions on visual journalists impacted their ability to offer an independent visual account of presidential activities (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017). Visual journalists play a crucial role in democracy by capturing images that inform the public, but their effectiveness is compromised when access to government officials and events is restricted. The situation becomes more complicated with each new presidential administration as the White House's communication strategies change, impacting how visual journalists can access and report on events (Kumar, 2008). Influenced by the incoming administration's unique goals, priorities, and styles, these shifts lead to varying approaches for conveying information to the public and media. For instance, each administration will announce its goals at the beginning of their elected term. The Biden-Harris administration's announcement of their priorities and the Trump administration's release of their priorities titled the "Contract with the American Voter" illustrate distinct communication strategies by two recent administrations. The Trump Administration's 100-day action plan aimed at restoring prosperity, security, and accountability. Key priorities included repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act, implementing major tax reforms, reducing regulations, and strengthening border security (Donald J. Trump Contract With the American Voter, n.d.). The Biden-Harris

administration announced its priorities to address the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, racial equity, and climate change. They emphasized efforts to provide pandemic relief, support job creation, ensure racial justice, and implement policies for sustainable environmental practices (The White House, n.d.).

As this dissertation research reveals, many visual journalists who have worked in Washington, D.C., for decades have expectations based on their experiences of what photojournalists can and cannot do in the White House. Established ethical guidelines provided by organizations like the Society for Professional Journalists and the NPPA are crucial for maintaining accuracy, fairness, and transparency in professional journalism. Visual storytelling is pivotal in White House event documentation as a powerful tool for shaping public perception, creating a historical archive, and facilitating political communication. The strategic deployment of visuals is not unique to any one administration. The Presidential Archives' focus on collecting and managing presidential records and historical archives related to the president underscores the significance of visual storytelling in preserving national history and facilitating public access to governmental proceedings (Stanworth, 1996). Visual storytelling at the White House serves as a tool for political persuasion and image building and a means for historical preservation as well as public engagement.

Access

The evolution of journalists' access to the president reflects significant changes in media technologies, journalistic practices, and the political landscape. Initially, the relationship between the presidency and the press was mediated through traditional forms of journalism such as newspapers. Print journalism dominated the scene until the

advent of broadcast television, which introduced a new dynamic in presidential coverage (Clayman et al., 2010). The transition from print to broadcast media, followed by the rise of the internet and social media, has significantly influenced presidential journalism coverage (Clayman et al., 2006).

Journalistic practices have evolved, particularly with a shift towards more aggressive reporting starting in the 1970s (Schudson, 2022). Influenced by events like the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, this trend toward adversarial journalism has been supported by empirical studies, reflecting both the independence of journalists and their reliance on official sources (Meeks, 2017). The expectations set by previous administrations for frequent access and direct questioning by reporters have shaped the contemporary landscape in which photojournalists operate, with cable news and the internet increasing the public's expectations for immediate and unfiltered news (Kumar, 2003). From the Carter to the George W. Bush administrations, there was a noticeable shift towards more controlled access, including the practice of releasing photographs taken by White House staff, limiting the ability of photojournalists to provide an independent visual record of the presidency (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017). Limiting journalists' access to the White House affects their ability to perform their watchdog function, undermining transparency essential for democracy (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017). By changing the practices and procedures for White House events, the administration can control the president's image and better project his curated story (Gleason & Hansen, 2017), which diminishes the power of American democracy (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017). Practices of controlling access and issuing official photographs hinder journalists' ability to gather information independently, affecting the public's right to receive

unmanipulated visual news (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017). The Obama administration's approach to photojournalism access, mainly through Chief Official White House Photographer Pete Souza, sparked discussions about access and control, as mentioned earlier in this research. Souza requested an unprecedented level of access to the president (Gross, 2017), which raised questions about transparency and authenticity in political photography. Throughout his eight-year tenure as Obama's Chief Official White House Photographer, Pete Souza took nearly two million photographs (Gross, 2017). Previous research shows that journalists experienced reduced access to President Obama over time and were instead presented with what they considered to be "visual press releases" (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017). The Obama campaign's heavy use of technology, a practice that continued into the 2012 election, was unparalleled in presidential elections (Goodnow, 2013). Unconnected to Souza's request for more access, reducing access given to independent journalists is an intentional tactic used to steer the president's image toward an approved, favorable one (Marland, 2012, p. 216). The Obama administration's use of digital platforms for disseminating curated images highlights the intersection of technology, access, and presidential image management (Marland, 2012). Similarly, the Trump administration's use of Flickr to disseminate official images illustrates a continuation of the trend towards managed visual messaging, albeit through new digital platforms (Chun, 2018). Effectively using social media has become an essential aspect of communication for the White House to control the president's public image. Through this control, politicians are packaged into a planned, enticing image disseminated digitally to the public (Marland, 2012). As journalism continues to evolve in the digital age, questions about transparency,

authenticity, and the role of photojournalism in shaping public perception remain central to the discourse on access at the White House.

Shaping Coverage of the U.S. President

As stated above, the White House partially relies on media outlets to disseminate official communications, announcements, and policies. In contrast, the media depends on access to the White House for this information. News organizations act as both a source of pressure on the president and an essential resource for governance (Kumar, 2003). Given that most Americans do not meet their presidents in person, various media outlets, including newspapers, T.V. channels, radio stations, websites, and social media platforms, have become a primary conduit for shaping the public's understanding of the president and other elected officials. Visual journalism helps build a collective visual memory of events (Dahmen & Coyle, 2017) and significantly influences public opinion on government, national security, civil liberties, and support for military actions (Fahmy & Wanta, 2007). Crafting a public image dates back centuries and is evident in various cultures and civilizations. For instance, the visual representation of pharaohs in ancient Egypt evolved, reflecting moderated effigies rather than accurate depictions (Laboury, 2010).

Public visual representations of presidents are strategic uses of visual rhetoric and framing techniques aimed at shaping public perception and garnering support. The media plays a pivotal role in this endeavor by covering speeches, public appearances, discussing advertisements, branding, and creating visual media like photographs and videos (Schill, 2012). Political communication researcher Daniel Schill underscores the

role of visual communication in shaping political narratives and public perceptions, with the right image having the power to influence public opinion and reinforce political agendas (Schill, 2012). Psychologist Anthony Pratkanis highlighted the critical role of a president's team in interpreting social problems and setting a national agenda to shape the president's image (Pratkanis, 1992). The political image is a carefully crafted public persona designed to shape public perception, garner support, and convey specific messages or values. The shared industry understanding of "image" is in terms of reputation, trustworthiness, and credibility (Scammell, 2015). In political marketing, "image" goes beyond superficial appearances and is tied to political figures' and parties' credibility and track record. Scammell's research illustrates that these strategies often focus on creating a coherent and trustworthy image, which directly translates into the reputation of the political figure or party. In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag argues that photographs shape how we perceive and remember people and events, creating lasting impressions that often become synonymous with the subject's reputation. Political figures and celebrities use images to craft and control their public personas, directly shaping their reputations.

Further, the repetition of certain images reinforces specific narratives about individuals or events, solidifying a reputation over time (Sontag, 1977). Political images aim to endow politicians with "larger-than-life qualities" that represent broader national ideals (Strachan & Kendall, 2004). Presidents strategically use visual imagery to construct mythic personas, drawing on archetypal symbols to bolster their political images. Due to the fact that visual communication combines literal meanings with symbolic representations, it fuels myths (Bock, 2021, p.4). In fact, when a visual

message conflicts with a verbal one, viewers are more likely to believe what they see over what they heard or read (Bock, 2021, p.4). According to Bennett (2016), public images in politics are often predictable and follow various formulas of “new beginnings, familiar reassurances, promises to shrink big government, pledges to clean up the mess in Washington, and claims about being a political outsider,” (p. 101). Rather than representing a specific idea or point of information, photographs frequently represent a summation of symbolic moments (Edwards, 2012, p. 683; Simons, 2007). For instance, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush associated their presidencies with symbols like the American West, leveraging its patriotic and historical connotations to resonate with the American public (Schill, 2012). Candidates frequently adopt mythic archetypes in their visual presentations, such as the “glad-to-see-you” image, portraying themselves as dynamic speakers or beloved leaders to connect symbolically with voters. In general, many images of politicians and the political arena are based on formulas that have worked in the past, such as familiar symbols and standard slogans (Bennett, 2016).

Even journalists who aim to be unbiased cannot entirely separate themselves from the image-building intent of the information provided by the White House, as all of the information presented is inherently strategic. According to a 2010 White House report to Congress on strategic communication, the government’s understanding of strategic communication involves synchronizing words and deeds to engage intended audiences, with every government action sending a deliberate message. “This understanding of strategic communication is driven by a recognition that what we do is often more important than what we say because actions have communicative value and

send messages,” the report stated. “Every action that the United States Government takes sends a message.”

Persuasive communication

At this point, it is time to address the elephant in the room: propaganda. This dissertation does not address the question, “Are Official White House photos propaganda?” – the complexity of answering that question will require another research project. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the concept when examining the role of photojournalism in shaping the president’s public image. John Long, former president of the NPPA, contributed to the broader propaganda discussion in 2009 by distinguishing between accuracy in photojournalism and the concept of “truth.” Long argued that while “truth” is subjective, influenced by personal experiences and values, photojournalism aims for accuracy. He believes the difference between documentary photojournalism and propaganda lies in their ultimate values: propaganda manipulates images to promote a cause, whereas documentary photojournalism aims to depict scenes accurately. “One man’s ‘fair and balanced’ is another man’s pure bullshit” (Long, 2009).

For the purpose of this research, the term “persuasive communication” is more appropriate and provides a nuanced understanding of political communication efforts in this context. Propaganda is one form of persuasive communication. Presidents have employed persuasive communication tactics since the founding of the United States. George Washington used persuasive techniques to garner public support for the Jay Treaty in 1795, ultimately shifting opposition in the House of Representatives (Wood, 2009). Washington’s influence as the first president was significant, demonstrating the

long-standing use of persuasive communication in American politics. First, addressing some fundamental aspects of propaganda contributing to the collective understanding of persuasive communication as a broad topic is necessary. Edward Bernays, often called the “father of public relations,” offers a foundational perspective on propaganda. In his book *Propaganda* (1928), Bernays explores how mass communication can shape and manipulate public opinion. He argues that propaganda is an essential mechanism for the organized control of public opinion, describing it as a tool used by governments, businesses, and other organizations to influence the masses. “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” (Bernays, 1928, p. 9). In this context, while undoubtedly biased, propaganda is not necessarily negative or harmful. Lasswell provides another critical perspective. In *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), Lasswell defines propaganda as the deliberate expression of opinions or actions to influence others for predetermined ends through psychological manipulation.

As an overarching umbrella term encompassing propaganda, persuasive communication focuses on influencing attitudes and behaviors through reasoned arguments and ethical appeals. As referenced earlier in the discussion of visual rhetoric, Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric* lays the groundwork for understanding persuasive communication by presenting the three critical elements of effective persuasion: ethos, or credibility; pathos, or emotional appeal; and logos, or logical argument. These elements are crucial for creating persuasive arguments that captivate the audience through visual rhetoric, which conveys ethos, pathos, and logos by using imagery, color, composition, and visual arguments to influence viewers’ attitudes. One definition of

persuasive communication is how attitudes are changed, without duress, through transmitting messages (Hovland et al., 1953). It is an effective strategy when the message's communicator identifies and aligns with the audience's values, beliefs, or experiences, creating a sense of shared identity (Burke, 1950). This is an apt definition since persuasive visual communication in politics encompasses the strategic use of imagery and visuals to influence public opinion and voter behavior. The significance of visuals in persuasion lies in their ability to be processed quickly, more quickly than words (Bock, 2021, p.3) and sometimes even unconsciously, by the audience, making them a crucial tool in the political strategist's toolkit (Miles, 2023).

In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1986), William Stott writes that "Photographs... used direction persuasion. They present evidence and let it work upon the audience if it will," (p. 33). The critical differences between propaganda and persuasion lie in the message's intent, methods, and ethical considerations.

Propaganda is defined as a deliberate, systematic attempt to manipulate and direct behavior to achieve a desired response (Pratkanis, 1992; Huckin, 2016). In contrast, persuasion is a complex, continuing, and reciprocal process defined more broadly as "any message intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of others" (Stiff & Mongeau, 2016, p. 4). However, even efforts to "document" social events and phenomena can be accused of being propaganda (Stott, 1986). Documents themselves increase shared knowledge of public facts, "but sharpen it with feeling; put us in touch with the perennial human spirit, but show it struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment," (Stott, 1986, p. 18) and their mildest goal is "public education," (p. 21). It is important to note that "documentary" means to do just that,

document without treatment or tampering (Stott, 1986, p. 269). Addressing the concept of persuasive communication is crucial in the context of photography efforts at the White House because one aim of this dissertation research is to highlight the ethical considerations and complexities involved in visual political communication. By creating a solid and decisive image of the president through controlled rhetoric and visual communication, the White House can attempt to influence how the public accepts his viewpoints and decisions made on behalf of the United States. Although the goal of this dissertation is not to make a definitive determination regarding the debate about whether official White House photographs are propaganda, this study does seek to understand the intentions of those creating the president's public image in order to analyze the ethics of presidential photography.

Image management

The concept of pseudo-events, coined by American historian Daniel Boorstin (1971), sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between the White House and the media in image management. In short, pseudo-events are events created to be reported on by the news media and discussed by the public. These events are strictly managed and resemble news events that require journalists to be in attendance (Marland, 2012). However, they are not necessarily executed to perfection every time. Minor missteps or unplanned happenings can throw the perfect event awry. Numerous examples would count as a political misstep on the president's part. A 2020 example happened at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point when former President Trump looked unsteady while walking down a ramp accompanied by the academy's superintendent. This 17-second video clip caused the world to question the state of his health (Haberman,

2020). Another example appears in the coverage of President George W. Bush surveying the destruction of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana in 2005. One photograph impacted the public's trust in the government (Whipple, 2017). The photo depicted Bush looking out of a window from Air Force One as he flew over a flooded area, and the public interpreted the photo as the president looking detached and uninterested in the destruction below. Years later, Bush stated that the whole situation and resulting photograph was "a huge mistake" (Wing, 2010). This example is a statement of the importance of physical indicators such as gaze, facial expression, and gestures in forming impressions and creating political persuasion (Nagel et al., 2012, p. 835) — and in viewer interpretation of images. While these events commonly occur and reporters cover them, more research is needed on pseudo-events in the news. Since access to the White House granted to independent journalists is diminishing, they even have to fight to attend a pseudo-event (Marland, 2012, p. 229). Moreover, the continuous focus from the news media on presidential actions and stances ensures that even well-intentioned journalists contribute to the spread of persuasive communication from the White House, shaping public perceptions and narratives. White House officials play a crucial role in providing access and information to reporters, facilitating media coverage that amplifies presidential narratives and agendas (Kumar, 2008; Schubert, 2014). The continuous focus of news media on presidential actions and stances ensures that even meticulously planned events can contribute to the perpetuation of the president's public image. By utilizing pseudo-events for media coverage, the White House focuses the public's attention on activities designed to make the president look like a leader (Grossman & Kumar, 1981, p. 232). As presidents strategically adopt communication

methods that promote their image and orchestrate pseudo-events to project leadership qualities, it becomes evident how the White House and the media maintain a symbiotic relationship.

In contemporary politics, the White House adeptly manages settings and events to orchestrate visually appealing scenes, capitalizing on the power of photos to influence public perception (Erickson, 2000). Recognizing the dominance of visual mediums over auditory ones, the White House prioritizes camera crews over word reporters to control the narrative (Maltese, 1994). This prioritization is also due, in part, to the fact that the White House can control all the visual outcomes of a televised announcement. In contrast, they cannot control what a word reporter writes afterward. This manipulation often emphasizes style over substance, shaping public discourse and blurring distinctions between significant and superficial issues (Erickson, 2000). The controlled “photo opportunity” dramatically alters how presidents are publicly portrayed visually (Erickson, 2000, p. 358). The White House creates these scenes intending to manipulate, entice, and amaze audiences (Erickson, 2000). They do so knowing people are likelier to watch than listen to a politician (Erickson, 2000). The manipulation of the news media to emphasize style over substance has become one of the essential aspects of the modern presidency (Maltese, 1994, p. 238), highlighting the importance of journalistic access and following journalism ethics in order to ensure that the public receives comprehensive and truthful reporting.

Advancements in visual technologies have revolutionized the dissemination of images, enabling rapid circulation and broader reach (Bleiker, 2018). Politicians, particularly presidents, recognize the significance of crafting a meticulously curated

image to garner public support (Bennett, 2016). Consequently, strategists use communication tactics to control media narratives and shape public opinion (Maltese, 1994). Since the advent of visual technologies in the not-too-distant past, they have developed and changed in a few fundamental ways. First, the speed at which images can circulate is unparalleled to what it once was. Previously, it would have taken days to develop film and publish a photo taken in the middle of a war zone. Second, in tandem with the previous point, these images can be published within minutes of being taken and reach a significantly larger audience (Bleiker, 2018, p. 5). Due in part to this, the need for large media networks has diminished significantly. Further, politicians have noticed the importance of curating a well-maintained image or persona presented to the public. Technology has significantly transformed the visual representation of the U.S. president in various ways, reflecting changes in media production, consumption, editing, dissemination, political campaigning, and public perception. The proliferation of cameras and digital editing technologies has blurred the lines between the public and private personas of the president, allowing for both the manipulation of images for editorial commentary and the creation of a more intimate, behind-the-scenes view of presidential life (Messaris, 1997). This technological evolution has also enabled presidents to engage with the public in unprecedented ways, as seen in President Barack Obama's adept use of the internet and social media to foster a sense of connection and public visibility. As demonstrated by Donald Trump's use of Facebook and Twitter, personalized communication strategies on social media have made the public image of politicians more visible than their political parties, sometimes leading to contradictions within party communication strategies (Tasente, 2020).

Since the news media thrive on dramatic stories, White House officials attempt to control stories about conflict and controversy within their ranks, making the president look weak or like an ineffective leader (Maltese, 1994). To avoid this, political communication officials do everything within their power to set the agenda for the news media regarding the president. It is essential to do so because the president will be in the news regardless. Presidents receive more news coverage than any other politician in the United States, which often focuses on who they are as a person (Graber & Dunaway, 2018, p. 225). By attempting to “spin” a story, the White House is essentially asking the news media to “play along,” whether they realize it or not, which is another question for a different dissertation. Successfully spinning a story can be done through communication via briefings or by providing background information, but frequently, White House officials can spin a story simply by helping journalists do their work (Maltese, 1994, p. 215) by providing them with press releases and answering questions before they are asked. This approach limits the potential for unprepared or uncontrolled interactions with the press, which can lead to disastrous news stories or simply focusing public attention away from where it “should” be.

Despite efforts to project authenticity, political photos are carefully staged to evoke specific emotions and perceptions (Erickson, 2000). Visual images, whether still or moving, are inherently subjective and prone to manipulation, challenging their status as unbiased reflections of reality (Bleiker, 2018). Politicians stage their visual interactions with the media to create an illusion of authenticity that masks the political values presented in a photograph. They focus on “coherence, sensitivity, and care. Indeed, spectator receptiveness is dependent upon how well presidents articulate

performance fragments” (Erickson, 2000, p. 359). Capturing faces, emotions, and events in meaningful and memorable ways helps create the assumption about the neutrality of photographs (Bleiker, 2018, p. 13). Even though an ever-increasing amount of attention is being paid to the idea that images are easily staged and manipulated, it is not a new concern among scholars. Since the advent of such photographic technology, there have been arguments for and against the idea that photos represent an unbiased truth about the world (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). While it is becoming increasingly common for audiences to question the authenticity of a photo in terms of digital manipulation, they are not questioning manipulation that happens before photographers even arrive. While these images are still frequently perceived to be “an unmediated copy of the real world, a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 17), that is not the case due to the very nature of political communication. According to Bleiker (2018), photos represent the world from a particular angle and likely exclude as much information as they include.

This dissertation draws on several critical threads in the presidential photography literature, including truth, visual literacy, ethics, and image building. These threads explore the authenticity and accuracy of images presented to the public, how viewers analyze and interpret visual messages, the ethical considerations and responsibilities of photographers, editors, and media outlets, and the use of photography to create a desired public perception of the president and the presidency. By examining these threads, this dissertation seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of photography at the White House. One of the most important factors to consider is how access to the president and the White House affects the

various elements of the presidential image. The level of access determines which events photographers capture and how they present them, shaping the narrative shared with the public. Limited or controlled access can result in a curated portrayal of the presidency, highlighting certain aspects while ignoring others, which can impact the perceived accuracy of the images. The visual literacy of viewers can affect their ability to determine if the images they see present only a biased perspective. Ethical considerations become critical when access is restricted, as photographers and media must navigate the balance between transparency and propaganda. Access is crucial in constructing the presidential image, as it enables or restricts the creation of a specific image of leadership and governance, influencing how the public perceives the president.

Addressing the gaps

Despite extensive discourse regarding the role of photographers in political photojournalism, significant gaps remain in understanding how photographers perceive their work and their role and how their perceptions affect the images they make. Current research overlooks photographers' voices, neglecting their self-perceptions and ethical frameworks, particularly among White House photographers. Although White House officials regulate White House photography, the diversity in photographers' outputs reflects unique perspectives and intentions. Given that a dozen photographers in the same room can produce a dozen distinct photos, it is crucial to understand how these photographers view their roles within such constraints. How do personal and professional perspectives influence their work? Examining the self-perceptions of White House photographers in comparison with those of news photographers sheds light on

how they navigate their roles and potential influences on the making of presidential images the public ultimately sees.

One major research gap concerns the ethical perspectives and practices of former photojournalists transitioning to White House roles. The shift from a newsroom to a controlled governmental environment raises questions about how their ethical frameworks adapt. Although previous studies have addressed the ethics of political photojournalism, there is a lack of focused analysis on how these individuals reconcile past experiences with new demands and restrictions as official White House photographers. How their previous training and journalistic principles influence their current work and whether they face unique ethical dilemmas are important concerns. This research gap leaves a need for a comprehensive understanding of how they maintain professional integrity, balance truth-telling with governmental narratives, and manage potential biases.

Based on the literature, background information, and theoretical foundations, I developed four research questions to explore the roles and impacts of the White House and news photographers, particularly in capturing photos of the president of the United States. I designed these research questions to investigate the roles of Official White House photographers and news photographers and their resulting photographs in the context of photographing the president of the United States. Using a theoretical framework merging framing and visual rhetoric theories through symbolic interactionism theory, this research investigates how photographers frame their roles, discusses their decisions while photographing the president, and examines the influences of their perceptions and decisions on their photographic practices. Further, Official White House

photographers' access level compared to press photographers affects the types of images captured. This differential access influences the photographs' framing, content, and perceived authenticity. By drawing on literature and background information focused on visual truth, photojournalism, and ethics in the field, the following research questions were developed:

Research Questions

RQ1: How do White House and news photographers perceive their role when photographing moments and events that include the president of the United States?

For the context of this research, a few terms in each of the research questions need to be more clearly defined and connected to the above theoretical framework. *White House photographers* are professional photographers officially employed by the Executive Office of the President. Their primary responsibility is photographing activities and events involving the president, the vice president, the first family, and the broader administration. In contrast, *news photographers* are defined as professional photographers in the press pool who work for media organizations. These photographers are granted access to cover the president and the White House, and their primary goal is to provide visual coverage of the president's activities and events for news reporting purposes. The concept "perceive" relates to how individuals interpret and form opinions about their responsibilities and actions based on their experiences, beliefs, and professional contexts. This study focuses on how White House and news photographers understand their roles. A "role" comprises the expectations,

responsibilities, and ethical standards that guide an individual's actions and decisions within their professional context. This includes the expectations and responsibilities of both the White House and news photographers. "Photographing" refers to capturing still visual images with a camera, which involves technical and artistic considerations.

"Moments and events" refer to the specific instances and occurrences that photographers capture, including planned and spontaneous occasions that are significant due to the presence and actions of the president. Understanding the role of the Official White House and news photographers entails examining their interpretations of their professional responsibilities, the specific expectations and ethical standards that guide their work, the technical and artistic processes they use when photographing, and the context of the moments and events they capture.

Given the different employers and purposes of their work, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the Official White House and news photographers may perceive their roles differently. According to framing theory, Official White House photographers may view their role as creating a positive image of the president by framing their subjects in ways that highlight their leadership and competence. In contrast, news photographers might perceive their role as fulfilling a watchdog function using frames that offer a balanced or critical view of the president, capturing both positive and negative moments. In addition, visual rhetoric theory suggests that Official White House photographers use visual elements designed to evoke admiration and trust, reinforcing the president's image as a capable leader. On the other hand, news photographers employ a broader range of visual rhetoric to promote critical reflection and transparency, highlighting both positive and controversial aspects of the president's actions.

By employing qualitative methods, such as interviews, this study aims to uncover the distinct professional dynamics and ethical considerations that shape how Official White House photographers and news photographers document the presidency.

RQ2: To what extent are White House photographs of the president similar to or different from press photographs?

“Similar” refers to the degree to which White House and press photographs of the president share common characteristics. This term covers various aspects like composition, setting, framing, and tone conveyed about the president. White House photographs are those taken by Office White House photographers and released by the White House. Press photographs are those taken by news photographers and distributed by news media. “Differences” denote the degree to which Official White House and press photographs diverge in their characteristics. These characteristics include variations in visual elements, framing, tone, and messages about the president. The differences reflect the distinct purposes and objectives of the two types of photography. While both the White House and press photographs utilize framing and visual rhetoric, the extent and nature of these elements may differ based on their respective purposes. The White House, as an employer, strives to project a controlled image of the president that aligns with its political agenda and public relations strategy. As a result, the framing and visual rhetoric used in White House photographs are carefully selected and curated. In contrast, news organizations operate under journalistic standards and seek to provide balanced coverage while often highlighting

accountability. Their photographs aim to inform the public and offer a range of perspectives on the president's actions and character. Consequently, the frames and visual rhetoric in press photographs may tend to be more varied and less controlled, reflecting a broader spectrum of viewpoints, including negative imagery.

Given the distinct objectives and employers, it is reasonable to expect that photographs from the White House and press organizations will exhibit different frames and visual rhetoric. The White House's focus on positive portrayal contrasts with the press's commitment to objectivity and critical inquiry. This difference is evident in how each type of photograph frames the president and conveys messages, highlighting the contrasting approaches to visual representation in political photography.

RQ3: How do viewers/readers interpret the content and tone presented in White House and press photographs?

"Viewers/readers" are individuals who engage with photographs of the president. In the context of this study of presidential photography, these are members of the public who encounter and interpret photographs disseminated by the White House and news media. "Interpretation" is how viewers and readers make sense of this visual media. This process involves decoding the messages and meanings conveyed by photographs, which personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and socio-political contexts influence. "Content" pertains to the visual elements present in the photographs. In presidential photography, content includes people (such as the president and other political figures), settings (such as the Oval Office or public events), and actions and

activities (such as speaking or interacting with others). “Tone” refers to the perceived emotional and attitudinal quality conveyed by the photographs. It encompasses the mood and atmosphere that images project and evoke, ranging from formal and authoritative to relaxed and approachable.

It is reasonable to assume that the public may approach Official White House photographs with greater suspicion than press photographs. This skepticism arises from an awareness of the framing techniques and visual rhetoric employed by the White House to craft a specific image of the president and the administration. Viewers and readers, drawing from their personal experiences and socio-political contexts, interpret these frames and visual rhetoric, often questioning the authenticity and intent of Official White House photos. While some viewers may be adept at distinguishing between White House and press photographs based on framing and visual cues, others may not perceive a significant difference. This distinction is influenced by visual literacy and familiarity with political photography conventions. Despite this variability, the frames and visual rhetoric embedded in both White House and press photographs play crucial roles in shaping how viewers interpret the content and tone of these images.

RQ4: How do viewer/reader interpretations of White House and press photographs affect their views of the president?

“Views of the president” refer to the overall perception and evaluation of the president by members of the public. These views encompass opinions on the president’s character, competence, leadership quality, policy positions, and overall effectiveness. A

complex interplay of media representations, personal beliefs, cultural values, and sociopolitical contexts shapes such views. Visual rhetoric and frames depicted in both Official White House and press photographs are believed to play a crucial role in shaping viewers' perceptions, ultimately affecting their overall opinion of the president. White House photographs, which often exhibit positive framing and favorable visual rhetoric, may strengthen the public's perception of the president's abilities regarding competence, character, and leadership. Nevertheless, the influence of these images may be moderated by the public's potential skepticism toward authenticity, considering the possibility of bias and intentional manipulation. In contrast, press photographs are typically considered more objective and can have a more significant impact on shaping public opinion of the president. This is especially true when the photographs emphasize controversial or negative aspects of the president's actions and policies through their composition and visual rhetoric. The diverse interpretations of these photographs create a complex image of the president, incorporating both favorable and unfavorable depictions.

The literature reviewed in the above chapter examines the intricate relationship among visual communication, photojournalism, and public perception. Symbolic interactionism theory, as an encompassing merger of framing and visual rhetoric theories, serves as the interpretative lens for examining gaps in the literature through four research questions. It is important to consider how photographs, despite being mechanical reproductions, always offer subjective interpretations of reality. The concept of "reasonable visual truth" emphasizes the role of socially responsible and ethical photojournalists in documenting and authentically representing subjects. It is also

essential to review the encoding and decoding of messages in media, as well as the impact of visual memories on shaping perceptions, as these highlight the inherent trust in journalistic ethics and the public's reliance on the accuracy and authenticity of journalistic images. Review of the literature and core related concepts paves the way for examining broader questions of ethics and perceptions in presidential photography.

In the following chapter, I will outline the methods employed to address the research questions central to this study. This includes a description of the research design, data collection techniques, and analysis used to explore visual rhetoric decisions, framing choices, and symbolic interactionism in photography of the president. Additionally, I will explain how the core concepts in the research questions were operationalized, providing clear definitions and measurable indicators for each concept. By doing so, I aim to ensure a rigorous and systematic approach to this study.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

“I think that they always remember that they were picked
from a group of photojournalists to come inside.

Most of them are not studio photographers or anything like that.

Usually, they are somebody who's had a lot of experience in photojournalism.

So, I don't think they turn that button off.” - Diana Walker

The following section outlines the data collection and analysis methods and procedures used in this dissertation. A qualitative, mixed methods research design was employed to address the above research questions, incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews; focus groups; and a close reading of photographs. As noted

earlier, although the interview data analysis was initially guided by framing and visual rhetoric theories, as I delved deeper, I realized that these theories were not adequate. The factors at play in photographers' minds and practices proved to be more complex than either theory could account for. As my understanding of the data grew, I adapted my analysis to address the intricate and constantly evolving processes of photographing the president. Therefore, I started the analysis again, employing a grounded theory approach through which I aimed to allow theory to emerge. This design aimed to enhance the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the insights gained from the interviews and exploring fresh uses of theory. My interest in this research lay in exploring aspects that had yet to be thoroughly investigated, mainly focusing on the perspective of the photographers. Qualitative research prioritizes the voices and perspectives of participants, providing insight into their lived experiences and the process of photographing the president from their viewpoint. These techniques enable the collection of detailed and comprehensive data, which is especially useful for understanding complex social dynamics and interactions. Qualitative approaches excel in examining nuanced contexts and subtleties. They also offer flexibility, allowing iterative adaptation as the research progresses iteratively. Moreover, qualitative research enriches theory development by providing rich data that inform theoretical frameworks. I aimed to uncover patterns, themes, and relationships within the role, contributing to advancing existing theories. This research method prioritized exploration and discovery within the topic. The emphasis was on allowing the findings to emerge from the collected data rather than testing a hypothesis. A grounded theory approach to analyzing interview transcripts enabled patterns and themes to surface naturally from

the data. Additionally, the intention was to lay the groundwork for future research in this underexplored area.

Operational Definitions

In the following section, I will define how I measured core concepts in this study.

Official White House photographers are identified by their employment status with the Executive Office of the President. Their work includes taking photos at official events, private meetings, and the president's public appearances.

News photographers in the press pool are identified by their affiliation with accredited media organizations and their membership in the White House press pool. Their work includes taking photos at various presidential events, press conferences, and public appearances, then published in news outlets.

Regarding RQ1, perception is assessed through qualitative interviews with White House and news photographers, where they articulate their understanding and feelings about their professional duties and the significance they attach to their work. Their "role" is examined by analyzing the photographers' job descriptions, professional guidelines, and self-reported duties. Data are gathered through interviews to capture how photographers define their roles and responsibilities when covering the president. In this research, "moments and events" are defined by examining the types of occasions (e.g., press conferences, public appearances, private meetings) photographers document while covering the president or working for the White House.

Regarding RQ2, *similarities and differences* are measured by analyzing the visual and textual elements of selected photographs taken by press photographers and Official White House photographers using close reading techniques. These elements include the subject's appearance, setting, composition, and actions. Data were gathered through the interviews of photographers, through exploratory focus groups and through my own close reading. My analysis involves contrasting these elements, focusing on how each type of photograph frames the president, the tone it conveys, and the underlying messages it intends to communicate.

In RQ3, *viewers/readers* are individuals aged 18 and over who participated in the focus groups conducted for this study. Although not statistically representative of the general public, participants provided useful exploratory data for future, representative studies. *Interpret* is the process by which participants in the focus groups made sense of and assigned meaning to the visual elements of White House and press photographs. This process included their immediate reactions, the emotions they experienced, the narratives they constructed, and the judgments they formed about the subjects and events depicted in the photographs. Interpretation was assessed through verbal responses during the focus group discussions.

In the context of RQ3, *content* is defined as the elements and subjects present in the White House and press photographs, including people, objects, settings, and activities. Participants' descriptions and identifications of these elements during the focus groups were used as indicators for analyzing content interpretation. Finally, *tone* is defined as the perceived emotional and stylistic quality of the White House and press

photographs interpreted by the focus group participants. Tone encompasses formality, warmth, tension, positivity, negativity, and neutrality. The tone was evaluated based on participants' expressed feelings and perceptions during discussions, with specific attention to the language they use to describe their impressions of the photographs.

Finally, in RQ4, *views of the president* are assessed through qualitative data from focus group discussions. Participants express their opinions and attitudes towards the president, specifically in response to their interpretations of White House and press photographs. These views are then analyzed to identify patterns and correlations with the perceived content and tone of the images.

Data Collection

The primary focus of this research was on the lived experiences of photographers at the White House, opening avenues for additional questions and investigation. Information about the experiences of presidential photographers was gathered through semi-structured interviews, offering conversational flexibility while ensuring attention to predetermined topics. Interviews were chosen to explore news and Official White House photographers' daily, weekly, and yearly processes directly.

To develop the interview questions, I focused on operationalizing my research questions. I wanted to understand how they approached their work, not just how they did their daily duties. Seeking an external perspective to help prepare, I sought the advice of Chris Pietsch, an award-winning local photojournalist and Director of Photography for Gannett Newspapers in Oregon, *The Register-Guard* in Eugene, and

the *Statesman Journal* in Salem. To ensure I was adequately prepared for the upcoming interviews, I conducted a mock interview with Pietsch to practice collecting valuable data. Although my interview approach mainly stayed the same following my conversation with Pietsch, I did reorganize the questions to better address the flow of questions.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, adhering to established ethical protocols. Participants were briefed on their rights, which encompassed the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without repercussions and the guarantee of confidentiality regarding their personal contact information and feedback. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews with photographers were conducted on the record, although participants could request information be kept off the record (not reported in any way) or on background (not directly quoted). Moreover, I took precautions to uphold participants' privacy and ensure focus group participants' anonymity throughout the research. Personal identifiers were anonymized on transcripts and other research materials to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, all data were securely stored and accessible solely to the primary investigator, aligning with data protection regulations.

Interviews

Interview population

The inclusion criteria for this study were initially stringent, based on the job experience of each photographer, which is detailed below. The research began with a strict set of criteria, which I later adjusted for practicality, validity and reliability reasons as opportunities arose. I obtained leads and introductions from other photographers,

resulting in a snowball sample. The initial inclusion criteria focused on photographers with the qualification of Chief Official White House photographer, indicating employment as the photographer in charge of the photo team and operations and who exclusively covers the president. As my understanding of White House operations deepened, the criteria broadened to include other photography roles within the White House Photo Office. I expanded the inclusion criteria to cover Official White House photographers assigned to the president, vice president, or first lady. I did not restrict my pool of interviewees to only the Chief Official photographers because I recognized that the experience of being a photographer at the White House is unique, and I could gain valuable insights from all perspectives. Regarding news photographers, retired individuals were more accessible and willing to participate than those currently working in the press pool. News photographers assigned to the White House beat were included and extended to those who are in the broad press pool and those in the tight pool¹, who regularly fly on Air Force One when the president travels.

This study differentiated photographers based on government employment and news media affiliation, categorizing them as Official White House photographers or news media photographers. This distinction facilitated understanding each group's unique experiences and perspectives. Several Official White House photographers returned to work for news organizations and wire services after their time at the White House. Were I to exclude every Official White House photographer who had worked for a news organization, a minimal number would be left to interview. It is worth noting that many of the interviewees highlighted the common misconception among the general

¹ The pools are explained further in interviews with Stephen Crowley and Doug Mills.

public regarding the differences between the two types of photographers. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish them clearly.

The sample included photographers with varying experience levels, including retirees and young professionals. I was fortunate to conduct an extensive interview with Doug Mills, who could not work due to contracting COVID-19. I included early career photographers because their association with news organizations grants them access. Despite several photographers' lack of response to interview requests, I successfully interviewed a diverse range of photographers, spanning administrations from Lyndon B. Johnson to Joe Biden, except for Presidents Nixon and Carter. As detailed in the literature review, Nixon's photographer is deceased, and Carter did not have a photographer. As I worked through the interviews, I began to gather similar accounts and did not seek additional interviewees when the data had reached a saturation point. It is unlikely that further interviews would provide additional insight into the overall process and personal perceptions of Official White House photographers.

Throughout the research process, it was essential to avoid leading participants and to set aside the preconceived notions I had heading into the research. Open-ended questions were employed, starting with broad inquiries and gradually delving into specific topics. The primary aim was to stimulate discussions about the photographers' roles and processes. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and over the phone, allowing for detailed qualitative insights while ensuring flexibility and convenience for participants. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Although I provide a detailed explanation of the interview protocol in Chapter 5, here are a few examples of questions I asked in each interview:

Example 1: How would you compare your understanding of this job before being hired to the reality of the position after you started?

Example 2: What are some of the more challenging aspects about covering the president as a photojournalist?

Example 3: What did you perceive your role as a photographer in the White House to be?

Example 4: Do you think that the public would be able to differentiate between photos taken by White House photographers and press photographers? - why/why not?

Complete lists of questions can be found in Appendix A (for news photographers) and Appendix B (for White House photographers).

Interviews are favored in qualitative research due to the method's flexibility, adaptability during interactions, and ability to gather rich data. Additionally, interviews provide participants with the opportunity to express their views and experiences in their own words, taking into account the extensive discourse surrounding the field and photographers' work. Interviews can serve as versatile qualitative data collection methods (Knott et al., 2022), allowing participants to articulate their perspectives, experiences, and interpretations, thereby providing rich qualitative data essential for understanding complex social phenomena. Unlike quantitative methods, interviews enable an in-depth exploration of human behavior and societal dynamics that would not otherwise be available. These interviews go beyond simple descriptions, delving into the reasons behind actions, beliefs, and interactions, and thus offer a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Despite their seemingly straightforward nature,

interviews are complex interactions shaped by researchers for specific purposes. They present various methodological, analytical, and ethical challenges that require careful consideration and planning. Researchers (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993; Holstein, 1995) have advocated different approaches to optimize the effectiveness of interviews in qualitative research. An open-ended, semi-structured format balances flexibility and depth, allowing researchers to adapt questions based on participants' responses while ensuring a comprehensive exploration of key topics. This approach fosters participant engagement and facilitates the collection of detailed information. By strategically selecting respondents, research can capture a broader range of perspectives, enriching the depth of analysis. This approach requires adapting traditional methods to foster interactive and engaging interview processes. In *The Long Interview* (1988), McCracken's methodology for conducting extended interviews offers an organized approach to ensure the collection of deep and reliable data. Interviews provide an immersive platform for exploring participants' lived experiences and narratives, offering a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena. Interviews also provided a means of verifying information through data triangulation, as some photographers had already participated in interviews through other platforms, allowing for the confirmation of details from various sources.

Purposive Snowball Sampling and Photo Collection

Snowball sampling is flexible and cost-effective. It allowed me to access a population that was difficult to reach due to busy schedules and publicly unavailable contact information. This method gave me a lot of insight into the social network of White House

photographers. Below is a description of the steps I took in reaching out to each photographer whom I interviewed for this research:

Torsten Kjellstrand, a professor at the University of Oregon, facilitated an introduction to Mike Davis, who has been recognized as Newspaper Picture Editor of the Year on two separate occasions and has served as a judge for other esteemed photography contests. After this initial contact with Mike Davis, I had a phone conversation with him that informed my process even further. Davis then connected me with Callie Shell, Barb Kinney, and Lawrence Jackson to conduct interviews with them. Callie Shell put me in touch with Diana Walker, Doug Mills, and David Hume Kennerly. Previously, I had sent cold emails to Mills and Kennerly but received no response. After connecting through Shell, I was able to interview them. While usually a busy photographer, Mills had time for me due to having COVID-19 while on assignment and was unable to work. Following my interview with Mills, he connected me with Anna Moneymaker and Andrew Harnik. Following my interview with David Kennerly, he connected me with David Valdez, Pete Souza, Eric Draper, and Shealah Craighead. Craighead was unavailable to speak with me but connected me with Joyce Boghosian instead. This interview with Boghosian came after noting that I had yet to interview a photographer who had worked in the Trump administration. I cold-emailed Stephen Crowley and was able to connect with him. Stephen Crowley connected me with Michael Geissinger.

I initiated contact with each interviewee by requesting an introduction. Next, I contacted them via phone or email, explaining my research and requesting their participation. Afterward, I sent them informed consent documents to review, sign, and

return to me. I interviewed eight White House photographers and six news photographers.

I knew I wanted to conduct focus groups using their photos and ultimately analyze a set of photos using the full extent of my understanding after collecting interview data and conducting focus groups. Therefore, following the interviews with each photographer, I requested that they provide me with photographs that met specific parameters, which can be read in Appendix E. I was interested in the potential differences in the work of White House photographers and news media photographers. These parameters were developed based on the interviews and the scope of my understanding of the subject. For example, I asked each photographer for a photograph of a planned presidential “photo op” moment. I took these steps to minimize my personal bias and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their work. Not all of the interviewees complied with this request. I did receive photographs from Diana Walker, Stephen Crowley, Joyce Boghosian, David Hume Kennerly, and David Valdez. I obtained permission to use these photographs from Diana Walker’s archivist/assistant, and Stephen Crowley obtained permission from *The New York Times* to share his photographs with me. Additionally, the photographs taken by Joyce Boghosian, David Hume Kennerly, and David Valdez were publicly available and were sent to me directly by these photographers. After receiving the photos, I used a randomized process to select the photos I would show to the focus group and analyze through my close reading.

	Position	Active administrations	Background	Retired or Actively working
Michael Geissinger	White House	Lyndon B. Johnson	Photography degree & Air Force	Retired
Stephen Crowley	Press - NYT	Bill Clinton to Donald Trump	Journalist	Retired
Joyce Boghosian	White House	George H. W. Bush Bill Clinton* George W. Bush Barack Obama Donald Trump	Journalism**	Active
Eric Draper	White House	George W. Bush	Journalist	Active
Pete Souza	White House	Ronald Reagan Barack Obama	Journalist	Active
David Valdez	White House	VP George H. W. Bush POTUS George H. W. Bush	Military; Journalism degree	Retired
Andy Harnik	Press - The AP	George W. Bush to Joe Biden	Journalist	Active
Anna Moneymaker	Press - Getty	Donald Trump - present	Journalist	Active
David Hume Kennerly	White House	Gerald Ford	Journalist	Active
Doug Mills	Press - NYT	Ronald Reagan - present	Journalist	Active
Diana Walker	Press - TIME Magazine	Ronald Reagan George H.W. Bush Bill Clinton	Journalist	Retired
Lawrence Jackson	White House	Barack Obama VP Kamala Harris	Journalist	Active

Barbara Kinney	White House	FLOTUS Hillary Clinton	Journalist	Active
Callie Shell	Press/White House	VP Al Gore TIME Magazine	Journalist	Active

Table 1: Photographers Interviewed by Category, Administration, Background and Work Status (*Was a member of the press working for AFP) (**Accepted a summer internship at the White House before entering college)

Focus Groups

I conducted two exploratory focus groups to lay the groundwork for future studies on the public's interpretation of photos. I chose this approach to gather preliminary insights and identify key themes, perspectives, and patterns in how the public perceives and understands presidential photos. The findings from these focus groups will inform and shape more extensive and systematic research in the future, providing a foundational understanding of the factors influencing the public's interpretation of photos.

Interpreting visual content to answer RQ3 and RQ4 was a challenging and multifaceted task. The complexities involved in understanding how individuals perceive and interpret visual media make focus groups a particularly appropriate research method to address this question. Additionally, focus groups allow participants to interact with each other, a process that can help reveal shared themes, contrasting viewpoints, and the underlying motivations behind their interpretations. The group interaction aspect is crucial for exploring how viewers and readers collectively make sense of the content and tone conveyed in visual media. As noted, I designed these focus groups as an exploratory method to provide information that would guide future research. According to research methods scholar Richard Krueger (1994), focus groups are highly effective

in exploring complex issues, capturing diverse perspectives, enabling rapid data collection, and providing rich, qualitative insights beyond simple responses. These groups capitalize on group interaction, stimulating dynamic discussions among participants with diverse viewpoints. In understanding viewer interpretations of White House and press photographs, focus groups offer an ideal method for participants to engage in dynamic discussions, share their perspectives, and elaborate on their interpretations, empowering them and enriching the research process with insights into the social and cultural context. Research has shown (Bloor et al., 2001; Gundumogula, 2020) that focus groups allow researchers to delve into complex issues, attitudes, and behaviors, uncovering more profound insights into social phenomena. By emphasizing the importance of group dynamics, effective facilitation techniques, and nuanced data analysis, focus groups offer a unique opportunity to explore participants' nuanced perceptions and interpretations of the content and tones conveyed in White House and press photographs. They facilitate in-depth discussions within a small group setting, which allowed me to uncover various views and experiences, revealing deeper insights into social phenomena and individual motivations.

The use of focus groups effectively supports the aim of RQ3, which seeks to investigate the public's interpretation of the content and tone of White House and press photographs. By engaging in dynamic group discussions and considering a range of viewpoints, focus groups provide a comprehensive and reliable approach to understanding the intricacies of photo interpretation.

Before conducting the formal focus groups, I performed a pilot test to determine the effectiveness of the focus group procedure and the discussion questions. I took this

preliminary step to strengthen the method and minimize potential moderator influence. For convenience and because the pilot intended to be exploratory, participants were recruited from among School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) graduate students through a private Facebook group. After conducting a pilot focus group, I revised the questions and procedures to improve group dynamics. I understood that some participants were more knowledgeable about politics and political imagery than others, which helped me better facilitate the discussion. After refining my questions and procedures, participants were recruited through the SOJC Research Pool using a recruitment posting accessible to all registered individuals. I also made an in-person appeal for participants in a large introductory communications course, J201 Media and Society, which enrolled students from various degree programs beyond the SOJC. In total, I successfully enlisted ten participants for the study, nine of whom showed up on the day of the scheduled hour-long focus group. As an incentive for participation, I offered \$25 Amazon gift cards to the participants (supported by SOJC graduate research funds).

I asked the focus group participants open-ended questions and encouraged everyone to engage in the discussion. I showed them a randomized selection of four photos and collected demographic information. Focus group protocols are outlined in detail in the results section of this research.

Participant no.	Major	Age	Gender
7294	Journalism	18-20	Male

7752	English	18-20	Non-binary
7561	Theatre Arts	21-23	Female
7552	Advertising	18-20	Female
7540	Journalism	21-23	Prefer not to say

Table 2: Participant Demographics for Focus Groups 1

7567	Asian Studies Linguistics	18-20	Female
7516	Social Science	18-20	Male
7573	Art	18-20	Female
7531	Computer Science	18-20	Female

Table 3: Participant Demographics for Focus Group 2

Data Analysis

I employed qualitative data analysis in this study. Research (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) underscores the critical role of theme identification in qualitative data analysis, advocating for techniques such as constant comparison, triangulation, and saturation to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of identified themes. Qualitative analysis requires meticulous attention to elucidate meaningful patterns within the data. Building upon this, Saldaña's (2009) comprehensive guide on coding and categorizing qualitative data provides invaluable insights into the intricacies of coding techniques and strategies. Additionally, Saldaña highlights the significance of interpretation and analysis

beyond coding, emphasizing the transition from raw data to meaningful insights contributing to the research findings. Utilizing these scholarly perspectives and methods, I sought to uncover nuanced patterns, themes, and interpretations embedded within the multifaceted qualitative data collected in this study. As noted earlier in this dissertation visual rhetoric theory and framing theory initially informed the analysis method outlined below to develop themes, categories, and frames.

Interviews

The initial step of this research involved reviewing interview data to determine initial codes, which I expected would coalesce into recurring themes and groupings the photographers shared. My examination focused on identifying visual rhetoric and framing indicators, encompassing elements of visual literacy and composition choices, to provide context for theoretical constructs. After an initial coding round, I realized that the photographers used vivid language and metaphors while discussing their jobs, which built toward their visual rhetoric and frames. By adopting a grounded theory approach, I aimed to systematically explore the data while allowing for the emergence of theoretical constructs grounded in the participants' lived experiences. At this point, specifically, the focus was on identifying visual rhetoric and framing indicators through decisions informed by visual literacy.

I conducted open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2009). The analysis began by coding for discussions of visual rhetorical decisions, framing choices, interactions with subjects, and contextual influences within photographic work. This step involved identifying photographers' specific language and actions to describe their

processes and choices. During the open coding phase, I identified and categorized passages that conveyed similar central ideas or themes and grouped them collectively. I grouped codes related to photographers' composition, lighting, and framing discussions under a broader category of "framing decisions." Key decision-making words, phrases, and metaphors were noted and categorized as "visual rhetoric decisions", which encapsulated the strategic choices made while photographing the president. This step included examining the nuances of their relationships with their subjects and perceived boundaries. I identified terms and phrases for framing that highlighted how photographers perceived and articulated their roles. As I was coding the data I watched for examples of the concept reviewed above such as visual aesthetics and visual framing. For example, news photographers' framing choices of visual rhetorical decisions were explored through their portrayals of access as a contested space, often involving strategic positioning and negotiation to capture exciting and important moments. Further, discussions regarding strategic positioning in order to take advantage of or make the best of a lighting situation were noted, for example.

In the axial coding stage, I categorized the codes into more specific and defined groups, a crucial step grounded theory methods. The study analyzed the role of Official White House photographers through their descriptions of their access and intimacy with the First Family, highlighting the delicate balance between being insiders and maintaining professional boundaries. For example, Official White House photographers often mentioned their unique position of not being a member of the First Family yet having close access to private moments. On the other hand, press photographers frequently described their access to the president as contentious, depicting it as

ongoing negotiations with the White House and sometimes with the president himself. These are examples of discussions regarding the intricacies of access by both groups of photographers.

Finally, in the selective coding stage, the codes were linked into a central category, which served as the focal point of this research. The final stage involved recognizing the core category and systematically connecting it to other categories to form a cohesive framework in line with Saldaña's (2009) guidelines. Symbolic interactionism emerged as the unifying theoretical framework at this stage, as it examines the development of meaning through social interactions and the role of visual elements and framing in this process. I recognized the dynamic interactions between photographers and their subjects and the contextual effects on their work as ongoing negotiations where meaning is continuously constructed. Through a grounded theory approach, this process was iterative. To ensure the validity of the interview results, I implemented participant-centered validity checks, which I delve into further in the validity and reliability section below.

Focus Groups

The analysis of focus group data was carried out after examining interview data. By analyzing the focus group data, I aimed to determine whether the participants' interpretations of the photographs were consistent with the photographers' perceptions of their work. In analyzing the focus group data, I focused on the connection between participants' interpretations of the photographs and the photographers' perceptions of their work. I was interested in learning how the participants interpreted the tone and

content in each photo and whether this comparative analysis was consistent with themes derived from the interview data, thus providing additional layers of understanding.

Close reading

Close reading has emerged as a pivotal method in qualitative research, particularly when analyzing visual materials. In her seminal work *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (2012), Gillian Rose, a leading scholar in visual research methods, underscores the significance of close reading, advocating for critically examining visual elements to uncover embedded meanings, assumptions, and power dynamics. This method can reveal underlying social constructions and ideologies by analyzing details such as composition, framing, and symbolism and situating their analysis within broader sociocultural contexts. Similarly, in *Visual Methods in Social Research* (2001), visual anthropologist Marcus Banks emphasizes meticulously examining visual materials to identify patterns, symbols, and themes, stressing the need for researchers to engage with visual elements to interpret intended and unintended messages. Both scholars highlight close reading as a rigorous and systematic approach to analyzing visual materials, allowing researchers to unravel visual culture's complexities and power relations. Conducting a close reading of photographs can help analyze visual elements, such as composition, lighting, framing, perspective, and subject matter, to uncover implicit layers of meaning and symbolism within the image. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of the photograph's significance and the photographer's intentions, emotions, and thematic elements. Closely examining photographs myself served as the concluding stage of my research. I

aimed to look for similarities and differences in the photos I received from the photographers and showed to the focus group. I utilized the themes and categories identified earlier in the study to guide my analysis by searching for aspects of the photos that indicated relationships, storytelling, access, and other relevant themes. I also utilized my understanding of photography focused on the U.S. president, which I acquired through an extensive review of research literature and related topics and what I learned from the interviews and focus group. I carefully examined the visual elements, such as composition, lighting, subject matter, and context, which included the time and place of each photo and the sociocultural climate at the time it was taken. I analyzed each photo's composition, considering the framing, perspective, focal point, lines, shapes, and how these elements evoked emotion and mood. Through this close reading, I sought to integrate my interpretation with the insights gained from the photographers' interviews and the focus groups' material. By systematically analyzing each image against these criteria, I aimed to investigate the potential similarities and differences in the images as the concluding stage of this research project.

After thoroughly analyzing the data, I used triangulation to corroborate my findings with existing research and popular literature. According to Lincoln and Guba's seminal work *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985), triangulation involves comparing and contrasting data from various sources or methods to enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative research outcomes. Creswell's book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2018) also emphasizes the significance of triangulation in corroborating evidence from multiple sources or methods to strengthen research findings. By integrating multiple data sources, including academic

research and popular literature, triangulation helps cultivate a comprehensive understanding of a given topic. It enriches the analysis by acknowledging and leveraging the inherent diversity of perspectives and insights across different sources.

Although popular literature may not be considered scholarly in nature, it offers valuable insights into societal attitudes, cultural norms, and public perception. Novels, magazines, and opinion pieces often reflect a particular period's cultural and social climate, thereby providing contextual depth to the research endeavor. Researchers can better understand complex phenomena such as political image-making and presidential photography by triangulating information from academic research and popular literature. This multifaceted approach enables the validation of findings, identification of patterns or themes across various sources, and development of a comprehensive analysis that embraces diverse perspectives and sources of information.

Validity and Reliability

Incorporating participant-centered validity into the research process was essential for this study. This approach prioritizes research participants' perspectives, voices, and experiences, positioning them as experts in their own lived experiences. By doing so, participant-centered validity enriches the depth and richness of the data collected, offering insights that may have yet to be obtained through a purely researcher-driven or quantitative approach. Moreover, this approach fosters authenticity and trustworthiness in the research process by upholding principles of transparency and accountability, thus nurturing trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants (Lindheim, 2022). Using participant-centered validity is an appropriate approach to qualitative

research as it aligns with the criteria advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These criteria, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are more suitable for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative findings than traditional validity criteria, such as reliability and objectivity, which may not be suitable for qualitative inquiry due to their subjective and contextual nature. According to Lincoln and Guba, credibility pertains to the extent to which the findings accurately represent the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

In summary, this study's qualitative, mixed-methods approach has made possible a comprehensive exploration of the intricacies involved in presidential photography, emphasizing the perspectives and lived experiences of the photographers themselves. By employing grounded theory, I was able to adapt and refine the analytical procedures to uncover emerging patterns and themes that offer fresh insights into the role and practices of photographers who photograph the president. I achieved this through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and close readings of photographs. This research aims to address gaps in the existing literature and shed light on the complex social dynamics and symbolic interactions that define this unique field of visual journalism. By enriching theoretical frameworks and setting a foundation for future studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of visual truth and journalistic ethics within presidential photography. The methods outlined here underscore the value of qualitative research in capturing the depth and richness of human experience, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of visual truth and journalistic ethics within the professional practice of photographing the U.S. president.

Chapter 5 – Interview Results

“A lot of people want to [photograph] sports. I always thought this is the greatest sport, sport of kings and Queens so I loved it. And you approach it like you would cover any sport, right? There’s winning teams and losing teams, a player that’s injured and a player that’s the rookie that’s coming on strong. Same thing in politics, so I liked that aspect of it and I really liked the challenge of keeping up with all the issues.” – Stephen

Crowley²

In the first stage of this research, I aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of photographers who are part of the White House press pool and Official White House photographers, I interviewed a diverse group of individuals with varying levels of expertise. These interviews yielded insights into both the historical context and the multifaceted nature of the topic at hand.

RQ1: How do White House and news photographers perceive their role when photographing moments and events that include the President of the United States?

² unless otherwise indicated, quotations attributed to participants were gathered on the date noted in the bibliography.

Participant Description

The data pertaining to the participants of the interview could potentially constitute a separate research study. Each interviewee has undertaken a unique journey in reaching their position at the White House, and this pathway has shaped their approach to the job they perform. Most of the Official White House photographers had a journalism background and came from practicing journalism to working at the White House. A notable exception is David Valdez, who originated from a military background and served as a military photographer prior to being hired at the White House in the George H. W. Bush administration. The influence of these experiences, as well as the manner in which each photographer has incorporated journalism ethics, was evident in the interviews I conducted. I will expand upon this in greater detail below.

Protocol

Conducting interviews for this research was a multi-step process. As described in the methods chapter, initially, I conducted a pretest interview with a local photojournalist. Subsequently, I made contact with each photographer to introduce myself, explain this research, and arrange interview sessions. Next, I obtained their informed consent in accordance with the standards set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to conducting the interviews, I informed the participants of the interview process and their rights while participating in this research. I interviewed eight White House photographers and six news photographers (see Table 1 in the methods chapter). The interviews were largely conducted via Zoom, with a few conducted over the phone depending on the participants' availability. To ensure accuracy, I recorded all interviews on my laptop and uploaded them to the Zoom cloud for transcription.

Following the automatic transcription, I reviewed and corrected any errors. Throughout the interviews, I took notes to record crucial details.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gain insights by allowing the interviewees to engage with the topics and explore themes as they arose during the interviews. I began with broad questions and delved into more specific topics as the conversations progressed, drawing on information from academic literature, popular literature, and the RQs to guide our focus. Comprehensive lists of the questions asked can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

As a facilitator of interviews, my duty was to establish rapport through various means, and I made a deliberate effort to avoid posing leading questions. I was a keen observer, paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues on Zoom, including maintaining eye contact, nodding, and utilizing other affirmative gestures, as well as verbalizing affirmations to demonstrate comprehension. I kept the interviews progressing smoothly and guided participants through the topics I wanted to discuss, while also providing them with the option to withhold information they did not want to share, share it on background, or share it off the record. My objective was not to limit participants, but to facilitate an exchange of information, ultimately enhancing the credibility and dependability of the findings. Data management involved the use of Zoom to record and transcribe the information, which was then downloaded, cleaned up for transcription accuracy, stored on an external hard drive, and, as outlined in the methods chapter, analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Initially, I began using Atlas.ti, and transitioned to an excel spreadsheet that incorporated the Atlas.ti codes.

The most important finding of these interviews is that the interviewed photographers, regardless of whether they were working for news organizations or the White House, see their role as documenting the president and the presidency for historical purposes. There are several categories that impact not only how they define their job to themselves but also how they are able to record the presidency using their cameras. The broad categories are *access*, *relationships*, and their *storytelling choices*. *Access* is what differentiates the role and activities of Official White House photographers and news media photographers. The access each photographer is given is 1) dictated by their job role (presidential administration or news media) and 2) contingent upon their *relationship* with the president. While a base level of access is guaranteed to an Official White House photographer because they have passed background and security checks, it is not all-encompassing and can be impacted by their ability to know when to leave a room, for example. The level of access granted to news media photographers is more complicated since it is clear from the interviews that the relationship a photographer has with the president will impact the access they receive within their respective job role. Additionally, their relationships and the resulting access impacts the *story* a photographer will tell while at the White House.

The *stories they choose* to tell and how they tell these stories are what shape their documentation approach. Both news photographers and Official White House photographers tell stories that will be shared with the American public, but for different purposes and through different outlets. Overall, their goals and perspective are to document the president, his actions, and his daily activities. To what extent the photographers can do this is dictated by their job position, which dictates access and

relationship to the president. Much of the literature review in this research focused on ethics and truth in photography, which were core to the professional experience of each photographer interviewed. Many of the Official White House photographers entered the White House after working for the news media, experience that impacts their perspective of the role and approach to storytelling. This is highlighted in the quote from retired TIME Magazine photographer Diana Walker (which opened this chapter but warrants repeating here):

“I think that they always remember that they were picked from a group of photojournalists to come inside. Most of them are not studio photographers or anything like that. Usually, they are somebody who’s had a lot of experience in photojournalism. So, I don’t think they turn that button off.”

In the following section, each photographer will be introduced by their first and last name and subsequently referred to by their last name. I delve into the lived experiences of interview participants, exploring their journeys through the lens of RQ1.

White House photographers

White House photographers perceive their role as crucial documentarians of history, driven by journalistic principles and the need for comprehensive access. Their approach is shaped by a combination of ethical standards, the nature of their relationship with the president, and the precedence set by their predecessors. Their role as documentarians is defined by the subthemes of access, relationships, and storytelling decisions.

To present a comprehensive review of the results of the interviews I begin by focusing on David Kennerly, who worked as President Ford's photographer, and corroborated the findings with interviews from other Official White House photographers. It became clear over the course of each interview that Kennerly set several precedents that have been carried through the Official White House photographer position to the present day. I have selected portions of interviews that highlight the continuation of the precedent set decades ago. I chose to present this as a narrative of Official White House photographers, and not every photographer I spoke with is quoted here.

David Kennerly started his professional career as a photojournalist at the now defunct *Oregon Journal*. He left when he was drafted into the military and after a six-month tour of active duty with the National Guard returned to work at *The Oregonian* in 1967. Later that year he began working for United Press International (UPI), and a few months later he took some of the last photos of Senator Robert F. Kennedy at the Ambassador Hotel on June 5, 1968, moments before the senator's assassination. In 1971 Kennerly went to Vietnam as a combat photographer for UPI. "I was a news photographer, people I knew had been killed there, and I wanted to see what was taking the lives of so many young people," Kennerly said. "I just wanted to cover the story, and I finally convinced UPI to send me over there." In 1972, while he was still in Vietnam, Kennerly won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography at 25 years old. In the span of four years, he had cemented his work ethic and reputation as a news photographer. He was hired by President Gerald Ford in 1974, when Ford became president upon President Nixon's resignation. Throughout my interview with Kennerly, it was clear that

his years as a wire photographer³ defined the rest of his career and defined how he functioned as a photographer in the White House.

He showed up to work every day before the President himself entered the Oval Office. “I just thought it was important, who knows what’s going to happen,” Kennerly said. “I’m an anxious person, if you meet a photographer who doesn’t have anxiety, he or she is not a good photographer. It’s a wire thing. You’re afraid of missing something and that’s all you think about, and you’re not paid to miss stuff. And I feel that I carried that same ethic with me into the White House.” He later reiterated this ethical underpinning that he carried from his experience as a wire photographer. “I didn’t suddenly become a different person and different photographer when I went to the White House,” Kennerly said. “I approached it the only way I knew how, which [was to] straight ahead cover the story. It just was a different angle, really. There was never a conversation with the President or Mrs. Ford or anybody about ‘you’ve got to make me look good.’” As the Chief Official White House photographer, his approach to the Photo Office was to run it like a small newspaper. “If you look at the President as a daily story like a big news story every day, whatever he was doing had to be documented,” he said.

Kennerly’s approach to photographing President Ford was also underpinned by the fact that Ford entered the White House late in the term and had two-and-a-half years before the next election. Even if President Ford was reelected, which he was not, each presidential term has a limit of four years. “It was such a great honor I couldn’t wait to get there every day because I knew it would end,” he said. “I wanted to take

³ A wire service is a news agency that supplies syndicated news to newspapers, radio, and television stations.

advantage of it, both as a professional person certainly and not wanting to miss anything, which goes back to the wire service anxiety, but to be there and to be given that position of great trust and also as a servant to history and that was really one of the most important things about it.” This was echoed in my interview with President George W. Bush’s photographer, Eric Draper, who held the role 24 years after Kennerly. Prior to joining the White House staff, Draper worked for the Associated Press (AP) as a news photographer after piquing his interest in photojournalism during his collegiate career. Understanding that his job as a photographer at the White House had a time limit also impacted Draper’s approach to storytelling.

“You knew it was finite because there was always an end to it,” he said. “There is a beginning, a middle, and an end so there’s a natural story to be told and I always kept that in mind, in terms of ‘Okay, how can I watch these relationships develop through the years?’

This journalistic approach to storytelling is further echoed by Official White House photographer Joyce Boghosian who holds a unique perspective as one of the few staff members to hold a position through multiple administrations. She began her career at the White House as an intern in the Reagan-Bush administration, working with then Vice Presidential photographer David Valdez, and continued until she left after the end of the Trump Administration in 2021, with a short break during the Clinton Administration. “I stayed on for Clinton for one day until Bob McNeely found me and told me that I don’t live and breathe [President] Bill Clinton,” Boghosian said. “So, he fired me.” She went on to work at the Pentagon and later for Agence France-Presse (AFP) before being rehired at the White House by Draper when President George W. Bush

was elected and stayed on staff as a photographer through the Trump administration. While working at the White House, Boghosian tended to use a wider lens so that she could show who was in the room at the time. “I like to be able to tell a story with my pictures from A to Z so that someone can get a feeling of what that event was like or what exactly happened. And that is really important at the White House,” she said. In contrast, she said that a news photographer “might have 30 seconds to a minute to try to get a strong image that will be captivating in the newspaper,” therefore impacting how they approach the stories they tell.

Access

The first theme that became apparent through the interview data was the theme of access, and it’s clear that every photographer at the White House deals with access constraints to some degree. Access is a core overarching theme of this data analysis. The key to Kennerly’s ability to cover almost everything President Ford did on a daily basis was the access he was granted as a photographer. As discussed in the historical context section of this dissertation, Kennerly was one of the earliest civilian Official White House photographers. Therefore, the job was his to mold. Kennerly’s relationship with President Ford began when Kennerly photographed him as then Congressman Ford for *Time Magazine*. That was subsequently Kennerly’s first cover photo for *Time*. “I was one of the first people he wanted to make sure that I would work for him and I told him, and here I am a 27-year-old guy, I looked him in the eye and I said, ‘I’ll do it if I can report directly to you and have total access to everything that’s going on in the White House.’ He stopped smoking his pipe and he said, ‘You don’t want Air Force One on the weekends?’ and he gave me the job under my terms.” Requesting an unlimited level of

access to the president was not done by Kennerly on a whim. Kennerly looked to the two previous Official White House Photographers in order to set the tone for his time in the White house. Yoichi Okamoto, President Lyndon B. Johnson's photographer, had an unlimited amount of access to the president.

Okamoto died in 1985, so I was unable to interview him. However, I was able to interview Michael Geissinger, another photographer who had been on staff at during LBJ's administration. Geissinger confirmed that Okamoto had free rein to walk into the Oval Office. Although Geissinger did not share that same level of access, he still enjoyed a high level of access and was told that no other White House staff members could ask the photographers to leave the room. "Nobody would ask us to leave except President Johnson," Geissinger said. "He was the only one who could ask us to leave." In stark contrast, Oliver "Ollie" Atkins had very little access to President Nixon. "[Ollie] would come in and take a couple shots and leave," Kennerly said. "I told President Ford, 'I'm not going to do it if that's the way it is.'" Thirty-four years later, this request for unlimited access was echoed by soon-to-be Chief Official White House Photographer for President Obama, Pete Souza. Souza was not new to the role of Official White House photographer, as he had been hired as a staff member in the middle of President Ronald Reagan's first term. However, his role with the Obama administration was different due, in part, to his professional relationship with then Senator Barack Obama. "I had known him for four years before he was elected President [and] had a professional relationship with him and was older, obviously, and I think wiser in many ways. [I] came in, as the Chief Photographer and it was my attitude that, unlike with Reagan, with President Obama, I was going to have unlimited access, something that I

had discussed with him. He understood the importance of somebody visually documenting his presidency, so it was much more of a 24 [hour], 7 days a week [job].” Prior to his role with the Reagan Administration, Souza had begun his career as a news photographer in Chicago in the early 1980s. Following his first position at the White House, Souza became a photojournalist for the *Chicago Tribune* and eventually covered then Senator Obama’s first year in the Senate.

David Valdez, who photographed George H. W. Bush from his vice presidency through his presidency, said, “Access is everything, you may as well go home without access... What’s the point?” Valdez entered the White House as Vice President Bush’s photographer after sending a cold letter to the press secretary inquiring about the position. Valdez’s background is unique in that he entered the Air Force after graduating high school and worked for a base newspaper before pursuing a degree in journalism. Emphasizing the differences in access among photographers on the staff at the White House, Draper explained that “The Chief is the boss. The Chief is the one who sees the president, has more access [and] has the confidence of the president to make the decisions to be in the right place at the right time and not bother the president.” The access granted to Official White House photographers also sets the tone for how they are viewed by other heads of state and their photographers while abroad. Highlighting this, Valdez said that his staff jokingly called him “Photographic Supreme Allied Commander U.S.” because the official photographers of other world leaders would follow his lead. “In my case, if I walked across the room to go get another angle, you would have France, Germany, and Japan all follow me over there,” he said. “Because it’s like, ‘well if the guy from the United States can do it, we can do it.’”

Access can vary among Chief Official Photographers and among members of the photo staff between administrations. As noted earlier, each administration hires their own set of photographers to be on staff, and few people have stayed through multiple administrations. However, Boghosian's consistent role as a photographer at the White House underscores the second core theme that arose from data analysis: *relationships*.

Relationships

Understanding when to be in the room is crucial to the role of Official White House photographers. "I've always tried to respect the privacy of the president," Boghosian said. "Because why would a president want to hire me if I didn't? I've had the privilege to go in and out for so many presidents. And I feel like they do deserve some privacy." Returning to the White House in a post-9/11 world, Boghosian also has a unique perspective regarding both Bush administrations. "As far as photographing him, [George W. Bush] was a lot like his father. The Bushes treated staff like family," she said. "They invited you to movies with your kids, they knew you, they're playing basketball with the resident staff. George Herbert Walker Bush, he used to have the press corps play horseshoes with him. They were very appreciative about people's sacrifices working around them, and they made that known. So, I definitely had a very special relationship with the Bush family."

Boghosian also said that as an Official White House photographer, the responsibilities of the daily tasks will impact the stories they tell. While news photographers are generally confined to one area and cannot move around like an Official White House photographer, they have fewer responsibilities in terms of which photos they have to take and can be more creative. "Where we can move around, we

have to get the handshake, we have to show everyone who's here we have a lot of things on our to-do list for every event where the press are there," she said. "And I mean, they are amazingly talented photographers, but they might have a little bit more freedom at certain times to look for more creative images, we might have a list of what we have to do; Wearing a lot of hats, having a lot of responsibilities to everyone in that room." She went on to say those responsibilities require that they photograph some of the more repetitive or mundane events. The events that Official White House photographers need to cover were described as "a necessary part of the job," by Geissinger: "Not one that was too romantic or glamorous." And while it was not the sole focus of their job, it was challenging nonetheless due to the sheer number of people who may be in a receiving line at one time. "The challenge [came] in the timing that you use to get that handshake," he said. "To get that moment, that fraction of a second when President Johnson looks good. That was the only one that mattered, we didn't care how the other person looked."

While the role of an Official White House photographer requires that they photograph the less glamorous parts of the president's day, the access they are granted allows them to view many aspects of the president's day as part of his story. "Obviously, he was the key subject," Draper said. "But the White House itself was also a subject, the people, the friends of the president, the family of the president, [and] close advisors." Draper went on to say that "There [were] stories everywhere you looked. It was really fascinating and almost overwhelming at times because it was all so interesting." Comparing his experience as Chief Official photographer to his experience as a news photographer, Draper said "it's really night and day" due to access and the

responsibilities that accompany access. “When you’re a journalist, you’re a representative of the news media and you only see what the White House wants you to see,” he said. “And you’re there to cover the news ... you’re there to serve the media and serve the public in that way and you answer to that media source, whoever you’re working for. But the White House photographer answers to the president.”

The relationship each photographer has with their principal (the president, vice president, first lady) will impact which stories they tell and how they do so. An example can be seen in the experience of Chief Official White House photographer David Valdez. Valdez was granted access to very personal moments for the Bush family. “I think it goes back to all the years I spent with [George H. W. Bush] as the vice president,” he said. “When his mother was on her deathbed up in Connecticut, all the family was there: George W. and Jeb and the president’s brothers and sister and family. Out of respect I didn’t go into the house and the Secret Service came and got me and said, ‘The President wants you to go in and take a picture of [him] and his mother one last time.’” However, Valdez also clearly understood his role despite the relationship he had with the Bush family. “I was always mindful of the fact that I was a staff person and not a family member, but I spent hours and hours and hours and hours with the family, in family situations. But I knew I wasn’t there because I was a family member,” he said. “I was there because I was an employee and didn’t step over the line. And I think they really appreciated that because [of] how many times I was invited to dinner with the family and Thanksgiving and things like that.” As Draper succinctly put it, “You can always tell how close they were to their president, through their images.”

Storytelling

“It’s a real privilege to have the trust of the president and of any president in any administration to have that job and to have that responsibility to record and document events as they take place. That’s really what I feel I did. I was there to tell a story through my pictures of what happened,” said Boghosian, emphasizing the responsibility associated with the role of an Official White House photographer.

The request for unlimited access to the president stems from each White House photographer’s goal to record every aspect of the president’s life with an additional goal of not being noticed or acknowledged. Of course, there is an adjustment period required for getting used to having a photographer in the room all the time. According to Kennerly, he had to request to go unnoticed. “Look, Mr. President, you don’t need to do it and I’d really prefer that you not introduce me to these people, because then I’m missing pictures,” he said. “There was training required, but it was really me training him to forget I’m there, if he can possibly do that.” A common goal among Official White House photographers was to document the presidency for historical purposes. “In simple terms, to produce an archive that could be accessed later that will tell the story of the George W. Bush Administration and the President,” Draper said. “So that means everything that I would see could be a story.”

Callie Shell, who was a *Time Magazine* photographer as well as Vice President Al Gore’s photographer, compared her experiences by saying, “At the White House nobody cared what I did. In the news media, every single day my editors cared about what I did.” She said that, after leaving the White House and going to work for *Time*, her approach changed: “Because by the time we would go to press and we would show up

on the stands all the wire work and dailies had already put pictures out,” she said. “So, everything I photographed, I felt had to stand the test of time because everybody else had already shown you Barack Obama at this event speaking here, there.” This insight highlights that how their photos will be used impacts how the photographers tell a story visually at the White House. Valdez further emphasized this point: “If a White House photographer and a news photographer [are] standing side by side, then the news photographer is thinking, ‘I need a vertical for this column or vertical for the cover of *Time Magazine*,’ and the White House photographer is saying, ‘there’s 10 people there and I want to take that horizontal photo to show those 10 people were standing at that moment with the president.’ And then the photographer right next to you is thinking, ‘oh man look at the light on the president’s face. [If] I shoot tight that could be the cover of *Time Magazine*.’ They won’t even take a picture of the 10 people standing there, so you know you think differently.” He goes on to further highlight how access impacts which story they tell and how: “Then as a White House photographer you can step away from that guy standing next to you, and you can walk around to the side and take a picture of the press, taking a picture of the President. What you’re doing as a White House photographer is documenting that the press were there doing that and also the president was engaging with the media.”

White House photographers tell daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly stories that amount to the administration’s run in the White House. The sheer number of stories to tell within a presidency indicates a decision that has to be made about what to cover. Draper, President George W. Bush’s photographer discussed this decision-making process by focusing on what the key part of the story was:

It's all about the situational story that's happening that day that you delve into," he said.

The emotion and the drama and the faces that can tell the story. You can go to any day in my archive in the Bush library and see.... it's just a document. And they're all pretty good.... they may not be as interesting but that's the whole point. You realize that sometimes it may be more important to show who's in the room, than an interesting picture in some situations because the persons in the room, are the history makers they're the ones making decisions. And if I'm photographing the president's hand because it's interesting in the light or something [then] I'm missing the true moment of this, missing the true news nugget, the true historic reason why I'm there. And that is to show everyone who's making this huge decision, which may not be as interesting as something else in the room, but it's more important to show that.

Interestingly, many Official White House photographers know that the majority of their photos will be archived for years to come. Even today, the photos released by the White House are just a drop in the bucket of the total number of photographs taken in a given year or even the span of an administration. It has been documented that, for example, Draper took over a million photos throughout his eight years as President George Bush's photographer and Souza took near two million photos over eight years as President Barack Obama's photographer. However, the now-archived Obama White House Flickr page has 6,668 photos published between February 2009 and January 2017.

The interview data revealed that access is a crucial element to the success of an Official White House photographer and that often, their access is impacted by the

relationship they have with the president and the first lady. In turn, access and relationship impact the stories that they focus on and tell while using journalistic principles. Despite their demanding schedule, Official White House photographers are afforded the flexibility to move around and capture images that the press does not have access to. Yet they are also responsible for photographing phone calls with other heads of state, as well as handshake lines, which are often referred to as “grip and grins” and are considered to be the less glamorous side of the role. The manner in which their photographs are used influences their approach to storytelling. Based on the interviews, the Official White House photographers know that their photos will often not be used immediately, whereas news photos likely will be published soon after the event being covered. Additionally, Official White House photographers follow journalistic photography principles and carry journalistic ethics from their previous jobs, which underscores their documentary efforts.

The distinction between White House photographers and news photographers in the press corps is marked by differences in access and responsibilities and, therefore, the stories they can tell. While both groups are essential in documenting the activities of the president and the administration, the photographers’ experiences and objectives significantly diverge. “When you’re a photojournalist, it’s like all bets are off the table, you can just go for it,” Draper said, while reflecting on his time working for the Associated Press. “Whatever you get, you have to scrap for, and there’s more competition because you’re fighting for access with other photographers physically and you have less room to work in. You’re handled more, there’s more downtime because you’re waiting for events to start. But the story for the White House Photographer never

ends. There's always something going on behind the scenes that tells the story. [It's] non-stop." While working for AP, Draper said he would shoot 500 frames of an event whereas when he was the Chief Official Photographer for President Bush, he would shoot 2,000 frames of an event "because I would see everything from the planning of the event, behind the scenes, the event itself, and then the aftermath of the event," he said. "There's more to think about."

Boghosian's experience during the Trump administration further illustrates the nuances in access and control over imagery. Despite public claims that President Trump restricted access for his official photographers, Boghosian observed that "for the most part, we covered everything," albeit with occasional restrictions during sensitive meetings such as those with Kim Jong Un, which she said was consistent between administrations. Additionally, President Trump's tendency to orchestrate photo opportunities, as recounted by Boghosian, underscores a controlled environment where even the news photographers had to navigate the president's preferences. This is exemplified by an instance in Vietnam when Trump asked *New York Times* photographer Doug Mills to take a picture during a meeting with Kim Jong Un. "Doug Mills was in front of me, and President Trump was meeting with Kim Jong Un, and he looked at Doug and he says to Kim Jong Un, 'He's really good. Doug, take our picture,'" Boghosian said.

News photographers

The role of news photographers at the White House encompasses unique challenges and opportunities, particularly concerning access, relationships, and story

choices. Through their lenses, these award-winning photographers provide a vital window into the presidency, capturing moments that define administrations and inform the public. Their work not only documents history but also has the potential to shape public perception, often in real-time. This section explores the experiences and reflections of seasoned as well as newer photographers, highlighting how they navigate access constraints, maintain relationships, and make critical decisions on which stories to tell through their images. In similar but different ways, news photographers perceive themselves as storytellers tasked with capturing moments that define administrations and inform the public about the presidency. They strive to provide a window into the presidency, documenting the president's activities, interactions, and the inner workings of the government. They aim to show the American people or anyone who views their work a genuine portrayal of the presidency, including both the public and behind-the-scenes moments. By documenting these moments, news photographers believe they fulfill their duty to enhance news stories with authentic images, thereby informing and shaping public perception.

While Official White House photographers generally hold their position for as long as their principal is in office, news photographers regularly stay on staff and hold their White House access through multiple administrations. The following section highlights the perspective of three news photographers due to the breadth of their work and time spent at the White House. Current *New York Times* photographer Doug Mills has been covering the White House since 1983, when President Reagan was in office. Previously, he was the Chief Photographer for AP in Washington, D.C. and won two Pulitzer Prizes for team coverage while there. He joined *The New York Times* in 2002,

and as of 2019, he is a board member of the White House Correspondents' Association. Throughout his time as a photojournalist in Washington, D.C., one of the biggest changes that has occurred in the advancement of technology. Mills describes the dramatic changes from the era of film to the digital age, noting how technological advancements have accelerated the process and expanded the reach of their work: "...when I first started, to send a color picture took 45 minutes, one picture, 45 minutes.... Now I send two pictures sometimes 30 seconds after the event starts." This shift not only affects the speed of dissemination but also responds to the increasing demand for immediate visual content in the digital news environment. Mills said:

I remember transmitting pictures with a bag phone. I mean, you probably don't even know what a bag phone is. It was this huge block of a battery with a phone attached to it, it looked like something out of an old movie and basically picked it up and hooked it into the computer and send it away.... I mean, hell, even back in the day, we had carrier pigeons take our film in New York. Honest to God, off a ship during the Reagan years back to New York City. It's pretty crazy how far it's gone.

Access

As with the White House photographers, access is one of the fundamental aspects of news photography of the U.S. president. Mills emphasized, "I feel like my role when I go in there is to show the American people or anybody who looks at *The New York Times* a window into the access that we get, and a window into the presidency, and to try and show what their agenda is that day, what their crisis is that day." Despite the limited and often fleeting opportunities to capture these moments,

news photographers strive to provide deeper insights into the presidency, often through brief but telling glimpses. Much like with Official White House photographers, access plays a critical role in how news photographers perceive and perform their duties when photographing the president. The level of access granted to these photographers can determine the narratives they can capture and the manner in which they present the narratives. Access also implies varying degrees of control over the photographs by the president or his staff, or it can reflect the relationship and trust between the photographer and the president.

In my interview with Mills, he articulated the constant battle for access that defines much of his professional life. “I think that is my biggest hurdle every day, because I’m always asking for more access,” he said. “I always fight for other photographers to have more access. I’m always advocating for more access, because the more access we have, the more you learn about your president, the more you learn about what government is doing, the more you learn how the process works more and what happens. I think that’s one thing that is so lost at the White House is that there’s not enough access to photographers behind the scene to allow us to show the human side of a president that intertwines with the government process.... there’s so many things that are happening behind the scenes that I know are happening, because I’ve either read about them, or heard from staff about them, that should be photographed because it’s history.”

As described earlier, news photographer access to the president varies significantly across different administrations, affecting the ability of photographers to

document presidential history comprehensively. Mills reflected on the varying levels of access he experienced with different presidents, noting that access was relatively open under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, while it became more restricted under President Bill Clinton due to public scandals, and even tighter under President Barack Obama due in part to the administration's strategic use of social media to bypass the press. In contrast, the experience of Diana Walker, retired *Time Magazine* White House photographer of more than 20 years, underscores the delicate and sometimes unpredictable nature of access. Walker covered Presidents Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush for *Time* and shared that the access she received didn't vary between the administrations she covered. "It didn't change too much for me, I'm happy to say. I did just what we wanted of Nancy Reagan, and I did just what we wanted [of the] president in [Reagan's] second [term]." However, toward the end of President George H.W. Bush's administration, she experienced a reduction in the access she was used to. This was due to the inherent risk associated with allowing a news photographer in the room. "I think what they were saying was that they didn't know if he was gonna win or lose," she said. "And they didn't want anything to happen that could possibly tip the scales one way or another.... You have to be pretty confident to let somebody in to be there with you." The varying experience of access during the H.W. Bush administration illustrates how access is not only a matter of routine but also a function of the administration's comfort and confidence in allowing photographers to capture unguarded moments. It underscores the importance of trust and the potential impact of political sensitivities on the access granted to photographers, ultimately shaping what they are able to document.

An outlier discussed in several interviews was the access granted during the Trump administration. “It’s kind of a misnomer that people think that because the paper [NYT] is considered leaning to the left, that we get more access with Democrats,” he said. “That’s not true. I got more access to [President] Donald Trump than I’ve had with any president since I’ve been there. One, he loves *The New York Times*... and I think he was just more about giving access. But I would fight all the time with the Obama people about trying to get access. Fight with the Clinton people, fight with you know, whoever... it’s a constant battle. Because it takes a lot of trust, and they have to trust the photographer, they have to trust the news organization.” This highlights the fluctuating nature of access and its dependence on the administration’s media policies, as well as on the relationship the photographer has with the president and the administration’s staff. He added that one of the most difficult times of his career was during the Obama Administration when news photographers were largely shut out of the White House and from the presidency. For some time there was a level of competition between Official White House photographers and the news photographers requesting access, but “we don’t have that problem anymore. No, we don’t feel the same competition. [Official White House photographers] have a role to do. They’re there to document the president day in and day out so at the end of his presidency, you can look at a full album to know and feel, how his presidency went. And all the stories that happened in between all the crisis in between all the great moments in between, for the country for him personally.”

Retired *New York Times* photographer Stephen Crowley emphasized the unusual nature of access granted to news photographers during the Trump administration. Crowley worked as a staff photographer at *The New York Times* from

1993 to 2017, covering President Clinton through President Trump. He has been awarded two Pulitzer Prizes and was cited as “Photographer of the Year” by the White House News Photographers’ Association in 2002. He stated that while President Trump was in office, news photographers were allowed a significant amount of time in the room during each meeting. “You can’t usually get these guys and now they’re like goldfish in a bowl,” he said. “When you’re there, bang, bang, bang, and you’re getting their interaction, how they’re treating each other, how they’re interacting, and all that. That’s valuable stuff.” This type of access allowed news photographers to capture candid moments that contribute to the public’s understanding of political figures.

Further influencing the stories shared by news photographers is the delineation between the press corps and the “tight pool”. “There’s four news organizations in the tight pool: three wires⁴ and *The New York Times*,” Crowley said. “Now, why is *The New York Times* in there? Because we were trying to get into that pool since before the Wright Brothers created flight... if you were in the White House pool, not only did you have a seat on Air Force One, and you were at everything, but we were the first in the room and in the Oval Office, in any event. *The New York Times* was always bitterly trying to get a little bit closer into things.” This was confirmed by Mills who said “It’s been a tradition for it was decided long before I got there, which is a long time ago. But it’s mostly the largest news organizations that have the permanent seats on Air Force One. That’s probably one of the reasons. The reason *the New York Times* photographer has a seat on the plane is not something that’s been around for that long. It used to be Time and Newsweek had that seat photographer. And they would rotate it between them....

⁴ AP, AFP, Reuters

and then *Newsweek* dropped out, because of financial reasons. So, then *Time Magazine*, and the *New York Times* shared that seat for probably a year, maybe six months to a year. And then *Time Magazine*, again, because of financial constraints, because it is so expensive, decided to drop out. Then that seat was opened.”

Clearly, the fight to gain access does not only boil down to persistence but it also comes down to the financial power of the news organization. In our interview, Mills disclosed that flying on Air Force One costs each news organization the price of a first-class ticket to the intended destination plus one dollar. Smaller news organizations generally do not have the financial power to gain access to the president.

It’s quite a perk to be able to go. I still feel like it’s a perk to go on the plane. I never take it for granted one trip. It’s incredibly expensive. Again, if you think about a foreign trip. I can throw numbers out like, I don’t know, the last trip we went to with President Biden to the Middle East. I think it was like a five-day trip. I think it was around 35,000 bucks per person. And then if you go to Africa with President Obama, I think it was around \$50,000. It was a long trip. We paid for ground transportation in addition to the air transportation, when the President flies to New York like we did last week, and the week before. When we land, mainly not to tie up traffic in Manhattan – Helicopter. President gets on Marine One, and flies to something called the Wall Street Landing. The press, and the staff, and the Secret Service hop on two other helicopters and we fly ahead of him. He takes off before us, but we fly ahead of him because the Osprey is about four times faster than his helicopter, and we land ahead of him and then he lands

there. So, we have to pay for those helicopter rides, also. Then we get in rented vans, we pay for those vans. And you may ask, well, who gets to do this? Well, not everybody can afford it. That's a big, big issue. Smaller organizations can't do it. – Mills.

Access comes with inherent constraints and ethical boundaries for news photographers. For example, they must respect (often unspoken) agreements that sensitive information vital to national security will not be disclosed, and personal aspects of the president's life, such as interactions with their children, are typically off-limits unless in public settings. Violating this trust can lead to a loss of access, as news photographers are keenly aware. Walker discussed a key factor in developing trust with the White House as a news photographer: "One of the things that I felt about getting this access was that I should never abuse it and the way to abuse it in my view, was to report to my editors or my writer what I heard. And I had a lot of big arguments with other photojournalists on this subject.... I said to my editors: 'Look, if [President] Clinton is going to let me in the room -- I don't hear, because I can't hear first of all I'm deaf, so I have to really concentrate on what someone saying. And I want to I want to concentrate on taking the picture. I'm not going to get it right, whatever they say. So, if I reported to you that I heard that "blah blah blah", it would be wrong and don't send me in if you're looking for someone who's going to report on what they see.' I said, 'I don't have a pencil and paper, I have a camera and film.'"

Relationships

Similarly to the White House photographer interviews, the second core theme that arose from the news photographer interview data is that relationships will impact how they are able to do their job and the stories they can focus on telling. Crowley highlights the importance of relationships in gaining and maintaining access to politicians and the White House. “Over time, you sort of see the same people over the decades that started out as young punks on the Hill⁵ and the next thing you know they’re a Chief of Staff somewhere, then they’re in the administration, and if you’ve done your job properly and you’ve been fair, you kind of buildup trust enough to get access.” However, he also warns against the pitfalls of too much access, which can compromise a news photographer’s objectivity. “The line you don’t want to cross is you don’t want too much access,” he said. “I didn’t want the same kind of access as Pete Souza because then you could compromise. Then you’d be tempted to kind of look the other way so you wouldn’t screw up your access.” Crowley’s formula for maintaining objectivity and fairness reflects a delicate balance: “I had a formula: if I took 10 pictures of an individual over a period of time, they were supposed to hate one of them, love one of them and say the other eight were fair. And if I kind of maintained that, then I felt like I was doing my job for the readers, and for democracy. So that’s a careful balancing act you have to play, and there were times when I offended somebody, and it cost me access.” This approach underscores a difference between White House and news

⁵ “The Hill” refers to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., home to the U.S. Congress. It includes the Capitol building, where the House of Representatives and the Senate meet, and metaphorically represents the legislative branch of the U.S. government. The term also refers to the adjacent neighborhood containing congressional offices, the Supreme Court, and the Library of Congress.

photographers, and the importance of ethical considerations in the profession, where the goal is to provide honest and informative coverage.

As highlighted by Walker, press relationships extend beyond just interacting with the president. Often, more access can be gained by having good relationships with other members of the president's staff that, in turn, will impact the stories a photographer can tell through their photos. The following quote from Walker encompasses all three major themes that impact the role of news photographers at the White House:

When you work in the White House, there are a lot of boundaries. And you always have to work behind the rope, and you do the best you can. And then you also ask, if you're off with the president, and he's making a speech in Omaha, and you don't like the scene from the back stand, [it's] really awful, you ask the press aide if he'll take you down front [to] get closer. And you had to do that. I famously got us all up on a stand in Poland and the picture was going to be from behind the President, not from in front of him because there was a building behind him, with people all hanging out of the windows. And that would never happen in the United States because the Secret Service would have a fit. Never let people be up behind you. So here they all were out there waving and everything, and so I knew President [George H.W.] Bush would turn around and wave up to them. I mean, it was just an obvious picture. So, I talked the aide into taking us up there to get ready for the president's arrival with Lech Wałęsa. And so the four of them, Mr. Wałęsa, Mrs. Wałęsa, the Bushes, all came up, and we were all excited

because this was really a big picture of Bush with this Labor leader, Lech Wałęsa. I had the perfect lens for the shot and there was all sorts of stuff in the front, and there was all this stuff in the back. And it was gonna be a great wide picture. I could see it in *Time*, the next week, double truck. Wonderful, just what we needed. President got up there. And he said, 'Come on, Lech let's turn around,' and they turned around, and they raised their hands, and my battery was dead as a doornail. I couldn't believe it. So there wasn't anything to do [but] to grab another camera, take the lens off that one, put that lens on the other camera, turn it on, and lift it up. That took a couple of minutes. And when I looked up, they had looked back to the front, so I'd missed the picture. So, you know, I have never done this before and I never did it after but I had no choice. So I yelled at the President of the United States and I said, 'Mr. President, sir, please, just one more time.' He turned around and he got Wałęsa to turn around. They lifted their hands up, greeted the crowd, and he called out to me, 'how's this Lady Di?'

The nickname 'Lady Di' implies a closer relationship than Walker says they really had. "One morning, a bunch of us went in early for a picture and the president stood up and said, 'Hi, everybody. Hi, Wally. Hi, Larry. Hi, Bill, hi, Lowry' or whatever and, 'oh, Lady Di' and he just simply said it, so that's what I became." The use of a nickname implies familiarity, but Walker said that President George H. W. Bush knew her as a photographer because she had photographed him for a long time, including when he was working for the CIA: "I was photographing him whenever there was the opportunity

to go to the CIA, those photo ops are pretty limited,” she said. “So, he was used to me, and he knew that I work for *Time*.”

Similarly, Mills underscores the importance of press relationships in his interactions with President Trump and his staff. Mills notes that presidents do see the pictures taken of them and will call out photographers in various ways if they're unhappy. Mills was called out by President Clinton for a photo of his daughter, Chelsea, that “he didn't care for” and had a similar interaction with President Trump. “[He] called me out in front of the Prime Minister of Great Britain during a photo op like, ‘Doug I hated that picture. Oh, my God, my chin looked huge.’” Mills further reflects on how such interactions affected his professional relationships: “I don't think it affected my relationship with him. He might have been pissed off about it. But they have so much going on in their lives. I mean, it's a split second for them.” Crowley offers another perspective, discussing how politicians are aware of the dynamics with the press and the importance of not appearing too deferential. “I don't think they would respect you if you liked them too much,” he said. “If you were really pandering to him, anybody with an ounce of sense, any politician would understand that's not good.”

Storytelling

The third key theme of this data analysis is storytelling decisions. The stories news photographers are able to tell are directly impacted by the access they receive. The restricted access granted to news photographers means that more often than not, they have to rely on photo opportunities and planned events in order to photograph the president. Crowley compared photo ops to the rigorous practice of Serena and Venus

Williams in tennis. Just as the Williams sisters honed their skills through relentless practice, photographers distill chaos into compelling, meaningful visuals. Crowley emphasizes that every photo opportunity, regardless of its initial appearance, holds value and contributes to the broader narrative. "I never saw any of that as a waste ever. So, most of the time, you came out with something that was not going to hang on your wall, but it has its place," he said. The White House photo ops are not just an opportunity for the president to send a message, but it's an opportunity for news photographers to look for more stories, as Mills explained:

It's like the hurdle that I look at every day, when I come into the White House. A photo op with a president most of the time it's something they want. Not always, many times because of certain news that's surrounding him forces him to make a statement or forces him to have a photo op. A lot of the photo ops are, can be conceived [of], if thought of that way, it's no different than, you know, the President of Russia doing something versus the president of the United States. People think it's propaganda. My job is to try and illustrate the best I can whatever happened during that moment, or that event. And it's not always what the what the objective[e] of the event is supposed to be. Many times when we go into photo ops, depending on the president, they vary in time. The average photo up before President Trump was probably, I don't know, maybe a minute to three minutes, maybe five minutes the most. For certain photo ops in the Oval Office probably maybe two minutes, maybe three, maybe four. That all turned on its head when [Donald] Trump became president, because he would have photo ops that would last 90 minutes. A Cabinet meeting, which we would go into with

[President] Trump would, would be 90 minutes, I would keep going to one with [Presidents] Bush, Reagan, Obama, Clinton and they would be anywhere from 30 seconds to maybe five minutes, maybe seven minutes if the President had a long statement. And for me, I because I have such a good relationship with our reporters and I read every night [about] what's going on, what's coming up the next day, I really try and do my homework about what the news is not only that day, but what's coming down tomorrow, the next day, a week from now who's in the news. So sometimes when you go into photo ops like that, there are multiple people in the room. I may not just be focusing on the president, because I know that having talked to one of our reporters, you know, the Secretary of State's going to be a big story by the end of the week, or the Secretary of Defense, or Transportation Secretary or you know, a cabinet member, or an aide for that matter. So that forces me really to look around the room a lot more, and not just fall into whatever event that that they want to show you.

An understanding that stories exist in all areas of presidential life, even in highly controlled situations was echoed in a different way by Crowley, who understood the impact of his news photography as a historical record:

"In 1988 or '89 I walked into the Senate press photographer's gallery in the US Capitol.

And there's Tames, and I don't know the guy he's just a God, right? I mean it's George Tames sitting there and he's talking to some gentleman who's going through a bunch of prints and contact sheets and they're talking about [President] Lyndon Johnson. Well, Tames had taken some really historic pictures of [President] Lyndon Johnson, who was a very consequential president of the 60s,

of course. It turns out the guy talking to him was Robert Caro, who is the Johnson family biographer.... And Caro really didn't care about Tames' best stuff, the pictures that Tames had on walls and in books. He wanted to see the outtakes because there's all this value in those outtakes, something that wasn't of much consequence when he took it suddenly was important. So, he was looking who was standing next to who in that picture and what was that and all these questions and Caro is using this as a resource to write his book. That's why truth and accuracy is so important. Whether the picture is getting used right now, or not I mean they're still pull stuff out every time somebody dies [something] gets pulled out of the archives to use. I [was] really thrilled that I was part that, I was able to help build this historical record.... That was a real eye-opening moment for me it's not just about me and my portfolio."

The ethical considerations and integrity involved in presidential photography are paramount. When asked about the difference between a photographer and a photojournalist, Walker said she defined herself as a photojournalist because she worked for a news organization and used photographs to enhance the news story. "I felt that it was my job to show you as best I could exactly what I saw," she said. This was echoed by every news photographer interviewed. Given that the White House is worried about the president's public image, Mills said that it's paramount to photograph what is there and what happens. "And when it doesn't happen, you can't make it happen," he said "You can't photograph something that doesn't happen. Our job is to make sure that we're telling the truth with our pictures and to never Photoshop anything. You can never

doctor a picture. I mean the rules on that are [as] black and white as they can be: you do it, you're fired. You're done. You're out, no questions asked."

The journalistic ethics of news photographers covering the president is paramount and impacts how they tell stories. Diana Walker underscores the ethical considerations in her storytelling approach. She emphasizes the importance of fairness and relevance in her work: "I like the word fair to be in my description of what I do." When asked what 'fair' meant to her, she said, "If a woman who's involved in the administration leans over to pick up something she dropped, I'm not going to shoot that I don't think that's fair and [it's] an unbecoming position for her to be in. And that's not the point of the story either. What the point of the story is [is] that she's making this announcement that's terribly important." Walker's focus is on capturing moments that are significant to the narrative rather than sensational or unflattering incidents. Crowley underscores the commitment to truth: "Our job is to make sure that we're telling the truth with our pictures and to never Photoshop anything... if you do it, you're fired." This unwavering stance ensures that the images produced are his reflections of reality that his editor can stand behind. His commitment to journalism ethics directly impacted his approach to his job covering the president. "The White House photographers work for the government and that's that, and their pictures are perfect. And their subjects are always perfectly quaffed," he said. "My job is to poke through that facade." This illustrates the tension between the typically controlled images crafted by official White House photographers and the more spontaneous, revealing moments that news photographers strive to capture. Crowley emphasizes the importance of interpreting these staged events critically to avoid manipulation by political narratives. Crowley said

that these photo opportunities are like “a two-way mirror and Pete [Souza], [David] Kennerly, they’re on one side of the glass and the photojournalists [are] on the other side. So, they’ve [Official White House photographers] seen more and if I can get ...really close to that two-way mirror, I can see shadows and movement going around [and] every once in a while they’ll deliberately turn on the light, so you can see what they want you to present as reality.”

Other photographers share similar perspectives on the storytelling process. For example, Anna Moneymaker likened photo opportunities to flying an airplane, where “all of the interesting things happen during takeoff and landing,” referring to the setup and teardown phases of events. This metaphor highlights the importance of peripheral moments that can provide a more authentic glimpse into political life and is echoed by Crowley. “The best moments of a photo op [are] before and after, when they’re yelling ‘lights,’” he said. “That’s when you get a real moment. So, you have to make do with what you have and you start piecing together this visual package of what this person is, and that could take a year, or you could do it in a day.” Crowley summarized his approach to covering politicians: “I wasn’t there to be their court photographer.”

Summary

By focusing on elements of visual aesthetics, visual literacy, and visual truth within the interview data the three key themes emerged and highlighted symbolic interactionism as a through line connecting visual rhetoric theory and framing theory. Both groups of photographers discussed access, relationships, and their storytelling decisions throughout the interviews. The way each topic was discussed made it clear

that each category is impacted by the other. Notably, news photographers discussed access as not only important to their job, but something that is constantly negotiated and often fought or argued for on a consistent basis. Even though they always want more access than they are granted by the White House, some believe that having too much access may compromise their ability to be objective in their coverage and may impact the stories they tell through their photographs. Maintaining positive professional relationships is a good way to keep access to the president and his staff as a journalist. It's difficult, if not impossible, to be granted access to any president without a good professional relationship, and this access also depends on if the photographer works for the news media or for the White house. In turn, their access impacts the stories they tell and how they tell each story. Official White House photographers need almost unlimited access to the president in order to conduct their jobs effectively as documentarians and historians of the president's activities and life at the White House. Often, Official White House photographers have established a prior connection with the incoming president through their press experience, which has an impact on the extent to which the president is receptive to the level of access they want and how at ease the president is with the constant presence of a photographer. Although news photographers may be more willing to capture and distribute an unflattering photo of the president, they do so with the knowledge that it may reduce their access to the president.

Chapter 6 – Results of Focus Groups and Close Reading

“Where we can move around, we have to get the handshake, we have to show everyone who's here we have a lot of things on our to-do list for every

event where the press are there. And I mean, they are amazingly talented photographers, but they might have a little bit more freedom at certain times to look for more creative images, we might have a list of what we have to do; Wearing a lot of hats, having a lot of responsibilities to everyone in that room.”

- Joyce Boghosian

Focus Groups

In the following chapter, I will address the protocol used for the focus groups and their comments about each photo individually. The primary goal of this study was to understand the perspectives and intentions of presidential photographers. This matters because their work can influence public perception of U.S. presidents. Given that most people will never meet the president they are partially reliant on visual communication in order to create an impression of who the president is. So, I also wanted to learn how people responded to still photographs of the president and whether they could tell the difference between photos made by Official White House photographers and those made by news photographers. I organized two exploratory focus groups to complement the interviews. I intended these focus groups to investigate viewer interpretations of photographs by the photographers interviewed. These photographs were given to me by the photographers I interviewed, following a set of prompts I provided them to gain a diverse and comprehensive selection capturing various facets of presidential imagery. I used a randomized process to select the photos I would show to the focus groups and use for the close reading from among the 104 photos sent to me by the interviewees.

By integrating insights from the focus groups with the interview data from photographers and a close reading of each photograph, I aimed to triangulate

interpretations and viewpoints on presidential imagery. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of differences and similarities between how photos are perceived by those who capture them and those who view them in different contexts in order to answer the following questions.

RQ3: How does the public interpret the content and tone presented in White House and press photographs?

RQ4: How do viewer/reader interpretations of White House and press photographs affect their views of the president?

Protocol

As described in Chapter 4, participants were recruited through the SOJC Research Pool using a recruitment posting accessible to all registered individuals. I also made an in-person request for participants in a large introductory communications course, J201 Media and Society, which enrolled students from various degree programs beyond the SOJC. In total, I successfully enlisted ten participants for the study, nine of whom showed up on the day of their scheduled focus group.

The two focus group sessions began with a brief overview and explanation of the research, followed by a presentation of four photographs of American presidents and a discussion about the participants' viewpoints. I intentionally avoided leading the participants to answers they thought I wanted to hear. I stated that we would examine photographs of various American presidents and that there were no wrong answers regarding their interpretations and viewpoints. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage participants to share their thoughts and opinions freely without feeling pressured to conform to any particular viewpoint. We reviewed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, and I informed them they could withdraw from the study at any

point. I communicated that their responses would be kept anonymous, and they were each assigned a unique study number to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Additionally, they consented to the audio recording of the session. I highlighted the importance of allowing each participant to express themselves and share their thoughts, and I stressed the value of their input in this research. I encouraged them to pay attention and show consideration for the perspectives of their fellow participants. I encouraged all participants to actively engage in the conversation while assuring them they did not have to speak if they did not want to. The primary objective of the focus groups was to delve into participants' interpretations of the photographs and their knowledge of how photographs of the president were made. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of what people know about this subject and to answer the research questions. As the moderator of the focus groups, I was responsible for overseeing the discussion and ensuring we remained focused on the topic. I paid attention to group dynamics and fostered dialogue among participants, asking probing questions when necessary to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. Participants were allowed to skip any questions they did not want to answer or had no answer for. Since the discussion was focused on politics, creating a safe and respectful environment was crucial. To maintain focus and guide discussion, I utilized a predetermined set of questions, which can be found in Appendix C.

Although the use of focus groups comprising college students has certain limitations regarding the generalizability of the data, as the future generation, college students are an essential group to consider. The focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format.

Example 1: Tell me what you know about official White House photographers and press photographers in the White House.

Example 2: Do you think it's important to have photos of the president? Why/why not?

The focus group discussions were audio recorded, and at the start of each session, the participants stated their assigned study number rather than their name. I reviewed and proofread the transcripts to ensure accuracy and corrected any errors the Otter A.I. transcription made.

First, I held a discussion with the focus groups to explore their knowledge of the topic of photography at the White House. Then, I presented them with four photos, one at a time, in order of when each president was in office, starting with President Ford, followed in sequence by Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Trump. I provided each participant with a short questionnaire (see Appendix D) to answer as they looked at the photos. I wanted to know their individual thoughts about each photo without being influenced by other focus group members. Finally, I revisited the images and facilitated a discussion based on the thoughts they wrote down.

Focus Group Findings

The findings outlined below report participant answers from both the individual questionnaires as well as the group discussion. The focus group discussions highlighted the participants' understanding of the value of visual documentation in documenting presidential leadership within the White House. Participants recognized the historical significance of visually documenting the presidency. One participant remarked, "I think for historic purposes, a face to a name is probably really important if you're trying to

decipher who's in what meetings and who you are representing history. For everyday use, I don't think it matters as much for me." This opinion emphasizes the significance of photographic records in preserving the narrative of presidential decision-making and governance. With that being said, most of the participants did not directly know the difference between a news photographer and an Official White House photographer: "Well, I actually don't know anything, but I think based on how it's phrased, I'd say the White House [photographers] are hired by the government. And they [are] extremely trained professionals and they're never going to let a bad picture of anyone inside the White House get out." Another focus group participant expressed an understanding of White House communication efforts through the use of official photos on social media by saying "When I see random Instagram posts, like, from [President] Biden or whatever, it's like, 'oh, that's obviously not a picture that was taken by the press, because it's very manicured in what he's trying to say.'" Additionally, another participant stressed the role of photographs as a means for citizens to understand the trajectory of national progress and acknowledge achievements, stating, "I think photographs provide a context for progress being made and accomplishments." These sentiments collectively underscore the participants' awareness of the power and significance of visual documentation in shaping perceptions of presidential leadership and the course of American history. They decided that knowing who took each photo does ultimately matter. "I would say [it] revolves around public perception. And I think, who took the pictures leads society kind of how to view the particular president." There was a consensus among participants "I agree that it matters who is taking it because it shows what biases they probably have towards that or if they're actually trying to be neutral

about it.” I will outline participants’ discussions regarding each selected photograph in the following section.



Figure 2: Photo 1. President Gerald Ford with President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (at left) of France, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and French Foreign Minister Jean Sauvagnargues, at the Leyritz Plantation Hotel swimming pool in Martinique in 1975. – By David Kennerly, Chief Official White House Photographer for President Ford. Used with permission, courtesy of David Kennerly⁶.

⁶ Captions are official wording accompanying photos as provided by the photographers.

Participants' interpretation of Photo 1 hinged on the perceived casualness conveyed in the photo. The participants in the focus groups expressed mixed responses based on the tone and context of the photograph of President Gerald Ford. While noting the casual nature of the photograph, one participant described it as if it were taken by a friend, emphasizing the informal atmosphere being poolside creates. This observation suggests that such photos may feel relatable and potentially discount the seriousness expected in presidential imagery. "I felt like it was taken by a friend. Like someone could have just hopped out and snapped a picture really quick, just because it does seem so casual. And there's like people in the background everywhere. I feel like it's not too secure." Another participant interpreted the photograph to be taken by someone close to the president, highlighting the proximity and intimate feeling of the shot. "I think it was taken by someone who was there at their own leisure with the president due to how close up the picture is. I don't think security would let any other non-hired photographer get that close."

Participants expressed a strong expectation for formality and decorum in presidential images, suggesting that casual or informal photographs would be considered outrageous and mismatched with the professional nature expected of a president.

"I feel like an image like this of a president nowadays would be outrageous. Too, I guess, casual."

"I would say [it] doesn't really align with the professional nature of what a president's supposed to be."

“When I first saw it, I was like, I don’t know what’s going on there. Because I was like, I don’t think I’ve ever seen them not in a suit and tie.”

These interpretations suggest that the public expects a high degree of professionalism in photos of the president.

When presented with this photo of President Ford, none of the focus group participants could identify which individual in the photo was the president nor which president he was after I pointed him out. One participant described President Ford as giving off a “creepy” impression, which may negatively affect their view of the president’s character. “I feel like he’s gonna be one of those creepy guys that like walks up to a young lady and it’s like, ‘Hey, how are you?’ Just gives me that vibe with that smile.”

Another comment associated the president with a lack of authenticity or depth, comparing him unfavorably to a superficial persona. This interpretation may indicate a perception of the president as insincere or disingenuous. “Definitely, there is nothing [in] his eyes; his eyes are really slanted [he’s squinting], but you can tell there is nothing behind them. You can just tell this dude’s chatting up 25-year-old women despite being like mid-50s. I don’t know, can’t tell how old he is.” Conversely, this photograph gave one participant a sense of normalcy and reassurance since it depicted the president in a relaxing setting. This interpretation suggests that the president, despite the demands of the office, has moments of relaxation and normalcy, which can humanize him and make him more relatable. “It makes me feel like at least there’s not like anything like crazy going on in like the wider world where it’s like, oh, he’s just having a good time with.... “It gives that, like, at least they have the chance to relax because I feel like a lot of

pictures are-- you see people stressed out. And so, this is kind of the opposite where it's like they're chillin' in the pool."

These interpretations suggest that photographs of the president can impact public perceptions, shaping views of the president's personality, authenticity, and even the perceived state of the nation. Photos that align with expectations of professionalism and decorum tend to reinforce positive perceptions, while those that deviate can evoke skepticism. Discussing this photo of President Ford was especially interesting, given that the focus group participants did not have an impression of him beforehand.



Figure 3: Photo 2. President Bill Clinton taking a deep breath before going on stage at the Democratic National Convention to accept his party's nomination for the 1996 elections. – By Diana Walker, *Time Magazine* White House photographer. Used with

permission, courtesy of Diana Walker.

Focus group participants identified the emotion on President Clinton's face and noted the general setting, recognizing it as a backstage location, though not specifically at the Democratic Convention. They interpreted the photograph's tone as more casual and inferred from aspects of the photo, such as his facial expression, that it was likely not taken by an official White House photographer. This interpretation stems from the belief that official White House photos likely aim to project a particular image. "Because it does look like a casual photo... I don't think it was the government's photographer just because you really wouldn't want the president being nervous put out in the world like that."

The photo was also interpreted as having a more journalistic approach, portraying a behind-the-scenes moment that aligns with the type of content journalists aim to show—real, unguarded moments of public figures. "It seems like it's so behind the scenes, and that's what I would imagine people in that field would want to be showing the world." Participants observed the discomfort and nervousness in President Clinton's expression, interpreting the photo as capturing a moment of stress or apprehension. "I thought he was about to blow chunks," one participant said. "He does look like he's gonna blow chunks," another agreed. "He looks really kind of uncomfortable and like he doesn't want to do whatever he's about to do." The interpretation of the photo as being taken before a speech or press conference, where Clinton appears nervous or tense, reinforces the idea that the tone of such images is

crucial in conveying the emotional state and context of the president. As one participant said, “This definitely looks like prior to like a speech or a press conference, and by his facial expression, he’s either nervous or it’s a topic that’s controversial.” These interpretations suggest that the public tends to read a lot into the emotional tone and setting of photographs, often using these cues to form broader judgments about the president’s state of mind and the context of the moment captured.

Comparing this photo of President Clinton to the photo of President Ford, which participants interpreted to be more relaxed, they noted the stressful nature of the image due to Clinton’s facial expression. The contrast highlights how different facial expressions can be associated with differing overall tones and elicit distinct emotional responses from viewers: “Compared to the last one where [it’s] very like relaxed almost. This is [a] very stressful kind of image because, well, you can’t see exactly what’s happening, but you can see in his face like, ‘oh, man,’ about to do something. Something that he may not like. It’s not something he wants to do, clearly. Whereas opposed to the last image, where it’s like, oh, just chillin’ in the pool with some drinks, of course, they’re all having a good time.” According to the focus groups, the photo makes Clinton seem more real or human, as participants saw him experiencing a genuine emotional moment.

According to the focus group data, seeing a president appearing scared or nervous can make him seem less confident and authoritative. “He’s scared. He seems like me about to public speak,” one participant said. “He doesn’t exactly inspire confidence. He looks like somebody the lights are too bright for,” another stated.

However, for some, seeing the president in a moment of apparent self-reflection or pep talk can humanize him, showing that he experiences nerves and self-doubt like anyone else. This relatability can endear him to the public. As one said, “It’s like presidents aren’t this perfect, super confident, good [at] public speaking, whatever. It’s like, no, he still gets nervous, too. You know what I mean? I guess it kind of humanizes [him] because it’s like, ‘wow,’ look, he still has to collect himself before some stressful thing, whether it’s public speaking or being on T.V. or something like that.”

Describing the image as a behind-the-scenes glimpse suggests an added layer of authenticity. “Looks more of like the behind-the-scenes, like, seeing movies rather than like, you really wouldn’t find a picture of that [of] current or recent presidents. It’s more of, like, what actors look behind the scenes,” said one participant.



Figure 4: Photo 3. President Barack Obama delivers his first prime time televised news conference in February 2009. -- By Joyce Boghosian, Official White House

Photographer from 1989-1993 and 2001-2021. Used with permission, courtesy of Joyce Boghosian.

Participants mistakenly assumed that the presence of members of the press in this photograph of President Obama indicated that a news photographer with limited access likely took it. They believed visual cues such as the photograph's angle and inclusion of the press indicated the photographer's inability to capture a "better" photograph. "I think that they might not be as popular of a news source or magazine or whatever because of how far back they are.... They're definitely not *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. They're probably some smaller source," one participant said. These are the visual cues that contributed to the interpretation of the photo being taken by a member of the press rather than an Official White House photographer.

With all the attention in the photograph on President Obama, one participant said, "[It] makes me think of ABC News with the special report from the White House. That's what it's kind of giving off a little bit when looking at it because it doesn't look like the normal kind of like just typical speech kind of setting. It looks like this is kind of like an urgent situation. Or some kind of conference that's like about the press like, 'Oh, I have to address this. We need to talk about it.'" To which another participant said: "Evidently so urgent they didn't even have time to zoom in the camera."

Photos showing Obama calm and collected at the podium conveyed a sense of confidence and authority, aligning with expectations of presidential demeanor. They

interpreted President Obama as looking “very confident” and “empowered.” Some participants found the image more aligned with their expectations of presidential photos, depicting professionalism and the president as the center of attention: “It seems much more like what I expect images of the president to look like. Very professional and, like, center of attention at the podium type thing.” Another said, “I agree that it’s more of what I would expect. That media has shown me on the news of what a president appears like, especially like [with] a podium... the grandness of the building and all the press just gives off like, ‘this is the leader, and this is some guy in power, and it’s important to listen.’”

Some participants viewed the structured and polished nature of the photo as indicative of the staged and performative aspects of political leadership. One said, “This photo kind of makes me think of artifice, like how much of a show -- there’s Obama at this podium.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating that while the scene itself does not appear fake, it symbolizes the idea that the president is newsworthy simply because he is the president: “I think it kind of speaks to the fact when the president has to say something that everyone is like, ‘we need to cover this. We need to hear what’s going on.’ I don’t think they’re doing this because, ‘Oh, we want to make it look like people care.’ I think people genuinely do care because they’re the president. And that’s why you get all these things. So, they bring in the light so it’s easier to see and take photos or videos, you know, all the cameras because it’s like, I want to be the person that said, ‘Look, Obama said this thing,’ you know, all the people are there to ask questions and be the person to get a breaking story or something like that.” Another said, “All of the eyes of the D.C. people looking at him, [they’re] all also wearing suits. It

just makes me think of like [a] presentation. You know how he's addressing the nation, but it's not an impromptu speech at all. You know, it's very much a show."

For some participants, the photograph of President Obama evoked positive memories and reinforced perceptions of his effective leadership and public speaking skills. As one said, "I remember the most other than the past president. But because 2008 is when he was signed in and so whenever I think of him, I think of good stuff because there [were] good things that came out of the presidency." Another said, "I grew up and Obama was the first [President] I could remember. And what I do remember is that he was very good at public speaking, or at least what it seemed like and this picture kind of, in my opinion, showcases that... you can see like he looks confident everyone's listening, which obviously he's the President, so everyone does anyways. But the way this picture is framed everyone's eyes all on him. The cameras pointed at him, but he's still like, calm and collected and like he doesn't even look like he's stressed about it." The key words that came to a different participant were "Empowered, confident. Definitely someone who knows what they're doing and knows what they're going to be saying; confident in their words."

These interpretations suggest how photographs can shape the public's view of the president, either reinforcing positive attributes such as confidence and leadership or bringing attention to the presidency's performative and structured nature.



Figure 5: Photo 4. President Donald Trump disembarking from Air Force One (not visibly shown) in Orlando, Florida, on March 13, 2017. – By Stephen Crowley, NYT photojournalist. Used with permission, courtesy of *The New York Times* via Stephen Crowley.

Participants did not interpret this photograph of President Trump as journalistic. Instead, they perceived it as resembling a “paparazzi” shot, suggesting it seemed heavily edited and possibly staged. However, they did interpret that it was still taken by

someone with a professional camera because “.... I just thought the quality of the image. I feel like it’s someone who’s got like a nice camera like not someone with like the Apple iPhone, like trying zoom in on the president because that would be grainy.” The saturated blue background made participants believe the photograph was over-edited. One participant remarked, “I thought this photo was staged because of the weird blue color that the sky is like; I don’t know what to call that color blue. It’s Weezer blue.... It can’t be staged, though, right? Because why would he willingly let himself get photographed when he knows there’s scotch tape on the back of his tie?” This sentiment underscores a general skepticism about the photograph’s authenticity, highlighting how unusual elements can lead viewers to question the realism of an image.

At the time of this research, President Trump was positioned front and center in many of the participants minds and understanding of current events surrounding the presidency, which made it difficult to influence the impression they already held. “I remember when I saw him in the home alone movie, I was like, he looks weird.... I feel like my personal opinion of him really clouds no matter what picture of him I look at.” The presence of visible tape underneath President Trump’s tie was a significant point of critique, as participants felt it made the photograph appear unprofessional and unorganized. One participant noted, “It makes it look really unorganized and not very put together.” This detail clashed with their expectation of the polished, carefully curated images typically associated with official White House photography. Participants expected a certain level of professionalism in these images, suggesting that deviations from this standard can lead to negative interpretations by the public. Several

participants speculated about the potential bias of the photograph's source, suggesting that a liberal-leaning outlet might have taken it to portray President Trump unfavorably. One participant stated, "Donald Trump is linked to Fox News because it's a more conservative news outlet. And I was like, this picture might have been taken by a more liberal-leaning news outlet just because it's a more unflattering picture." Another added, "I think it's somebody that's maybe trying to kind of get almost a bad or odd photo of the President." These comments reflect a suspicion that the photograph could be intentionally unfavorable, influenced by the perceived political alignment of the photographer or media outlet. These perspectives suggest that perceived authenticity (staging and editing), professionalism (unflattering details like tape on the tie), and potential bias from the photograph's source can influence the public's interpretation of photographs of the president.

Participants noted that the visible tape on President Trump's tie made them perceive him as lazy and needing more attention to detail. One participant remarked, "... the tape just makes me think of laziness. Because I mean, you can easily sew a tie if you really wanted to. It's not hard. And he does have it in the strap piece. So, if there's something seriously wrong with it, if he's the president, he can buy a new tie." This critique underscores how minor details can influence public opinion. The presence of the tape also contributed to perceptions of "tackiness." One participant observed, "There's like a sort of tackiness to it, which is ironic. Considering how much he's worth and how he presents himself, it's really interesting to see that." This quote highlights a disconnect between the image Trump projects and the reality the public perceives. Interestingly, the photograph also led some participants to question whether such

practices were standard among other presidents, reflecting curiosity about the behind-the-scenes efforts to maintain a presidential image. One participant thought, “[it] makes me wonder if other presidents do that or if it’s just him because you don’t see a lot of pictures ... because any other president could easily do that. It could just be part of their staff saying, ‘Oh, let’s tape it down in case it flies up. So, it looks neat.’” This introspection suggests that such images can prompt the public to reconsider their assumptions about presidential behavior and the authenticity of their public personas.

What I found most significant about the focus group data was the participants’ interpretation of each photo as staged or set up with the intention of being photographed. Notable, one participant said “I think all of them are staged. I just think they’re all purposely done, in a way, for the camera. “Due to this, it was important to ask the focus groups what their understanding was of the difference between the terms ‘photography’ and ‘photojournalism’, which came down to: storytelling. “Photojournalism is more like definitive in like telling the story. So, like, in particular, these [photos] will probably be linked to certain events. Versus photography is more spontaneous.” Of important to the focus groups when differentiating between the two types of photography was who took the photo. “It kind of depends on who’s taking it and the motive with the image. I think when I think of photography, I think more of [an] artistic point of view of whatever this person is taking. Whereas photojournalism, I think the person takes a photo for more of a purposeful like, news, or sharing of some event that’s happening.”

Summary

Notably, participants interpreted many of the same themes and categories that arose in the interview data. Based on various visual cues, participants inferred the level of access each photographer was granted, which in turn provided some context about their relationship and the story each photographer was trying to tell based on their perceived role as a news photographer or an Official White House photographer. The focus group data had some interesting results regarding the RQs:

RQ3: How does the public interpret the content and tone presented in White House and press photographs?

RQ4: How do viewer/reader interpretations of White House and press photographs affect their views of the president?

In order to answer RQ3, I looked for participants' discussion surrounding the visual content as well as their interpretation of how the president was represented in each photo. The focus group participants understood the historical significance of visually documenting the president's actions in the White House. They acknowledged the value of photographs in providing context for the president's activities and accomplishments, or lack thereof. They recognized certain visual cues, such as the casualness of the setting or the presence of members of the press, as indicators of authenticity and professionalism. The participants also focused on the facial expressions of each president to determine the tone of the photo. They speculated about the photographers based on their perceived proximity to the president or their composition choices. In general, the focus groups interpreted the tone and content of each photo similarly to the

photographer's intention based on interview data. Ultimately, where the focus group data diverged from interview data was in their interpretation of who took each photo. As for RQ4, I looked for participants' direct interpretation and discussion of their perception of the president in each photograph. The focus group participants had preconceived notions and assumptions about the presidents they recognized and were familiar with from a historical perspective. They had no preconceived knowledge about President Ford himself, but rather interpreted the image based on his age, facial expression, and location. They discussed their expectations regarding the president's public image, indicating that they anticipated seeing the president in specific settings and events, with certain appearances aligning more with their expectations of presidential representation. The photograph of President Ford in the pool highlighted the professional nature of presidential imagery that has come to be expected. This was emphasized by their interpretation of the photo of President Trump, which was described as unorganized based on the visible tape underneath his tie. Furthermore, they linked their assumptions about the political leanings of the photographers and the media outlets they might represent to their perceptions of the president's relationship with the media and his overall image.

Close Reading

To answer the second research question of this dissertation, I conducted a close reading of each of the four photographs presented to the focus groups and revisited the focus group data. While exploratory in nature, the focus group data provided some interesting insights influencing my understanding of each photograph as the participants discussed the photos in relation to each other.

RQ2: *To what extent are White House photographs of the president similar to or different from press photographs?*

Protocol

As mentioned previously, the photographers themselves chose the photos based on prompts that I provided, which can be read in Appendix E. I then used a randomized selection process to select the photos I would use for the focus groups and my close reading. A randomized selection eliminated any potential bias on my part.

As a researcher, I utilized my understanding of the subject matter, which I acquired through review of research and popular literature, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and professional experience, to analyze the provided photographs thoroughly. I worked systematically, viewing each photo via my laptop computer in the original color they were sent to me. Studying the photos in this way gave me a detailed view of the compositional elements present in each photo. I conducted three rounds of a close reading of various elements for each of the four photos. Guided by Foss (1994) and Page (2020) I looked for three aspects within each photograph: Nature, function, and evaluation. Nature is the distinguishing features of the photo, function is the connotations and denotations, and evaluation is how well functions make meanings in the photograph. First, I began with general observations of the photo. I carefully examined and noted the visual elements, such as composition, lighting, and perspective, considering the framing, perspective, focal point, lines, and shapes and how these elements evoke emotion and mood. After this, I conducted research regarding the social climate at the time the photo was taken in order to understand how the narrative present in the photo fit into the broader context of politics at the time and

made notes about how the context affected or informed my interpretation of the photo. Finally, I considered the potential metaphors and symbolic messages in the photo and made notes as I studied each photo. Through this iterative, close reading process, my goals were to answer RQ2 about differences and similarities in the photos and to integrate my interpretation with the insights gained from the photographers' interviews and the focus groups' material.

Results

Figure 2, referred to as Photo 1

Photo 1 by David Kennerly, the Chief Official White House Photographer for President Gerald Ford, captures a gathering at the Leyritz Plantation Hotel swimming pool during a sunny day in Martinique in 1974. The image is in black and white and shows President Gerald Ford and President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing of France in a relaxed yet formal setting alongside Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and French Foreign Minister Jean Sauvagnargues. The four bare-chested men are in the pool and engaged in conversation, smiling while holding drinks, which suggests amicable relations and a congenial atmosphere. The photograph is set within the context of international diplomacy during the mid-1970s. In 1974, President Gerald Ford had recently taken office following the resignation of Richard Nixon, making it a transformative period for U.S. leadership and its global diplomatic stance. Ford's presidency was marked by efforts to stabilize domestic politics and strengthen international alliances, especially in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal (Greene, 1995). During this time, significant events in President Ford's administration included managing the complexities of the

Cold War, addressing the economic challenges of inflation and recession, and restoring public trust in the government (Greene, 1995).

Leyritz Plantation Hotel in Martinique, also known as La Plantation Leyritz, was renowned for its historic and scenic setting. It provided an ideal environment for the Franco-American summit, which was used to discuss political and economic issues (Herbers, 1974). This venue choice underscores the importance of a serene setting for high-level discussions, allowing leaders to engage in meaningful conversations on international issues and geopolitical strategies. The photograph captures a diplomatic moment and reflects themes of international collaboration and strategic partnerships defining U.S.-France relations in the mid-1970s.

The use of black-and-white photography enhances the timeless quality of the scene, highlighting contrasts in light and shadow to emphasize the event's formality. The image was likely made with relatively high-speed film and taken in black and white in order to preserve the photo for use years later. The subjects are positioned centrally within the frame, their relaxed postures and shared smiles conveying mutual respect and camaraderie. In the background, discreetly positioned figures in suits, likely Secret Service agents, add an air of security and vigilance, underscoring the significance of the diplomatic meeting. The focal point of the photograph is clearly on the president and those in the pool with him. While part of the pool is outside of the frame, it is likely that no one else was in the pool aside from those pictured. In addition to the Secret Service agents, this indicates a highly controlled environment. The poolside setting and the presence of drinks in hand suggest an informal moment during a formal diplomatic visit, reinforcing the idea of personal rapport and strategic dialogue between leaders. The

sunshine and outdoor setting of this photo create a symbolically positive feel to this photo. The formal attire of the figures in the background further emphasizes the gravity of the occasion, contrasting with the relaxed demeanor of the central figures. In contrast with focus group participants, I did not interpret President Ford to be at all “creepy” based on this photograph. Instead, this photo indicates the behind-the-scenes efforts that go into diplomacy and political relationships. The relaxed and casual tone of this photograph did make me wonder about how casualness is portrayed in modern presidencies. I agree that a photo like this is unlikely to be released in the current political climate.

Among the four photos analyzed, this one stands out as the only one that clearly indicates a higher level of access granted to the photographer, who was an Official White House photographer. While clearly outside of the pool, Kennerly’s perspective with this photograph makes it look like he is in the circle of politicians, rather than outside of it, as if he is involved in the conversation. The relaxed posture and body language of the president and the individuals in the pool imply a certain level of trust between not only the subjects themselves but also between the subjects and the photographer. Further, the photograph humanizes the politicians, making them more relatable to an audience and reinforcing the idea that even national leaders have moments of leisure, just like everyone else. This authenticity adds depth to the narrative surrounding these political figures, presenting them as multidimensional individuals rather than mere symbols of power. The fact that they allowed such an intimate moment to be photographed implies a degree of comfort and familiarity, further enhancing the implied authenticity of the image. This trust between the subject(s) and photographer is

essential in storytelling, as it allows for the capture of genuine moments that can resonate with viewers on an emotional level. This photo was taken from a close distance, likely with a short focal-length lens rather than with a telephoto lens, given the extended depth of field throughout. The level of access granted to Kennerly and the photographer-subject relationship between them is demonstrated in this image, not only through the subject matter but also through the composition, location, and body language of the president. The authenticity and candidness captured in this photograph contribute significantly to storytelling and narrative by giving viewers a glimpse into the private moments and personalities of political figures. In an era where staged photo opportunities, pseudo-events, and carefully curated images were (and still are) common in politics, this candid shot breaks through the facade, revealing a more human side to these influential figures.

Figure 3, referred to as Photo 2

Photo 2 is a black and white photo of President Bill Clinton taking a deep breath before going on stage at the Democratic National Convention to accept his party's nomination for the 1996 elections. It was taken by Diana Walker, *Time Magazine's* White House photographer at the time and likely was made with a wide-angle lens and 35-mm film. The focus is on President Clinton's face, which reflects the anticipation and the seriousness of the moment, showcasing the significance of his responsibilities and the high stakes of his re-election campaign. There is no reference to the scandal that would later overshadow much of his presidency. The scene's backdrop is a chaotic and cluttered backstage area filled with a crowd of people, which adds a sense of

expectancy to the narrative surrounding Clinton's acceptance speech. The chaos behind the president creates a more energetic feeling the photo. The photograph shows President Clinton in a suit, surrounded by individuals dressed similarly, although their identities are not discernible. One person is wearing a guest pass, indicating access to the setting. Remarkably, no other photographers or visible Secret Service agents are in the image, suggesting a high level of trust and rapport between the president and Walker. This level of trust allowed Walker to capture a candid moment that reveals a personal aspect of her subject. Given that most of the photo is in focus, Walker was likely not using a telephoto lens, which builds upon the perceived trust in this photo. She was allowed to be close to the president and her presence was not obtrusive or unwelcome in this setting. The presence of poles and wires in the image suggests that the photograph was taken backstage in a visually uncontrolled environment. Despite this, the composition is intimate and unobtrusive, capturing Clinton in a private moment of contemplation amid the bustling activity of backstage preparations. The cluttered background setting conveys the complexity of orchestrating a major political event. It contrasts sharply with Clinton's solitary, introspective position, emphasizing his human vulnerability and the weight of responsibility associated with political leadership. These elements contribute significantly to the narrative, providing a raw and unfiltered glimpse into a significant moment in political history. The photograph captures a vulnerable side of President Clinton that transcends the polished image typically associated with political leaders.

Furthermore, the expression on the president's face suggests that he had let his guard down and was not thinking about his public image at the time. This moment

further suggests that the president trusted Walker, enabling her to capture a candid moment revealing her subject's vulnerable side. Similarly to the focus group participants, I interpreted his facial expression as an indicator of nerves or anticipation before giving a speech. This is a relatable experience to anyone who has been on a stage, which comes through in this photograph. The exclusion of the stage or an audience does not detract from the interpretation of President Clinton getting ready for a speech. Instead, showing the backstage setting creates an understanding of what happens moments before a president steps out in front of the public. In this instance, President Clinton's decision to let down his guard and allow Walker to document his private moment speaks volumes about their relationship and the level of access granted to her as a photographer. Walker took the photograph just before a highly controlled and publicized event scheduled to take place. President Clinton later confided in Walker that he did not like the photo due to his facial expression, adding another layer to the narrative. The picture effectively communicates the level of access granted to Walker and the photographer-subject relationship through visual cues, such as location and body language.

Figure 4, referred to as Photo 3

Official White House photographer Joyce Boghosian's photograph, Photo 3, shows President Barack Obama during his first prime-time televised news conference in February 2009, held in the East Room of the White House. In the photo, Obama is standing behind a podium decorated with the Presidential Seal of the United States, symbolizing his authority and the official nature of the event. To his right is the American

flag, and to his left is the seal appears again, both reinforcing his presidential authority and framing his address with historical and institutional significance. The color photograph is taken from a zoomed-out perspective, likely with a wide-angle lens on a digital camera, revealing members of the press seated in front of President Obama on both sides of the room. These members of the press, seated and facing the president, signify the role of the media in reporting and interpreting presidential actions. Their presence adds depth and context to the photograph, highlighting the interaction between political leadership and media scrutiny. Boghosian's position alongside other photographers is evident, indicating her role in documenting the event. Using a wide-angle lens captures the expansive setting of the East Room, emphasizing the scale and importance of the presidential address.

The East Room of the White House is a historically significant venue for presidential announcements and formal addresses, symbolizing American political history and ceremonial grandeur. It has hosted key presidential moments such as press conferences, bill signings, and state events. Notable events include the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Seven presidents had funerals or Laid-In-State in the East Room (White House Historical Association, n.d.), and Richard Nixon gave his departing remarks from the East Room in 1974 (American Presidency Project, n.d.). Notably, First Lady Abigail Adams had hung her laundry here in the winter of 1800-1801 (Obama White House, n.d.). In February 2009, early in Obama's presidency, a prime-time news conference in the East Room was crucial in shaping public perception and policy amid economic challenges and international

developments. This context highlights the setting's role and significance in presidential communications.

President Obama occupies a central position, which serves as a focal point, drawing the viewer's attention to him. The symmetrical arrangement of the American flag and Presidential Seal on either side reinforces his authority and the formal nature of the event. The press members, depicted with their backs to the camera, symbolize their role as observers and documenters of the address. Large lighting towers with multiple lights on each side of the room illuminate the scene, casting President Obama in a spotlight-like glow. The lights enhance visibility and metaphorically underscore his central role in addressing the nation. The lighting contrasts the illuminated president and the darker foreground, further highlighting his prominence. President Obama stands upright and confident, reflecting his authoritative stance as he addresses the press. His facial expression appears serious and focused, suggesting the seriousness of the event. Notably missing from this frame are Secret Service members and other communications staff, who are usually present for press conferences and public addresses. The exclusion of inherently obvious White House staff members further emphasizes the president's authority and highlights his role as the leading representative of the U.S. government.

Based on my understanding of the storytelling choices made by Official White House photographers, I did not immediately assume that a member of the press took Photo 3. However, it is also possible for a member of the press to capture the same or similar photograph. Therefore, drawing conclusions about the photographer-subject relationship based solely on this photograph is challenging. The intent behind the

photograph was not to portray the president in an intimate or behind-the-scenes manner; instead, the photographer aimed to showcase the media's presence to document the president's appearance, as she informed me in her interview. This photograph effectively demonstrates the challenges that news photographers face due to the limited space in which they must work. Although this image presents a small aspect of the access granted to members of the press at the White House, it does not explicitly indicate the extent of access given to this particular photographer, given my knowledge of her work and tenure at the White House. This photograph reflects a conscious effort to document the president's interactions with the media and the broader context of his public engagements. While it may not reveal the depth of her professional relationship with President Obama, it serves as a testament to her role as a documenter of history and her ability to capture significant moments within the constraints of her position.

Figure 5, referred to as Photo 4

Photo 4 is a photograph of President Donald Trump on March 13, 2017, at the Orlando International Airport in Orlando, Florida, taken by Stephen Crowley, a long-time photojournalist for *The New York Times*. This image was taken in early 2017 when Trump's presidency was under intense media scrutiny and political polarization. It depicts a candid moment, contrasting with the highly controlled and polished images typically disseminated by the White House. The photograph's symbolic elements reflect the broader socio-cultural climate and offer a counter-narrative to the official portrayal of President Trump. By depicting the president looking down, this photograph does not

make him look strong or dominant. In contrast to the photograph of President Obama, the solitary nature of this photograph does not make President Trump look like a strong figure representing the United States. In this way, the image provides a more candid and potentially humanizing depiction of the president. The arrangement of this image plays a significant role in guiding the viewers' attention. President Trump is shown in profile, his gaze directed downward, and he is on the frame's left side. This orientation imparts a sense of movement to the composition. By placing President Trump off-center, Crowley employed the rule of thirds, a technique that divides the image into nine equal parts using two horizontal and two vertical lines, often giving a dynamic quality to the image and accentuates the subject's significance. My eye was drawn to his face and the prominent red tie, crucial elements in the composition and narrative of the photo. The red tie, a recurring feature of President Trump's attire, flying over his shoulder due to wind, is a focal point in the image. The three visible pieces of scotch tape on the back of his red tie, which expose the imperfection of his appearance, sharply contrast with the polished image expected of a president. This detail humanizes the president, presenting a more relatable and less curated side of his persona. The lighting in the photograph appears to be natural sunlight, reflecting the outdoor setting as the president disembarks the plane. The light highlights his profile and details of his attire, skin, and hair, resulting in a clear, sharp photo. The clear blue sky behind the president offers a simple, uncluttered background that further isolates him as the sole subject of the photograph. The absence of clouds and other elements ensures that all attention is focused on President Trump, emphasizing his solitary figure and the subtleties of his appearance and expression.

Crowley's decision to frame the photograph with President Trump against a plain blue sky emphasizes the photo's impact. The photo focuses solely on the president and the significant moment captured by excluding surrounding elements. The content of the photo is also noteworthy because it features only the president and no other individuals or objects in the frame. Likely outside of the frame Air Force One itself, a stair ramp, Secret Service agents, local politicians such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis at the bottom of the stair ramp, and the presidential state car nicknamed 'The Beast'. The composition implies a less intimate relationship as a long lens on a digital camera was likely used to capture the shot, showing the president from the elbows up. Additionally, the lack of posing or acknowledgment of the photographer's presence in the moment, despite being a planned event for the press to attend, underscores this observation.

Differences and similarities

My close reading of these images found similarities and differences between the photographs taken by Official White House photographers and those taken by news photographers. The focus group participants also compared the photographs in our discussion, furthering my interpretation of the similarities and differences between each photograph.

A key similarity between these photographs is that they depict controlled moments to a certain degree. Generally, news photographers in the press corps do not have access to the presidents' private lives. Therefore, the presence of a news photographer suggests that the moment was planned or that an event was taking place, as interpreted by focus group participants. However, the president does not look at the camera in any of these photographs. In addition, each photograph places the president

as the primary subject of the visual story. The candid aspect of these photos is worth noting because Official White House photographers have the access to photograph various other aspects of the president's life and the goings-on at the White House in general. However, each of the moments captured in these photos showcase situations that required a significant amount of planning and preparation.

The photographs each possess a significant historical and political context, capturing crucial moments in the respective presidencies and international relations. Each contains symbolic elements that contribute to the narrative, such as the tape on President Trump's tie, President Clinton's deep breath, the East Room and accompanying presidential symbols, and the relaxed poolside setting of President Ford and other leaders. These elements humanize the subjects and provide a deeper understanding of the context of the captured moments. Additionally, these photographs reflect broader themes of leadership, diplomacy, and personal moments in political life. The photographs differ in the levels of access and photographer-subject relationships depicted in the composition. Notably, the first two images were both taken on black-and-white film, while the last two were digital color photographs. These differing technological approaches reflect the evolution of photography over time and potential influences on the images' emotional tone and visual impact, shaping the viewer's perception of the presidential narrative.

There are also several technical differences in each photo. The angle of each photo is slightly different from the other. Photo 4, of President Donald Trump, was taken from a lower angle, whereas Photos 1 and 2 of Presidents Ford and Clinton were taken from close to eye level. Photo 3, of President Barack Obama giving a speech, was also

taken from eye level but used such a wide angle that the focus of the image is not solely on the president. Further, the lighting situations present in each photo are vastly different. They range from natural, outdoor lighting to a spotlight to a lack of intentional lighting. Regarding the location where each photo was taken, only one photo (Photo 3) was taken at the White House.

Summary

Based on this analysis and my understanding of the photography process at the White House, I believe that in order to fully understand the photographer's role, their connection with the president, and the level of access granted to the photographer, one would need to examine a wider collection of photos taken by a single photographer at a single event. The findings from the focus group data outline above indicates that in general, the public interprets content and tone in a similar manner to what was intended by the photographer. However, they viewed the presented photos as planned and orchestrated moments. This speaks to the general public's understanding of how and why a professional photographer gains access to the president. The findings also indicate that a person's perception of a president likely won't be changed based on a single photograph if they already have an impression of that president. However, impressions of presidents who the public may be less familiar with due to time, education regarding American presidents, or the historical significance of the president are more malleable and can be influenced by visual cues within photographs.

This chapter outlined the data analysis protocol and presented the findings from the focus group data as well as my own close reading of the photographs shown to

each focus group. The following Discussion chapter will tie the data together in a broader discussion and connect the findings of this study to gaps in the literature.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

“You can always tell how close they were to their President, through their images.”

- Eric Draper

This study aims to fill the gaps stated earlier by conducting interviews with photographers who travel with the president and dedicate considerable time each day to covering him. By interviewing these photographers, this research emphasizes their personal and professional viewpoints, providing insights into how they perceive their roles and the ethical frameworks that guide their work. This approach moves beyond the existing discourse on the potential visual propaganda aspect of presidential photography to evaluate the intentions and decisions of those who create these photos. By highlighting the lived experiences and professional history of each photographer, as basis regarding how their professional ethics are formed can be understood. The study reveals how access to the presidency enables photographers to create narratives, positioning them as both storytellers and documentarians of history. Furthermore, it highlights the collaborative relationships between photographers and presidents, which are built on trust, authenticity, and a commitment to accurate representation. This research not only enhances the collective understanding of how photographers navigate their roles within the constrained environment of White House communication but also clarifies how their unique perspectives and professional backgrounds influence the

framing, content, and perceived authenticity of the images they produce. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the intricate process of image production and the various factors that contribute to the final product, highlighting the importance of considering both the photographer's perspective and the context in which they operate. By examining the role of photographers within the restrictions of access to the president, this research serves as a valuable contribution to the field of visual communication and provides insights that can inform future practices and analyses of presidential photography.

The results of this study offer a comprehensive perspective on the intricate nature of presidential photography, shedding light on the photographers' responsibilities, deliberative processes, and the broader implications for visual journalism. This section examines the themes and patterns revealed in the data, situating them within the theoretical contexts of visual rhetoric, framing, and symbolic interactionism and analyzed through qualitative coding using grounded theory approaches. Synthesizing results of this study with prior research reveals how the photographers' viewpoints and procedures contribute to and challenge established narratives in political imagery and journalistic ethics.

The findings of this study are significant because most people do not have the opportunity to meet, let alone interact with the president in person. As a society, we depend on the integrity and accuracy of professional photographers who are granted access to the president. This includes Official White House photographers who work for the government, as well as news photographers. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the significance of professional photographers in capturing and preserving

historical moments, as they are often the only ones granted access to the president and high-profile events associated with the White House. Their work not only provides us with a visual record of these moments, but also contributes to visual narratives that influence public perceptions. The ethical standards of these photographers play a critical role in shaping the public's perceptions of the president. As photographic technology has developed, people have used images to represent, convey, and create meanings of various human experiences (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). However, with society's increasing reliance on technology, a "visual communication revolution" has essentially occurred (Bleiker, 2018, p. 7). As citizens have gained increased access to the internet and social media platforms, they have overturned the previously understood hierarchy of information dissemination, prompting politicians to reevaluate their approaches to connecting with the public.

To code the interview data, indicators of visual aesthetics, visual representation, and visual truth were used in connection to the photographers' decisions regarding ethics and their dedication to accuracy in storytelling. Visual aesthetics include elements such as composition, color, and style, which enrich the storytelling embedded in a photo (Visser & Wagemans, 2023). As mentioned in the literature review of this study, due to the artistic and expressive components influencing visual messages, understanding visual aesthetics is integral to studying photography (Petrovici & Szabo, 2018). Every visual portrayal of an event is presented with some subjective choice, whether through selecting a particular image or framing (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 16). As stated earlier, in her book *The Burden of Visual Truth* (2000) visual ethicist Julianne Newton presented the concept of a "reasonable visual truth," which she defined as the best

information a human being can discern and disseminate. In later scholarship (2020), she called attention to the definition's assumption that people want to discern and disseminate the truth, altering her definition of reasonable truth to include the caveat that a reasonable truth is the best information that socially responsible, ethical people who seek to understand what is true can discern and disseminate.

Core Themes from Interviews

The interviews revealed three primary themes defining how photographers perceive their roles: access, relationships, and storytelling decisions. These interconnected themes define the roles of each group of photographers, shedding light on their responsibilities and deliberative processes.

Official White House Photographers

Official White House photographers see themselves primarily as documentary photographers rather than photojournalists. This is a crucial distinction to note. Photographers who aim to document events in front of their cameras impart a particular meaning of 'truth,' as there is no single 'truth' but rather multiple interpretations shaped by diverse perspectives and contexts. The main aim of Official White House photographers is to create a historical visual record, focusing on capturing moments that reflect the day-to-day life and work of the president and the administration using documentary photography. Their work contributes to a long-term record of a presidency, often becoming part of the official archives. Despite their documentary intent, their photographs are subject to the administration's control. This duality—between journalistic integrity and administrative control—defines their professional identity and

the narrative they create. Often, Official White House photographers have transitioned from a career in journalism, bringing with them the professional norms and values of journalism. This background clearly instills a strong sense of ethics, integrity, and a commitment to capturing truthful representations of events. They negotiate their role between being chroniclers of presidential history and adhering to journalistic standards. This transition involves a shift in professional identity and perception of their role and their photographs' role in society and American culture. Their extensive and intimate access to the president allows them to capture candid moments. However, this proximity also means that the White House communication team and often the president himself oversee their work.

Official White House photographers, although government employees, reliably document historical events. Their experience as former photojournalists and their ethical standards ensure the authenticity of their images. Broadly, visual journalism aims to inform and educate viewers, akin to a headline or lede (Newton & Williams, 2014). As *Time Magazine* photographer Diana Walker said, White House photographers were selected for their experience as photojournalists and don't "turn that button off." The integrity and perceived trustworthiness of an Official White House photographer's work is paramount, as their photographs serve both immediate publication and long-term historical documentation.

News Photographers

Press photographers define their roles through their association with a news organization, commitment to journalistic integrity, objectivity, and the public's right to know. They aim to capture newsworthy moments for immediate publication, focusing on

current events and public interest. Photojournalists who operate without the immediacy of publication deadlines, such as those outside of wire services or hard news publications, need to consider the text stories their photos will accompany in terms of “standing the test of time”, as photographer Callie Shell said. Interactions with editors, colleagues, and subjects reinforce their role as impartial observers. The meanings they attach to their work are rooted in journalistic standards and the symbolic value of the press as a watchdog. The watchdog role, understood and valued by visual journalists, underscores the importance of photojournalism in maintaining a check on presidential power by documenting events unbiasedly (Coyle & Dahmen, 2017).

Comparing the Two Categories

Understanding these distinctions also helps explain the unique role of Official White House photographers and their perspective as documentary photographers. While news photographers aim to provide immediate, newsworthy images, Official White House photographers focus on creating a lasting historical record, offering a different yet complementary narrative to what is presented in the news media. This research supports the concept of a “reasonable visual truth” (Newton 2000; 2020). Based on this project’s findings, I do believe that reasonably true images of presidents are those made by socially responsible, ethical photojournalists, and that this extends to Official White House photographers who seek to document and represent presidents as authentically and accurately as possible.

Based on the interviews I conducted and the review of relevant literature, photographic coverage of the president can be both a form of persuasive communication and documentary photography. The proliferation of cameras and digital

editing technologies has blurred the lines between public and private personas of the president, allowing for both the manipulation of images for editorial commentary and the creation of a more intimate, behind-the-scenes view of presidential life. This is reflected in the ways both Official White House photographers and press photographers capture and present presidential photos. My research builds on this foundation by exploring the distinct roles and intentions of different photographers and how these contribute to the evolving narrative of the presidency.

With the increased sophistication of digital cameras and editing tools, photographers have greater control over their photos. These techniques align with the principles of visual rhetoric, where the photographer's visual literacy and aesthetic choices in framing, lighting, and composition are deliberate, though sometimes subconscious, efforts to convey specific stories and emotions. Press photographers, who often aim to capture immediate and newsworthy moments, may also use selective framing to emphasize certain aspects of an event or personality. This practice can serve as a form of visual editorializing, where choosing what to include or exclude from a photograph shapes public perception. The dynamics of access and control play a crucial role in how these photos are produced and interpreted.

Focus Groups

Exploratory in nature, the focus group discussions provided additional insights into public perceptions and interpretations of presidential photographs. Participants' reactions to photographs of Presidents Ford, Clinton, Obama, and Trump highlighted their expectations for presidential imagery and the narratives constructed around these images.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the focus group data from the participants' discussion was their reaction to Photo 1 of President Ford by Chief Official White House photographer David Kennerly. Their response to this photo highlighted the public's expectations of professionalism versus casualness in presidential imagery. The focus groups were surprised to see a president in a swimsuit without a shirt on in a casual setting. The focus groups' interpretations of the casual nature of the photograph highlighted their perception of access, relationships, and storytelling decisions. The perception that the photograph was taken by a friend or an individual close to the president indicates that the focus groups interpreted that the photographer had a close relationship with the president and suggested that the person taking the photo was someone the president had confidence in.

Participants perceived Photo 2, taken by *Time Magazine* photographer Diana Walker, as a backstage photograph. They believed it was likely not taken by an Official White House photographer, highlighting the visual perceptions of access and visual storytelling. This inference reflects a view of the photograph as journalistic and behind-the-scenes, suggesting a different relationship between the photographer and the president compared to official settings. Participants perceived this image as depicting a moment that a photographer with closer, possibly less formal ties to the president might capture, emphasizing a different type of relationship and portrayal. The focus group saw the photograph as telling a story of vulnerability and authenticity, contrasting with the staged or formal images typically associated with official settings. This interpretation underscores how Walker's decisions—the angle, timing, and context—shape the narrative conveyed through the photograph, influencing public perception and

understanding of presidential moments. Their perception that an Official White House photographer did not take this photo suggests that non-official photographers might capture less formal, more candid moments, contributing to a narrative of vulnerability and authenticity.

The focus groups' discussion on Photo 3 of President Obama in the East Room, taken by Official White House photographer Joyce Boghosian, was also notable in relation to literature and existing research. Participants assumed this photograph was taken by a news photographer based on the press members' visibility and angle. This perception illustrated beliefs about access and authenticity, implying that more prominent photographers or those with a better relationship with the president might capture different angles or closer shots, affecting how viewers perceive the authenticity and depth of coverage. Participants assumed the photographer lacked skill or was not affiliated with a prominent media outlet. The structured nature of the photo, with President Obama at the podium surrounded by cameras and a formal setting, is a visual indicator of storytelling decisions, which suggests a deliberate presentation of leadership and authority.

Participants' perceptions of Photo 4, taken by Stephen Crowley for *The New York Times*, were akin to a paparazzi shot, suggesting they inferred a level of access and storytelling decision that did not align with the goals and intent held by news photographers. This interpretation reflects how viewers use visual indicators to assess the credibility of photographs based on the photographer's perceived access to the subject and the narrative interpreted in the photograph. The visible tape on Trump's tie led participants to question the professionalism of the president's public image, implying

a distant or potentially adversarial relationship between the photographer and subject. Photographers' choices in framing, lighting, and composition are forms of visual communication that interact with the audience's pre-existing biases and understanding of the world. Through their images, photographers engage in a dialogue with viewers, using visual rhetoric to shape perceptions and interpretations. Given that political images -- defined as reputation, trustworthiness, and credibility (Scammell, 2015) -- are carefully crafted and often focus on creating a coherent and trustworthy image (Scammell, 2015), it is interesting to note when it does not do so. Research shows that public political images often follow formulas such as "new beginnings" and reassurances (Bennett, 2016). Therefore, it is understandable that the public would anticipate the familiar patterns of visual communication and be surprised when photos do not follow the pattern.

Close Reading

A close reading of each of the four photographs presented to the focus groups was instrumental in addressing the second research question of this dissertation, which asks whether there are similarities and/or differences between White House photographs and news photographs of the president. This method provided an analysis of the visual elements, such as composition, lighting, subject matter, and context, and considered the socio-cultural climate when each photo was taken. By focusing on the photographer's intentions and visual rhetoric, the close reading integrated these elements with insights from interviews and focus group discussions, uncovering each photo's narrative and emotional depth. This methodological approach further underscored the photographer's role in shaping public perception and highlighted the

influence of access, photographer-subject relationships, and technical choices on the resulting portrayal of presidential moments.

The results of this close reading indicate that the photographer's level of access can impact the narrative conveyed through the image. These results align with previous research on visual rhetoric in political imagery, which suggests that candid photographs can help to humanize political figures and establish a sense of authenticity (Berger & Barasch, 2018). Nonetheless, this research adds to the understanding by emphasizing the specific influence of access and photographer-subject relationships in shaping these narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism provides a valuable framework for understanding how Official White House photographers and press photographers define their roles and for integrating framing and rhetorical decision making as constructed meaning making. As noted in Chapter 2, this theoretical perspective posits that individuals formulate social realities by interpreting symbols and language during social interactions (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Fink, 2015). Blumer (1969) coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and believed that meanings are continuously negotiated and constructed through social exchanges. Photographers who cover the president on either side of "the velvet rope" interact with various high-power individuals, which shapes their understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Their professional identity is developed through experiences and interactions, with their role as photographers imbued with symbolic meaning, whether as a government watchdog or a historical documenter. As photographers, they

shape and are shaped by the societies they engage with, their images serving as both a reflection and a contributor to the cultural and political discourse of their time.

Framing theory is crucial in understanding how different photographs present presidents in varied ways, influencing how audiences perceive their leadership and personality. Frames emphasize certain aspects of reality over others, significantly impacting public beliefs. For instance, the intimate backstage photograph of President Clinton by Time Magazine photographer Diana Walker frames him in a personal moment of vulnerability, contrasting sharply with Joyce Boghosian's formal shot of President Obama during a press conference, which frames him within the grandeur and authority of the White House East Room. These framing choices reflect the photographers' access and relationship with the subjects and shape the narrative conveyed to the public. The application of framing theory to interview data uncovers the photographers' roles as documentary photographers and photojournalists, revealing their perspectives on the White House and their relationship with the administration.

In the context of this study, visual rhetoric theory provided a framework to interpret the photographers' choices in composition, lighting, and framing as deliberate rhetorical strategies aimed at influencing public perception. For example, using black and white photography in David Kennerly's image of President Ford and other political leaders at the Leyritz Plantation Hotel underscores the timeless and formal nature of the diplomatic moment. This rhetorical choice enhances the perceived significance and gravitas of the scene.

The integration of visual rhetoric and framing theories in this study under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism highlights the photographers' role in constructing presidential images that resonate emotionally and intellectually with audiences. The focus on access and photographer-subject relationships further reveals how these dynamics influence the authenticity and candidness of the captured moments. For example, the trust between President Clinton and Diana Walker allowed for a more personal portrayal, enhancing the perceived authenticity of the image.

The credibility of both official and news photographs is crucial for maintaining public trust in the media and governmental transparency. The tension between being a documentarian of history and a watchdog holding power to account underscores the importance of ethical standards, editorial independence, and a balanced approach to visual journalism. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for appreciating the role of photography in political communication and its impact on public perception and democratic accountability. Based on my understanding of presidential photography and the findings of this study, I recommend a set code of ethics be created for Official White House photographers. There something special about photographing the president that needs to be put down in writing regarding obligation to truth, transparency, and history. Right now, it seems that the main check put in place for Official White House photographers is the presence of news photographers. News photographers advocate for access, ring the alarm when they do not receive enough access, and openly discuss the final photos made by Official White House photographers and released by the White House. Without their check on Official White House photography, ethics and accuracy

could potentially be put to the wayside in the interest of an even more curated presentation of the presidency.

The dynamics of access and control play a crucial role in how these photos are produced and interpreted. With close access to the president, Official White House photographers often have their work subject to the administration's image management strategies. Conversely, press photographers, who typically have more limited access, strive to capture unfiltered and spontaneous moments that provide a counter-narrative to the official story. These differing levels of access influence the framing and content of presidential images, contributing to the broader discourse on visual truth and journalistic ethics.

Acknowledging their journalistic backgrounds, ethical standards, accountability, and historical significance, it becomes clear that Official White House photographers dedicate themselves to capturing authentic and trustworthy images. Their role may be within a government framework, but their professional principles ensure that their photographs remain reliable and credible sources of historical documentation. Official White House photographers, often former photojournalists, aim to create a historical visual record of the presidency, balancing journalistic integrity with administrative control. Press photographers, driven by journalistic standards and the public's right to know, capture newsworthy moments for immediate publication. The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between visual rhetoric, framing, and symbolic interactionism in White House photography, offering valuable insights for future research in visual journalism and political communication.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

“I was always mindful of the fact that I was a staff person and not a family member, but I spent hours and hours and hours and hours with the family, in family situations. But I knew I wasn’t there because I was a family member,” he said. “I was there because I was an employee and didn’t step over the line. And I think they really appreciated that because how many times I was invited to dinner with the family and

Thanksgiving and things like that.” - David Valdez

This study investigated presidential photographers’ lived experiences, seeking to understand how their photographic practices influenced their image making, which in turn influenced the public’s view of their presidents. A review of the literature revealed a gap in knowledge about how presidential photography has evolved and how photographers’ application of concepts such as truth, visual literacy, ethics, and image construction might affect the ways in which they work and the authenticity and accuracy of their images. This research also examined how photographs taken by White House and news photographers might differ, what people understand about presidential photographers, and how people interpret photos of their presidents. Despite their mechanical origin or the intention of the photographer to be truthful, photographs always present subjective interpretations of reality. The need for images that convey a “reasonably visual truth” underscores the importance of socially responsible and ethical photojournalists in accurately documenting and representing their subjects, particularly when those photographed are U.S. presidents. It is critical to understand these aspects of presidential photography because the majority of the public will never meet the

president in person and rely on these photographs, in part, to build an understanding of who the president is in public and private.

This dissertation questioned how access to the president impacts aspects of the presidential image. Access plays a crucial role in constructing a presidential image, as it either enables or restricts the creation of an image of leadership, thereby influencing public perceptions of the president. Ethical concerns become significant when access is either limited or unlimited, as photographers and the news media must navigate the line between transparency and propaganda. Ethics are a critical component of how each photographer interviewed operates within their position. Official White House photographers often employ the ethics they have developed when working as news photographers. Ultimately, the public relies on the professional ethics of each photographer in order to see the personal side of the president, which can also be trusted as accurate and “truthful.”

Using a grounded theory approach to understand how photographers use framing and visual rhetoric in their work, symbolic interactionism emerged as a unifying theory, contributing valuable new perspectives to visual theory. Symbolic interactionism explains how photographers define and perform their roles and how their visual decisions frame their photographs and the stories they tell, potentially shaping the public’s perception of U.S. presidents. These factors underscore the fundamental trust in journalistic ethics and the public’s reliance on the accuracy and authenticity of journalistic images.

This study utilized a mixed-methods qualitative approach to address four research questions about presidential photographer roles, differences, and similarities in

photographs of the president made by White House photographers versus news photographers, and how the public interprets the photographs:

RQ1: How do White House and news photographers perceive their role when photographing moments and events that include the president of the United States?

RQ2: To what extent are White House photographs of the president similar to or different from press photographs?

RQ3: How do viewers/readers interpret the content and tone presented in White House and press photographs?

RQ4: How do viewer/reader interpretations of White House and press photographs affect their views of the president?

I employed a combination of in-depth interviews with 14 photographers, conducted two exploratory focus groups, and carried out a close reading of the photographs. The qualitative data analysis was supported by triangulation methods and participant-centered validity checks to ensure the credibility and reliability of our findings.

Official White House photographers and news photographers view their roles similarly but with distinct differences in intention and long-term goals. They all view their role as documenting the presidency for the American people. Official White House photographers understand that their photos will contribute to a long-standing archive referenced in the future. News photographers intend to inform the public about the

president's actions and contribute to broader discussions and news stories. Each photographer's perspective was influenced by the extent of their access to the president, which was determined by their relationship with the president, shaping the stories they conveyed through their photos. Analysis of focus group responses to a small set of the interviewees' photos and my own reading of the photos suggest that photographs by the two groups are remarkably similar and often indistinguishable. On a daily basis, they take photographs that are difficult to differentiate. I attribute this difficulty to the ethical and general journalistic storytelling approach shared by each interviewed photographer. Viewers generally interpret these photos accurately in terms of content and tone but have difficulty identifying the role of the photographer, given the various visual aspects of each photo. These interpretations impacted their views of presidents they had less knowledge of, such as President Ford and President Clinton, and reinforced their interpretations of the presidents they were more familiar with, in this case, President Obama and President Trump. Based on these findings, it would be prudent to establish a code of ethics among Official White House photographers.

Limitations

Qualitative research has several inherent limitations that must be recognized when delineating the scope and boundaries of this study:

1. The reliance on interviews as the primary data collection method may introduce potential biases, as the perspectives and experiences of the interviewed photographers may only partially represent the spectrum of practitioners in the field.

2. The subjective nature of qualitative research, compounded by the researcher's nuanced understanding, might unintentionally influence the interpretation of data during the close reading process, potentially leading to bias.
3. While focus groups were utilized as an exploratory tool to complement the interview findings, college students' participation in these sessions may limit the generalizability of the results, as their perspectives may only partially reflect those of other demographic groups. Despite these limitations, college students, as the future generation who grew up in the digital age, are an important group to consider. However, undergraduate students may be more adept at noticing digital photo manipulation.

Despite these limitations, meticulous attention to methodological rigor, reflexivity, and transparency in reporting findings helped mitigate potential biases and enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

Future research

Future studies should explore several important areas. In the process of conducting this research, I had the opportunity to talk with other people involved in presidential photography who should be involved in future studies. I spoke with White House photo editors and one archivist who worked in the White House throughout multiple administrations. Their work is vital to the documentation and archival records of the presidency, but it was beyond the scope of this dissertation. In their interviews, press photographers who covered his administration stated that President Donald Trump granted unprecedented access to the press. However, three of the Official White House photographers interviewed believed that the Trump Administration was more restrictive

and potentially limited official photographers' access compared to previous administrations – or at least limited what was released to the public. This disagreement warrants further investigation into the extent of press access and Official White House photographers' access during the Trump administration and how it was reflected in their work. Future research could also conduct in-depth case studies of presidential photography or entire archives from various administrations to understand its evolution comprehensively. Understanding how photographers navigate these ethical dilemmas and how the public perceives them could inform the best practices in political photography and photojournalism. Future research could focus on the visual representation of the vice president and the first lady of the United States, and how positions of power and gender impact visual communication inside and outside the White House. This research could provide valuable insights into the role of photography in politics and government.

Further research is needed to better understand how the public receives and interprets presidential imagery. An extensive content analysis of presidential photography, comparing images made by White House and news photographers, is needed to extend the preliminary findings of this dissertation. This is a unique opportunity to study the evolution of photography as a mode of visual storytelling and its role in shaping public perception in politics. Given the importance that presidents and photographers place on White House photography, more research is needed, particularly in relation to the existing literature on the tension between the White House's battle for control over a president's image and the press's role as a watchdog for the public. This dissertation could not cover everything and answer all visual political

communication questions. However, it has provided an excellent starting point for a body of work in the future, further linking visual and political communication.

Contributions to the field

This research contributes significantly to several areas of study within political communication, visual rhetoric, media literacy, and journalism ethics. Conducting interviews with photographers who cover the president enhances the overall understanding of political image construction through visual communication. By analyzing how White House photographers and news photographers function, this study sheds light on the impact of transitioning from a news photographer to an Official White House photographer on the access, relationships, and storytelling decisions made by each photographer. Furthermore, this research provides insight into the political “photo opportunity” and the deliberate construction of events that contribute to the visual narrative of the presidency. This work emphasizes photographers’ creative choices, revealing how visual narratives are constructed, and contributing to a deeper understanding of the visual strategies used when photographing the president. The interviews with both Official White House and press photographers provide insider perspectives on the photographers’ roles, challenges, and ethical considerations. These interviews offer essential firsthand information for understanding the practical realities and professional ethos behind presidential photography. By contrasting the perspectives of Official White House photographers and news photographers, this study highlights the ethical tensions between being a documentarian of history and a watchdog holding power to account.

The theoretical contributions of this study are illustrated in Figure 1. By conducting 14 interviews and analyzing the context in which each photographer

operates, it became clear through the grounded theory approach that Symbolic Interactionism is the connecting theory that ties framing and visual rhetoric theory to the process of presidential photography. Symbolic Interactionism provided the framework for understanding how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with the world around them. This study highlighted that photographers define their roles not only by the journalistic sphere they operate within, but also by their relationships with each other and with the president. In addition to Symbolic Interactionism theory, it is also important to consider the role of photographers' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds in shaping their framing decisions and visual rhetoric choices.

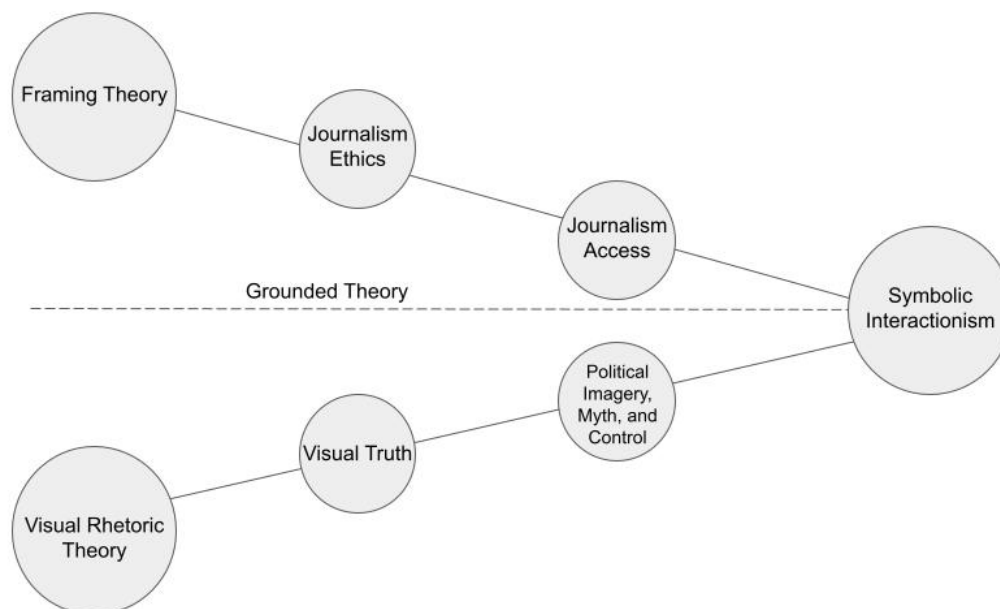


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

It bears repeating that the findings of this study are notable due to the fact that most people will never meet the president in person. Therefore, we must rely on visual

communication through media sources to develop an understanding of what presidents look like in different situations, which influences our views of who they are. Presidential photography is done through the lens of journalistic experience and ethics, which impacts how stories of the presidency are told and shared with the public. Based on the focus group data, the public is largely aware that the president and White House communications team has a goal when allowing the president to be photographed in public or privately behind-the-scenes. They also believe that it does matter who took a photograph because it colors their interpretation of the story and the meaning within the photo. While Official White House photographers have operated with journalistic ethics and insist on open access to the president, it is important to reiterate that this is done at their own insistence, not the president's. It may be important for the president's public image to allow photographers to capture more intimate and emotional moments, but it is also important for the public to have this view of the president to have a deeper understanding of who they have elected. Official White House photographers have struck a careful balance between documentary photography and persuasive communication with the understanding that while they may not be immediately released to the public, all of the photos they take will be preserved in the National Archives for decades. However, at any point, a sitting president may decide, as President Nixon did, that their photographer is no longer allowed in the room.

This study sheds light on the complex interplay between presidential photography, public perception, and ethical considerations inherent in visual communication. The findings discussed above underscore the critical importance of ethical practices in photojournalism and photography, particularly when documenting

the highest office in the nation. This research has revealed that while Official White House photographers and news photographers share similar goals in documenting the presidency, their approaches and long-term objectives differ. This distinction, coupled with varying levels of access, significantly influenced the narratives conveyed through photographs. Importantly, the study highlights the need for a standardized code of ethics among Official White House photographers to ensure transparency and maintain public trust.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the vital role that photographers play as both documentarians of history and shapers of public perception. Navigating the complex landscape of visual political communication, this research provides valuable insights that can guide future practices, policies, and public understandings of presidential photography.

Appendices

Appendix A – Questions for news photographers

1. Can you tell me about your career leading up to your current position?
2. In your own words, define photographer and photojournalist.
3. How would you define objectivity in journalism?
4. How do you define 'photo opportunity' ('photo op')?
5. As a photojournalist, what is your opinion on White House 'photo ops'?
6. How would you compare your understanding of this job before being hired to the reality of the position after you started? – How has your job changed since you started?
7. What do you perceive your role as a news media photojournalist in the White House to be?
8. On an average day covering presidential events, how much time do you spend with the president?
9. What are some of the more challenging aspects about covering the president as a photojournalist?
10. How would you describe the relationship between the press and the president?
11. What is your opinion on the matter of journalism access in the White House?
12. How would you describe the access that you have as a photojournalist for the NYT?
 - a. How does your level of access compare to other members of the press?
 - b. How does the access you receive now compare to access under previous administrations?
13. In your opinion, how important is access to the president for the job of the press?
14. How do you handle photographing situations that may not be flattering for the president?
15. Do you think that the public can differentiate between photos taken by official White House photographers and news media photographers?

Photos

16. Has your opinion of any of your political photos changed over time? If so, which?
17. As a photojournalist in the White House was there a moment or photo you captured that felt unique?
18. Have any of your political photos received a public reaction that you were not expecting?

Final Questions

19. Is there an aspect of your job as a photojournalist that I haven't asked you about that you would like to mention?
20. May I contact you for clarification or further questions in the future?

Appendix B – Questions for Official White House photographers

1. Can you tell me about your career leading up to working for the White House?
2. In your own words, could you define photographer and photojournalist?
3. How would you define objectivity?
 - b. How much did you think about objectivity while in the White House?
4. How did your understanding of the job before being hired compare to the reality of the job after you started?
5. What did you perceive your role as a photographer in the White House to be?
6. What were some of the most challenging aspects of being a White House photographer?
7. How would you describe the relationship between the press and the president?
8. How would you describe the relationship between the president and his photographer?
9. How do you view the matter of journalism access in the White House
10. What was your access as a member of the press, and did it change after becoming the president's photographer? – How did your access differ from other press access? – did your access change between administrations?
11. In your opinion, how important is access to the president for the job of the press? For the job of WH photographer?
12. How did you handle photographing situations that were not flattering for the president?
13. How do you view photos ops? Are they beneficial to in-house White House photographers?
14. You have spent a lot of time in the White House, with photographers working for the president/ How would you compare working for the news media to working for the White House?
15. How much time did you get to spend with the president?
16. Who decided which of your photos to publish?
17. Do you think that the public would be able to differentiate between photos taken by White House photographers and press photographers? - why/ why not?

18. What's the first moment that comes to mind when I ask about a moment that felt special?
19. Has your opinion of any of your photos changed over time?
20. Have any of your photos received a public reaction that you weren't expecting?
21. Can you think of a moment or photo you captured that you would not have been able to take as a news media photographer?
22. Some moments when you were the only photographer in the room?
23. Any not popular that you wish were?
24. A photo that you feel encapsulates the person you were assigned to?

Final questions

25. Is there an aspect of your job as a White House photographer that I haven't asked you about that you would like to mention?
26. May I contact you for clarification in the future?

Appendix C – Focus Group Questions and Procedure

1. Is there a photo of any US president that comes to mind? – describe it
2. How often do you see photos of the president (and/or his family)?
 - a. What are the situations in which you see these photos?

Show photos - 4 photos one at a time

3. What are your first thoughts on this image? - adjectives/descriptive words?
4. What is your impression of the president based on this photo?
5. Do you recognize this president? – do you know who this is?
6. Have you seen this image before?
 - a. If yes, where/what medium? (Newspaper print/online, social media – specific)

(Hand out print outs)

7. WRITE DOWN: Who do you think took this photo? (Whatever you think I mean - professional, citizen) – do you think the person who took this photo was working for someone? Who? -- SHARE
 - a. What about this photo makes you think that?
8. Do you think it matters who took this photo?
9. Staged vs. spontaneous?
10. Do you think there's a difference between photography and photojournalism?
11. How much do you know about presidential photography?
12. Tell me what you know about official White House photographers and press photographers in the White House?
13. Tell me what you know about access at the White House for journalists?
14. How much access do you think a WH photographer has?
15. Who do you think determines what images of the president are disseminated? (from the WH and from the press?)
16. What do you think the responsibility of a photojournalist is?
 - a. What is the responsibility of a press photographer in the White House?
17. What do you think the responsibility of an official White House photographer is?
18. Do you think it's important to have photos of the president? Why?

19. What else is important that we've talked about – after you've seen these photos and thought about the questions, what are you thinking?
20. Tell them which photo was taken by whom.

Appendix D – Focus Group Questionnaire

Study ID:

PHOTO 1

1. Who do you think took this photo?
2. Do you think the person who took this photo was working for someone?
 - a. If yes, who?

PHOTO 2

1. Who do you think took this photo?
2. Do you think the person who took this photo was working for someone?
 - a. If yes, who?

PHOTO 3

3. Who do you think took this photo?
4. Do you think the person who took this photo was working for someone?
 - a. If yes, who?

PHOTO 4

3. Who do you think took this photo?
4. Do you think the person who took this photo was working for someone?
 - a. If yes, who?

Appendix E – Photo prompts

Used to ask for photos from interviewees

1. A planned presidential “photo op” moment.
2. A photo featuring only the president in/at the White House.
3. A photo you feel is unique to your portfolio of political photographs.
4. A photo of the president that received a public reaction you were not expecting (positive, negative, or otherwise).

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