

# Cut-Off Low (DANA) in Valencia: Visual Representation of Death and Grief in Photojournalism

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## Abstract

This article examines front-page images from a selection of newspapers portraying the loss of life, grief, and destruction caused by the cut-off low that hit the Valencian community, Spain, on 29 October 2024. This climate-related disaster was the first national catastrophe to take place since Covid-19 and resulted in at least 237 fatalities, leaving a devastated social and physical landscape. The research analyses images from a selection of regional, national, and international newspapers in the first few weeks following this disaster, examining graphic portrayals of the dead, the recovery of bodies, scenes of people in grief, and other unsettling images to explore possible underlying narratives, biases, and absences. The framework follows previous research on images of the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to ethics and the current context of instant image sharing, the effects of globalization, and the contemporary practices connected to the visibilization of death which vary depending on the nature of the crisis and the relationship to those affected. This article aims to contribute to broader discussions on the ethics of visual representation and the construction of meaning in times of crisis.

## Keywords

climate-related disaster; death; flood; grief; news images; newspapers; photojournalism; Spain

## 1. Introduction

On 29 October 2024, several parts of Spain, especially areas of the Valencian community, were struck by an extreme, catastrophic weather event caused by an “isolated depression at high levels” (DANA, for its Spanish acronym *depresión aislada en niveles altos*), a type of cut-off low-pressure weather system. Although frequent

in the region, the DANAs have become more frequent and intense due to climate change (Climate Central, 2024; Faranda & Álvarez-Castro et al., 2024; World Weather Attribution, 2024).

This climate-related disaster was the first large-scale catastrophe to hit Spain since the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the official website of the Spanish government (La Moncloa, 2025), it caused at least 237 fatalities (including 229 victims in Valencian community, seven in Castilla-La Mancha, and one in Andalucía) and left a devastated social and physical landscape. The DANA brought torrential rain, overflowing rivers, wide-scale flooding, and overwhelmed social and structural support, making it one of the deadliest meteorological events in the country's recent history.

Despite the existence of official alerts, institutional response mechanisms failed to activate as expected. The reasons for this apparent breakdown remain under investigation at both political and judicial levels. On 23 October, the Spanish State Meteorological Agency had reported that the DANA would hit the Mediterranean coast the following week. On the afternoon of 28 October, the University of Valencia, like many other institutions, cancelled activities for the following day due to the adverse weather forecast. On the morning of 29 October, the Spanish State Meteorological Agency issued a red alert for heavy rainfall in the inland areas of Valencia. At midday, the Júcar Hydrographic Confederation (Confederación Hidrográfica del Júcar) warned of abnormally high water levels in rivers and ravines in the south of the province after which the rivers began to overflow and the Valencian government's Emergency Coordination Centre triggered a hydrological warning. Although a level two emergency flood plan had been decreed throughout the province of Valencia, civil protection alerts were only sent to residents' mobile phones by around 8:10 p.m., when rivers and ravines had already overflowed into different towns. The flooding resulted in hundreds of deaths, destruction of infrastructure, and a collapse in services, supplies, and support, sparking a wave of national solidarity with Spaniards arriving in large numbers to volunteer their help. The exchange of accusations between central and regional governments regarding management failures, shortcomings in the public warning system, and the lack of preventive measures gave the disaster additional political significance, intensified by the fact that the Spanish government is currently led by the social democrat Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, while the Valencian government is led by the conservative Partido Popular.

During this time, hundreds of local, regional, national, and international media outlets covered the disaster. Spanish media reporting initially emphasized the scale of the tragedy, human losses, and personal stories, but soon shifted alternately towards political criticism, scrutiny of institutional decisions, and accounts of solidarity. Images played a key role in spreading the story worldwide with the terrifying scale of destruction visually represented in international media through striking images of piled-up cars; on social media, accounts circulated citizen-recorded videos of people, cars, and belongings swept away by the water.

This article aims to explore ethical aspects of representation of crisis and disaster and the existence of possible bias in the creation and selection of visual narratives in news media through an analysis of front-page images which appeared on the front pages of the print editions among a selection of local, national, and international newspapers portraying the loss of life, grief, and destruction caused by the DANA in the Valencian community. The article is built on previous studies and discussions on the ethics of representation and the construction of meaning through press photography, following several debates raised by images depicting the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spanish media (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The massive floods caused by the DANA and its aftermath were captured in a series of dramatic photographs depicting everything from washed-out bridges to thousands of vehicles piled up, collapsed car parks, entire neighbourhoods and towns flooded with water and mud, blocked roads, destroyed infrastructure, as well as rescue operations and the massive influx of volunteers to help out. These images echoed photographs taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, the eerily abandoned roads of the pandemic versus the impassible streets of the floods, piled up with the wreckages of hundreds of cars; people wearing face masks and personal protective equipment while disinfecting versus cleaning up rubble. To date, limited scholarship exists on photographic representations of victims and those affected by these kinds of non-conflict crisis events. In this context, this research explores the media's role in the construction of narratives around the DANA and its victims. This kind of approach makes it possible to examine differences and unique aspects in the representation of death, grief, and destruction in particular contexts, such as natural disasters and climate change, while also identifying specific visual resources.

### 2.1. *Death and Grief in Mass Media*

The way in which death and grief are visually represented has changed since the earliest uses of photography in the 19th century. In the early days, images of death, such as postmortem and funeral photographs, that had a memorial function within the intimate or family contexts (Morcate & Pardo, 2019; Ruby, 1995).

However, profound shifts in the cultural, political, and technological context, along with changing attitudes towards death and grief, have influenced the kinds of images used and how they are deployed in this context (Walter, 2015). These days, explicit images of death are rare in family archives, although certain practices, such as those related to perinatal loss (Ramirez et al., 2019), are becoming more common. In the public sphere, such images tend to be limited to coverage on state funerals or funerals of prominent public figures (Sumiala, 2013), as seen after the recent death of Pope Francis.

There is ongoing discussion about how death is represented in the media and there are notable differences in how natural and violent deaths are portrayed. However, most scholars agree that images of death, especially explicit ones, scarcely appear (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Taylor, 2000; Walter et al., 1995). As John Taylor (2000, p. 130) points out:

For the most part, the press errs on the side of caution in depicting horrible but newsworthy events. It is careful to write more detail than it dares to show. When the press decides to picture dead bodies, the imagery tends (with notable exceptions) to be restrained. Newspapers do not disgust audiences for the sake of it.

However, the emergence of the internet and social media, along with the proliferation of images generated and shared on digital platforms, has made analysing these trends more complex. While the visibility of death online has increased, linked to practices of memorialisation and tribute (Morcate & Pardo, 2019), there remains a notable tendency in the traditional Western media to shield images of deceased individuals who, as mentioned by Sontag (2003), are considered "our dead." Both Sontag (2003) and Moeller (1999) have noted a tendency to depict grief and death when culturally distant while special care is given to victims who seem to be closer.

Sontag (2003) raises the question of whether images affect us more when they depict “our dead,” stressing that such images are not the same as those of others’ dead, since they would be even more difficult to confront and accept.

These concepts should be considered more critically in the context of Spanish media’s representations of death and the corpse, not only in relation to natural disasters but also to acts of mass violence. Spain’s recent history is marked by numerous terrorist attacks perpetrated by ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna or “Basque Homeland and Liberty” in the Basque language) between 1968 and 2010, resulting in continued, mainstream publication of photojournalistic representations of death and violence in domestic locations (Morera Hernández, 2021; Parejo Jiménez, 2008). Parejo Jiménez’s (2008) analysis of representations of the corpse and violence during the ETA years shows a distinct transformation over time, starting with press images in which the violence of the attacks was *not* explicitly shown under the Franco dictatorship due to strong state censorship. After the death of the dictator, a period marked by democratic transition and freedom of the press started. Here, the corpse and violence were displayed more literally and graphically. By the 1990s, incidents such as the murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco (a young Partido Popular councillor) in 1997, which received unprecedented media coverage and generated mass social revulsion, marked a break in the representation of violence and death, prompting a photojournalistic approach in which images of memorialization and protest prevail over portrayals of the dying or the dead body.

The presence of images of dead bodies as part of media coverage of other high-profile national crises in Spain would continue to be very limited after the 2000s. In this regard, some notable exceptions such as the image taken by Pablo Torres after the terrorist attacks on the Madrid trains on March 11, 2004, and published by *El País*, showing several injured people and an amputated limb, or the more recent image taken in 2020 by Alberto di Lolli, published by *El Mundo*, showing a person (with the face pixelated) who had died from Covid-19 were the subject of controversy and analysis (Fontcuberta, 2010; Morcate & Pardo, 2022).

## **2.2. Visual Representation of Climate Change and Natural Disasters**

The consequences of historic catastrophes and natural disasters have been portrayed by photographers in diverse ways. Some of the earliest examples include: images of the 1871 typhoon in Kobe, Japan, captured by Felice Beato, best known as one of the first war photographers; pictures of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake taken by Edith Irvine, a young photographer who happened to arrive at the city a few hours after the event; and footage of the 1908 Messina earthquake in Italy by Luca Comerio, a pioneer of the Italian film industry. Over the course of the 20th century, photojournalism saw these kinds of images become more widely disseminated through the press (Frizot, 1998) and photographs began to raise awareness of mass disaster events among the general public, shaping people’s perceptions of their severity, magnitude, and impact.

The visual treatment of natural disasters differs from that of other violent or traumatic events such as wars, attacks, and murders (Moeller, 1999; Taylor, 1998) and uses specific visual narratives and tropes that merit a separate analysis. Using historical and contemporary examples from Japan, Morse and Havinga (2015), for example, show a longstanding tradition of portraying natural disasters by focusing on their impact on the land, the destruction of human-made structures, and the scale of the tragedy, establishing a more symbolic narrative that makes it easier to avoid depicting victims and the deceased. Despite the number of large-scale natural disasters that have occurred in the 21st century, including the cyclone in Mozambique in 2000, the

Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, and the Japanese tsunami in 2011 to name a few, academic studies that have systematically analysed the photojournalistic visual coverage of specific cases have been relatively limited. Prominent scholarship includes: Fahmy et al.'s (2007) comparison of front-page photographic coverage of hurricane Katrina disaster by US newspapers versus images distributed by international newswires; Hanusch (2012) looked at photographic coverage of death in the wake of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, examining press accounts from 15 countries with the aim of identifying differences and possible influences such as religious backgrounds; Thomson (2021) analysed different national and international photojournalistic approaches on front pages depicting the Australian bushfire season between 2019–2020.

Society's growing awareness of climate change means that photojournalistic representations of certain natural disasters can no longer be understood solely as isolated, inevitable natural events but must also be seen, at least in part, as consequences of political inaction and the unchecked consumption fostered by capitalist systems. This more complex perspective influences how photojournalists approach such events visually but also extends to other agents involved in photography, such as photo editors and press photo competition juries. An example of this trend is the notable presence of award-winning images of natural disasters and climate change in recent editions of the annual World Press Photo Contest (World Press Photo, 2025) for photojournalism and documentary photography, which reflects growing interest in their coverage. For example, the 2024 Southeast Asia and Oceania Singles category was won by Eddie Jim for his photograph "Fighting, Not Sinking" which depicted the unstoppable sea level rise on Kioa Island, Fiji, while Southeast Asia and Oceania Open Format winner, "A Lost Place" by Aletheia Casey, portrayed the Australian wildfires. These two examples were followed in 2025 by the World Press Photo of the Year finalist "Droughts in the Amazon" by Musuk Nolte, "Aircraft on Flooded Tarmac" by Anselmo Cunha in the South America Singles category, and "Brazil's Worst-Ever Floods" by Amanda Maciel Perobelli in the South America Stories category, the latter two portraying the worst flooding in the history of Rio Grande do Sul.

In addition to more traditional visual approaches such as inhospitable landscapes (deserted, flooded, burned, with damage and debris) resulting from natural disasters or climate change, there is a growing focus on individuals within images of mass disaster events which raises questions about how to approach them and the roles they represent, whether as "victims, villains, or changemakers" (Nurmis, 2021, p. 174). Coverage of natural disasters—which are, by definition, unforeseen—has the added complexity of how to portray victims, particularly corpses, when fatalities are involved. In this regard, it is essential to analyse photojournalistic images that directly convey the presence of death and grief through the visibilisation of dead bodies, coffins, funerals, or grieving individuals, as well as the use of other visual elements that symbolize or replace more graphic images of death while also portraying the devastation and impact on the land and resources.

### ***2.3. Photojournalistic Approaches in Other Recent Crises***

The 21st century has already seen a number of mass disaster crises, the largest of which is arguably the Covid-19 pandemic which, as Maddrell (2020) explains, helped to produce "new geographies of death" including having a major impact on Spanish society and media. An investigation of almost 9,000 images published in Spanish newspapers during the first lockdown (Pardo & Morcate, 2022) reached several key conclusions. On the one hand, disease and death were virtually invisible during the first lockdown (from the first declaration of a state of emergency in Spain, on 14 March 2020, to the de-escalation plan adopted from

28 April 2020). Explicit images in the three newspapers analysed—*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *La Vanguardia*—were rare, in line with the findings of this research. Even when deaths were occurring on a daily basis, only 1.8% of press images depicted death or grief while just one image of a clearly visible corpse (with a pixelated face) was published on the front page during the period analysed. Meanwhile, there was a marked overrepresentation of positive and/or everyday aspects, such as scenes of teleworking, children studying at home, people clapping on balconies, and empty streets. This created a “positive” yet metaphorical visual narrative which did not reflect the severity of the health crisis by failing to include images that accurately reflected the situation lived in nursing homes, funeral homes, and hospitals. These images contrasted with the headlines sharing alarming figures of deaths and contagions which contributed to a visual narrative that minimized the seriousness of the health crisis.

Scolari (2020) suggests that the narratives and visual metaphors employed during the first lockdown in Spain were designed to reassure the public and make sense of the situation by simplifying the chaos and reducing the uncertainty. This gave rise to a visual narrative that could be described as “sterile” with images that avoided direct depictions of suffering, pain, and death.

It should be noted that, for many audiences, crises only exist if they appear in the media (Joye, 2010, p. 593). This, coupled with the fact that events are communicated both by their absence and by their presence (Richardson, 2007, p. 93), reminds us that what is omitted or excluded also has meaning and contributes to the construction of the narrative. Joye (2010) highlights the importance of the underlying political and ideological implications of absent images or news.

To understand the connotations and meanings of images of death, however, it is necessary to situate them within the cultural context in which they were produced and circulated (Campbell, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010). In this line, Chouliaraki (2010) introduces the notion of the “regime of pity” linked to nationalist discourse and the way the visibility of death is culturally managed and often sublimated. Chouliaraki and Vestergaard (2022) also analyze how images of people-in-need mobilize emotion (empathy or indignation), catalyzing communities of feeling.

#### **2.4. On Ethics and Visual Representation of Suffering and Death**

The ethical and strategic considerations in relation to the explicit visual representation of issues such as violence, suffering, and death, especially in times of crisis, are far from straightforward. Complex issues such as the limits of representation (Butler, 2007a, 2007b; Grønstad & Gustafsson, 2012; Sontag, 2003; Tagg, 1988; Zelizer, 2010) and the effects of overexposure to violence or suffering (Moeller, 1999) must be addressed, alongside the political implications (Azoulay, 2008; Linfield, 2010). As a result, numerous debates remain ongoing among both practitioners and theorists (Morcate & Pardo, 2022).

Some images of suffering and violent death are extremely raw and explicit and, in certain cases, challenge the ethical boundaries of photojournalism in particular and visual representation more generally (Tagg, 1988), even when they are used to raise awareness of issues such as human rights (Linfield, 2010). As Butler (2007a) and Grønstad and Gustafsson (2012) point out, it is essential to balance the right to information with respect for human dignity.

On the other hand, there are additional issues related to ethics, such as the control of access to information that can have a major impact on the visual narrative of an event. As an example, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, photojournalists in Spain faced severe restrictions in accessing hospitals, morgues, and care homes, which limited their ability to document and report on the events and raised concerns about the right to information (Pardo & Morcate, 2022). Photojournalists who were interviewed condemned the institutional censorship often generated by the communication offices of different institutions which impacted their ability to show the true impact of the crisis.

However, the severe shortage of explicit, as well as symbolic or metaphorical, images depicting the gravity of the situation raises concerns about how these gaps in the documentation of this era and the incomplete and biased visual narrative might impact collective memory and history (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022).

When addressing ethics in contemporary media coverage, issues of the excess and trivialisation of suffering, known as “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999), are present along with the visual saturation and the spread of disinformation. In addition to this, in the case of media coverage of disasters, especially those that are traumatic for the community affected and cause social disruption due to their nature or scale, Joye (2018) highlights “the important social role that news media can play in disaster situations and events involving human suffering” (p. 24). He also notes how the particular nature of a disaster can trigger specific news discourses (Joye, 2018). Certain types of coverage additionally shape perceptions of the affected population. Argiñano and Goikoetxea Bilbao (2020) point out the importance of certain images in reinforcing feelings of solidarity and a sense of community during the Covid-19 crisis, as happens with new approaches to visual representations of natural disasters.

For example, in the Spanish context, a study on residents’ perceptions of the media coverage of the 2021 eruption of the La Palma volcano in the Canary Islands concludes that:

In general, the perception of those surveyed was that the images of destruction caused them discomfort and disapproval. Journalists and the media focused more on the spectacular nature of the geological phenomenon and the drama than on the human aspect and on demanding solutions for the affected population. (Meneses-Fernández & Martínez Torvisco, 2024, p. 287)

From an ethical perspective, it is essential not only to consider which images effectively convey the scale and consequences of the tragedy to the audience but also to strike a balance between focusing on those affected and avoiding their re-victimization and overexposure.

Regarding ethical codes, it is notable that images, especially those depicting death and tragedy, occupy limited space within journalistic guidelines. In the context of Spain, the ethical code of the Association of Journalists of Catalonia (2016) does not specifically mention crisis and disaster coverage but does provide recommendations for covering war and armed conflicts (Annex D of the document), which could be applicable. There is a small annex specifically devoted to images in photojournalism, but this focuses solely on manipulation.

Keith et al.’s (2006) earlier study of US journalism ethics codes found that, while most contemplate the use of images, only nine (out of 47) addressed the treatment of images of tragedies and violence. They also noted that

many had become outdated, partly because they fail to address how to handle disaster images captured by survivors or witnesses using digital cameras or mobile phones and the use of photojournalistic images online. They emphasize that “if codes neglect broad categories of journalistic activities, such as visual reporting, those omissions may indicate that in the culture in which the codes were written, those types of journalism are not seen as being ethically problematic” (Keith et al., 2006, pp. 256–257).

More recent reports from NGOs such as the *Dóchas Guide to Ethical Communications* (Dóchas, 2023) and the Code of the Spanish coordinator of non-governmental organisations (Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales para el Desarrollo España, 2022) incorporate explicit references to the visual representation of crises and disasters. They emphasize a careful approach that avoids sensationalism and distortion of reality, respecting the dignity of those affected by portraying them as equals and active agents rather than passive victims and stressing the importance of informed consent. However, there is no code or guide that addresses specific issues regarding the photojournalistic representation of crises “at home.”

### 3. Methodology

This research combined quantitative and qualitative analysis (Campos Arenas, 2009; Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014), including bibliographic and documentary reviews and image analysis, in line with previous research.

The analysis period spans from the onset of the DANA on 29 October 2024 to the day after the official tribute to the victims, on 10 December 2024. This timeframe was chosen to encompass both the immediate impact of the disaster and the full cycle of public mourning and societal response.

To this end, all images associated with headlines about the DANA in Valencia were analysed across 12 newspapers, distributed as follows:

- Four local newspapers: The most widely circulated general-interest and relevant daily newspapers in the Valencian Community (*Levante*, *Las Provincias*, *Mediterráneo*, and *Información Alicante*) were chosen according to the “2024–3ª Ola” (third and last period of data) from the *Estudio General de Medios* by Avante Comunicación (2024).
- Four national newspapers: *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC* were selected as the best-positioned general-interest, non-free daily national newspapers according to the *Estudio General de Medios* by the Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación (n.d.).
- Four international newspapers: Four foreign newspapers were selected for this study based on their leading positions in the SCImago Journal Rank (2024) with the filters: “General + Newspapers + 2024 Winter Edition.” The first-ranked newspapers from the United States (*The New York Times*), the United Kingdom (*The Guardian*), France (*Le Monde*), and Latin America (the Peruvian publication *El Comercio*) were selected. This also provided a diverse international perspective by including major Anglophone and Francophone media, as well as the Latin American context, which is culturally and historically linked to Spain.

The front pages were accessed through various platforms such as Kiosco y Más, SAPO, and the newspapers’ own websites.

This methodological approach allows the identification of recurring patterns and ethical tensions in the depiction of death and suffering in this crisis. All images associated with headlines about the DANA in Valencia on the front pages of these newspapers were analysed. A proprietary taxonomy was developed based on previous research on visual data and inductive image analysis that addressed the representation of illness, death, and grief, such as that conducted for the study of Covid-19 in Spain (Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Pardo & Morcate, 2022). This was established to classify the images according to their most prominent visual elements, with clear prioritization of representations of death and grief/mourning, consistent with the study's focus and the main areas of interest covered by the media. Certain secondary categories were specifically defined such as: cars, due to their visual prevalence and strong symbolic association with death, as many victims were found trapped inside motor vehicles; and volunteers, given the significant role they played. When classifying the images, explicit visual cues were prioritized: first, depictions of death and grief/mourning, and second, volunteers and destroyed vehicles. In cases of ambiguity, the dominant element guided the categorization process. This method allowed for consistent classification while preserving the complexity and symbolic richness of the visual content.

## 4. Results

A total of 393 front-page images on print edition newspapers (Table 1) linked to the DANA tragedy were analysed across the 12 newspapers (four regional, four national, and four international).

**Table 1.** Total number of photographs published on the front pages of the 12 newspapers by categories.

Category	Images by Newspapers												Total Images
	REGIONAL				NATIONAL				INTERNATIONAL				
	Levante	Información Alicante	Mediterráneo	Las Provincias	El País	La Vanguardia	El Mundo	ABC	The New York Times	The Guardian	Le Monde	El Comercio	
Death (human losses)	2	1	1	1	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	11
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	15	6	5	9	2	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	42
Material Destruction	12	4	10	13	4	5	4	2	1	1	0	1	57
Reconstruction	14	4	5	19	4	6	9	6	0	0	2	0	69
Authorities and Management	48	29	22	26	3	6	6	5	0	1	0	1	147
Other Images	22	7	12	21	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	67
Total Images by Newspaper	113	51	55	89	18	18	24	17	1	2	2	3	393

The strongest presence was observed in local press coverage of the disaster: *Levante* (113), *Información Alicante* (51), *Mediterráneo* (55), and *Las Provincias* (89). In the case of front-page coverage by national newspapers, the following results were obtained: *El País* (18), *La Vanguardia* (18), *El Mundo* (24), and *ABC* (17). The international newspapers devoted the following numbers of front-page images: *The New York Times* (1), *The Guardian* (2), *Le Monde* (2), and *El Comercio* (3).

The taxonomy identified six central themes for the images: Death (human losses), Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses), Material destruction, Reconstruction, Authorities and Management, and Other Images. These proposed categories allow an analysis of the visual communication of a natural disaster event in a more complex approach that takes into account its political, social, and economic aspects. There was a high percentage of front-page images (Table 2) showing portraits of politicians and disaster management in the Authorities and Management category (37,40%) with 16 images depicting demonstrations. Also, a high percentage of images fell into the Reconstruction category (17,56%), with many images associated with volunteers (20) and the actions of those affected (9), as well as into the Destruction category (14,50%) with a significant number of images focusing on piled-up cars (16). A final category, Other Images includes 67 images that do not bear analytical relevance to the study's main focus and which have therefore not been further subdivided or highlighted. These were images that served mainly to offer visibility to peripheral topics related to the DANA, such as people buying cars or lottery tickets weeks after the disaster, or advertising upcoming special supplements on the DANA.

**Table 2.** Share of photographs by category.

Total Photographs by Category: 20 October 2024–10 December 2024		
Category	Number of Photos	%
Death (human losses)	11	2.80%
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	42	10.69%
Material Destruction	57	14.50%
Reconstruction	69	17.56%
Authorities and Management	147	37.40%
Other Images	67	17.05%
Total	393	100%

It was estimated that 6.3% of the images could be classified under more than one category. In this case, visual elements linked to the central theme of the study (death, grief/mourning, and their metaphors) were prioritized. In other cases, where the representation was ambiguous, the headline and caption were used as guidelines. Regarding the proposed categories, 10.69% of images would fit in the Grief/Mourning category with a higher share of images linked to tributes and funerals for the victims. By contrast, only 2,80% of the images were linked to direct representations of death with just one image (Table 3) showing a corpse that was covered (Figure 1).

**Table 3.** Total images by themes.

Total Photographs by Themes: 20 October 2024–10 December 2024			
Category	Themes	Number of Photos	%
Death (human losses)	Corpses	1	0.25%
	Coffin	0	0%
	Funeral vehicle	2	0.51%
	Search for missing persons/dead	6	1.53%
	Others	2	0.51%
Grief/Mourning (consequences of human losses)	Expressions of grief	9	2.29%
	Funerals	9	2.29%
	Tributes	21	5.34%
	Others	3	0.76%
Material Destruction	Transformed landscape	7	1.78%
	Cars	16	4.07%
	Streets, homes, and businesses	7	1.78%
	Damaged infrastructure (bridges, roads, and railways)	9	2.29%
	Others	18	4.58%
Reconstruction	Machinery and operational equipment	16	4.07%
	Volunteers	20	5.09%
	Active victims (cleanup and reconstruction)	9	2.29%
	Others	24	6.11%
Authorities and Management	Politicians and institutional coordination	125	31.81%
	Demonstrations	16	4.07%
	Others	6	1.53%
Other Images	Other images	67	17.05%
Total	Total images	393	100%

## 5. Discussion

The results reflected a marked absence of literal representations of death in the media in the context of this disaster and in accordance with other studies (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Walter et al., 1995). Out of all the images linked to death (11), only one image, published by *El País* on 3 November (Figure 1), five days after the tragedy, showed a fully covered corpse being transported by members of the Civil Guard on a stretcher.

Indirect representations of the deceased appear in six images depicting the search for missing people (Figure 2), two of which were published on 3 November: one by *El Mundo* and the other by *Mediterráneo*, which refers to a search for “lifeless bodies.” *Levante* published one more image on 7 November, with the caption referring to a “search for the deceased.” There were two further images in *El País* (9 and 11 November) and, finally, the newspaper *Las Provincias* published a front-page image on 21 November which highlighted the search for the last remaining missing people. Therefore, images of corpses were evoked through images of specialized teams working amid water and mud. Despite the high death toll, no images of coffins appeared on the front pages.



Agentes de la Guardia Civil retribran ayer un cadáver del aparcamiento de un supermercado de Benetússer. CLAUDIO ÁLVAREZ

Figure 1. The only image showing a corpse (fully covered) being transported by members of the Civil Guard on a stretcher, published by *El País* on 3 November. Source: *El País* (2024a).



Figure 2. The six front pages with photographs of missing persons: *El Mundo* (2024, 3 November), *Mediterráneo* (2024a, 3 November), *Levante* (2024, 7 November), *El País* (2024b, 2024c, 9 and 11 November), and *Las Provincias* (2024a, 21 November).

*Levante* and *Información Alicante* each featured two images showing a vehicle recovering the body of a deceased worker during reconstruction efforts, but none appeared in the first few days following the DANA.

Finally, one photograph published in *El Mundo* showed relatives waiting in the street for the body of a loved one to be recovered from their home. The image evoked the presence of the deceased out of frame but without depicting them directly, instead conveying the gravity of the moment through the survivors. The deceased was never shown directly but appeared instead through archival images. A unique photomontage published in *ABC* on 24 November showed the decaying portraits of some of the deceased lying in muddy water, an image that gave the victims visibility while also reflecting the scale of the tragedy and paying tribute to them by replacing anonymous figures with recognizable faces.

This scarcity of images depicting death also extended to more human-centred photographs such as those linked to the survivors' grief and mourning (9). Few images depicted pain and loss in a more graphic way. In the first few days following the tragedy, *El País* published a group photo showing a young man, covered in mud, comforting another upon learning that his father's body had been found, while *Las Provincias* featured a close-up of a man seen from behind, crying as he waited for his sister's body to be recovered. These were the only two front-page images in which grieving victims appeared as the main subject. In both cases, the treatment respected their privacy and anonymity, with their faces either fully or partially obscured.

Images of the authorities' controversial visit to the epicentre of the disaster in Paiporta, which was covered by all national and regional media on 4 November, focused on the political tension. However, *Levante*, *Mediterráneo*, and *Información Alicante* all chose to feature the same image of the king consoling a victim while the third showed a photo of Queen Letizia in tears, an image also published by *Las Provincias*. In doing so, they avoided addressing the victims' negative reactions to the visit and instead used the images to convey institutional support while also showing the victims in a more indirect manner. Out of the 42 images related to grief and mourning, most (21) concentrated on public tributes to the victims, especially at sporting events, while nine depicted the official funeral for the victims reported in the press on 10 December. All media outlets focused on representing the victims by showing the king and queen, either in frontal shots as the main figures or in close-ups, interacting with the victims' families but without showing any explicit moments of grief. Only *El País* departed from this approach by presenting a shot of several attendees with the focus on a photo of a victim held by a relative, thus positioning the deceased as the protagonist and making them visibly present.

A month after the tragedy (30 November 2024), *Las Provincias* and *Levante* published a photograph accompanying a tribute in which residents from the hardest-hit towns took part in a candlelit vigil. The latter's headline, "Mourning and protest over the flood," reflected a progressive political stance that highlighted the errors made in managing the disaster.

The limited presence of images depicting death was offset by images focusing on material destruction. The extensive devastation caused by the flood resulted in vast amounts of debris, mud, and accumulated objects and cars. Indeed, the image of piled-up cars (Figure 3) dominated the front pages of most newspapers on 31 October, the date the high death toll was confirmed, with the exception of *The Guardian* which published it the following day and *Le Monde* which that day featured a shot of a muddy street and volunteers instead. Thus, images of the hundreds of wrecked and piled-up cars, shown in varying close-up

shots, served as a metaphor for destruction and death, thereby reflecting the scale of the tragedy (over 120,000 cars were wrecked). In the days that followed the DANA, the link between these images and the unseen dead grew stronger as fake news and speculation about hundreds of victims trapped in cars and car parks spread.



**Figure 3.** Front pages showing photographs of piled-up cars in regional newspapers (up) and in international media (down). Source: *Mediterráneo* (2024b), *Las Provincias* (2024b), *Información* (2024), *The New York Times* (2024), *The Guardian* (2024), *El Comercio* (2024).

This representation, along with other images of material destruction, recurred throughout the coverage of the disaster, in accordance with a classic photographic tradition. It is worth noting that only regional newspapers mentioned the risk posed by the DANA on the actual day of the disaster. *Información Alicante* and *Las Provincias* referred to the DANA threat, the latter with a headline announcing cancelled classes and warnings of heavy rain and flooding, but neither included images. Meanwhile, *Mediterráneo* published a credited photo of a car stranded on a flooded road with a headline stating that the DANA had intensified and that the worst was expected that afternoon and overnight.

A significant number of images (69) fell under the Reconstruction category, including 20 that prominently featured the thousands of volunteers who had rushed to the affected area, especially on 2 November. Thus, the front pages' visual narrative provided extensive coverage of the reconstruction efforts and highlighted the active, cooperative attitude between those affected by the DANA and volunteers, thus reflecting a more human and nuanced perspective of the disaster, in line with more contemporary natural disaster coverage.

The presence of 147 politically themed images, including portraits of politicians and scenes from demonstrations, was significant. Some front pages featured photomontages combining multiple portraits which increased the total number of such images. A progressive tone emerged in the coverage, focusing on the management of the DANA and the institutional response, with special emphasis on images of mass protests and Carlos Mazón, then president of the Valencian Community, who was heavily criticized and whose presence varied according to each newspaper's editorial stance. This high number shifted the visual narrative of the event towards more political ground, especially in the weeks following the DANA, which reflected the impact it had on Spanish politics following allegations that part of the high death toll could have been avoided. In this way, the coverage of a "natural disaster" was reframed as both a social and a political issue.

It is worth noting that, despite the scarcity of images showing grief and mourning, three of the four regional newspapers included the image of a black ribbon from 31 October or 1 November until the end of the period analysed, with the exception of *Las Provincias* which did so for a month. The national newspaper ABC included it only on 31 October.

Finally, several headlines clearly referring to the scale of the tragedy were accompanied by images that had no connection whatsoever, such as the headline in *El País* on 15 November (Figure 4), "Half of those killed by the DANA were over 70 years old," accompanied by a photograph of a child kicking a ball around in a muddy street. This fact reflects the complex role that images representing death and dead bodies play in the media.



**Figure 4.** Front page of *El País* newspaper. Notes: The headline reads "Half of those killed by the DANA were over 70 years old"; the caption reads "A child plays with a ball on a street in Paiporta after the recent rains." Source: *El País* (2024d).

## 6. Conclusion

The representation of death and corpses on the front pages of newspapers covering the DANA disaster was very limited, as were images that directly depicted grief and mourning, identical to what has already happened in previous crises (Aaron, 2014; Hanusch, 2008, 2010, 2013; Morcate & Pardo, 2022; Taylor, 2000; Walter et al., 1995). The deceased were represented indirectly through images of the search for missing persons, off-frame evocations, the presence of family members, or archival photographs portraying the deceased. However, visual metaphors for the dead were used frequently, especially symbolic images of piled-up cars, which was a recurring theme throughout the period analysed.

The photojournalistic coverage followed the precedent set during the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain by minimizing explicit images of death and grief while preserving the identity of both victims and their loved ones, in accordance with ethical concerns. Among the differences in these two visual narratives of national crises lies the use of distinct visual metaphors: during the pandemic, the empty streets conveyed isolation and collective fear through absence and stillness; whereas in the case of the DANA, the piled-up cars and debris embodied material devastation and the tangible aftermath of destruction. This contrast illustrates how, in both cases, visual metaphors (whether through the emptiness of urban spaces or the material traces of destruction) were used to evoke the magnitude of loss and fear while avoiding more explicit depictions of death.

The coverage of this natural disaster partially presented a visual narrative in line with the photographic tradition of extensively depicting material and territorial devastation while also adopting a more contemporary approach to visual coverage that complexifies the notion of natural disaster by addressing natural, social, and political aspects. This approach highlights the impact on the population and the response capacity of those affected, volunteers, and institutions, while also portraying the political leaders responsible for disaster management and public discontent, including debates over preventive measures that could have averted some of the deaths.

This study provides an inclusive analysis of visual depictions of the DANA crisis in Spain, from the initial tragedy to the official funeral for the victims, and offers a detailed examination of photojournalistic coverage of selected newspapers. While this research focuses solely on newspapers, future studies could further enrich these findings by comparing them to coverage in other formats, such as the ongoing ethical debate on behalf of NGOs about the coverage of humanitarian crises, and the influence of other images and videos disseminated through television and social media. Such an approach would allow for a more in-depth exploration of the different narratives and potential biases within the wider media landscape regarding the representation of death and grief during crises.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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