

What a photograph can do

Images, media, social networks and ecology¹

Lo que puede una fotografía

Imágenes, medios de comunicación, redes sociales y ecología

O que uma fotografia pode

Imagens, mídia, redes sociais e ecologia

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the case of a press photograph

that had a decisive impact on the political, judicial and economic power of Paraguay and made it possible to stop the pollution of a lagoon. It analyzes under what circumstances and through what actors this exceptional event was possible, as well as the reasons why a press photograph could be so effective. In this regard, it examines what the photograph depicts, its production and circulation conditions, the effects it had upon release, and the political, social, and media reactions that occurred around an image that ultimately ended up being a key link in exposing pollution. Furthermore, it reflects on the power of photography to promote social change and its potential to highlight ecological issues with visible impact. The analysis crosses studies of press photography, media communication, social networks, the role of *influencers*, and ecological struggles, and invites us to continue to think about the power of this type of images.

KEYWORDS: *press photography, media, social networks, ecology.*

¹ Un adelanto de este artículo fue presentado en 2022 en el marco de un seminario organizado por el Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brasil.

RESUMEN

El artículo aborda el caso de una fotografía de prensa que tuvo un impacto determinante sobre el poder político, judicial y económico de Paraguay y posibilitó la interrupción de la contaminación de una laguna. Analiza bajo qué circunstancias y a través de qué actores fue posible este hecho excepcional, así como los motivos por los cuales una fotografía de prensa pudo tener tanta eficacia. En este sentido, se analiza lo que muestra la fotografía, sus condiciones de producción y de circulación, los efectos que generó su publicación, pero también tiene en cuenta las reacciones políticas, sociales y mediáticas que se produjeron en torno a una imagen que terminó siendo un eslabón clave para denunciar la contaminación. Asimismo, reflexiona sobre el poder de la fotografía para promover cambios sociales y su potencial para denunciar problemas ecológicos con impactos visibles. El análisis cruza estudios de fotografía de prensa, medios de comunicación, redes sociales, el papel de los *influencers* y las luchas ecológicas, e invita a seguir pensando el poder de este tipo de imágenes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *fotografía de prensa, medios de comunicación, redes sociales, ecología.*

RESUMO

O artigo aborda o caso de uma fotografia de imprensa que teve impacto decisivo no poder político, judicial e econômico do Paraguai e permitiu deter a poluição de uma lagoa. Examina em que circunstâncias e através de quais participantes este fato excepcional foi possível, bem como as causas pelas quais uma fotografia de imprensa poderia ser tão eficaz. Neste sentido, analisa o que a fotografia mostra, as suas condições de produção e circulação, os efeitos gerados pela sua publicação, mas também leva em conta as reações políticas, sociais e mediáticas que ocorreram em torno de uma imagem que chegou a ser um elo chave para denunciar a poluição. Igualmente, reflete sobre o poder da fotografia para promover mudanças sociais e seu potencial para delatar problemas ecológicos com impactos visíveis. A análise cruza estudos sobre fotografia de imprensa, mídia, redes sociais, papel dos *influenciadores* e lutas ecológicas, e convida a continuar pensando no poder deste tipo de imagens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *fotografia de imprensa, mídia, redes sociais, ecologia.*

1. A PHOTOGRAPH'S JOURNEY

In 2018, several local Paraguayan newspapers published photographs of the Cerro lagoon, in the town of Limpio, located 30 kilometers from Asunción, where it grew an aquatic plant called Yacaré Yrupé in Guaraní. The flowers are circular water lilies measuring up to two meters in diameter that grow every five years. That same year, the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, published in Barcelona, Spain, printed an article by Alberto Peña (2018) that included a dossier of photographs entitled “The Wonderful Spectacle of Giant Lilies in the Paraguay River”, with several photos of singular beauty. One of the authors of said dossier was Jorge Sáenz, an Argentine photographer based in Paraguay, correspondent for the North American agency The Associated Press (AP). The lagoon is an inseparable part of the life and daily landscape of the inhabitants who live in its surroundings and enjoy this green space.

At the beginning of 2020, two years later, a group of residents from the town of Limpio reported to the municipality that a section of the Cerro lagoon had turned purple and was emitting nauseating odors. The lagoon, divided by an embankment, was contaminated on one side, but not the other. The complaint held that the Waltrading tannery was dumping toxic waste directly into the water. The group of residents, led by Herminia Valdez de Meza, a retired nurse from the town, took various actions before the local municipality and before the Ministry of the Environment (known as MADES, for its acronym in Spanish) which were not attended to. Sáenz heard about the residents' complaints and returned to the place on August 5, 2020, when he took several photographs, some of them with a drone at an altitude of 150 meters, in which the effect of the contamination could be seen with the naked eye (Image 1).

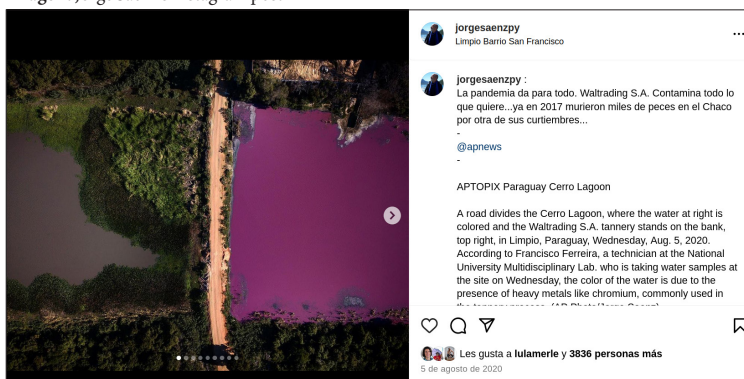
Image 1. Cerro lagoon, town of Limpio, Paraguay



Source: Photograph taken by Jorge Saéenz for The Associated Press (AP) and shared on social media on August 5, 2020.

That same day, he sent one of these images through the AP agency to its subscribers (the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* newspapers and European newspapers such as *El País*, *Le Monde*, among others). The photographer also published the photograph, along with others, on his Instagram account and on his personal Facebook with the text: “Anything goes in the pandemic... Waltrading contaminates whatever it wants, already in 2017 thousands of fish died in the Chaco due to another of its tanneries” (Image 2). His post reached more than 3,800 people.

Image 2. Jorge Sáenz’s Instagram post



Source: Jorge Saézn’s Instagram account – Post from August 5, 2020.

The photos included one in which the polluting company could be seen from the drone (Image 3).

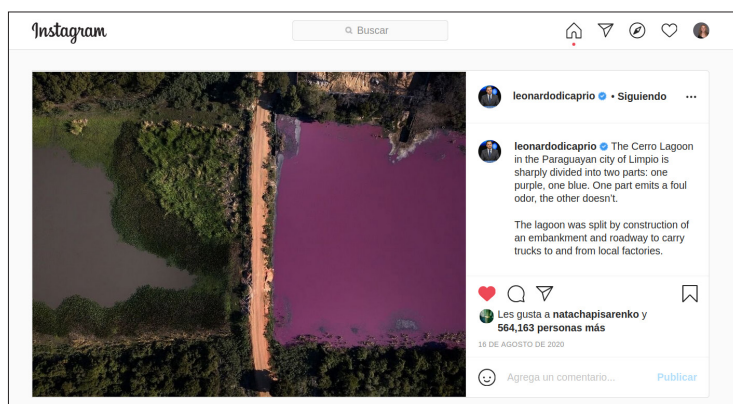
Image 3. Waltrading company in Cerro lagoon, Limpio, Paraguay



Source: Photograph by Jorge Sáenz posted on his social networks on August 5, 2020.

On August 6, the Paraguayan newspaper *La Nación* reported the news. On August 16, 2020, the news would gain new visibility when Leonardo Di Caprio, who defines himself on his social networks as an actor and environmentalist on equal terms, reproduced the photo on his social networks² (Image 4). At the time, Di Caprio had 48 million followers on his Instagram account and received 564,163 likes when he posted Sáenz's photo.

Image 4. Leonardo Di Caprio's Instagram post

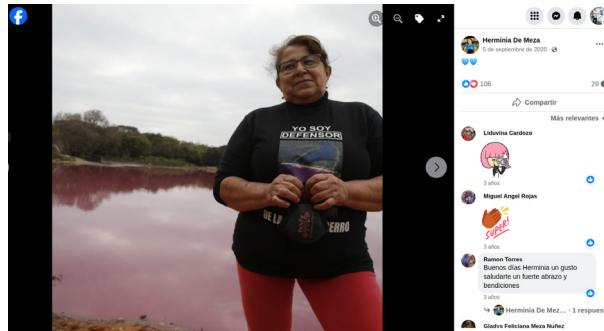


Source: Leonardo Di Caprio's Instagram account – Post from August 16, 2020.

Following the media coverage of Di Caprio's post in Paraguayan media and social networks, the residents of Limpio protested again. This time they cut off the traffic of sand trucks working on the road that separates the two parts of the lagoon, made signs that they placed on the side of the embankment and placed a row of crosses with black crepe. They also made a T-shirt with one of Sáenz's photos and the caption "I am a defender of the Cerro lagoon." Herminia Valdez de Meza (from now on, Doña Herminia) put on the T-shirt and, with the contaminated lagoon behind her, took a photo of herself that she posted on her personal Facebook where she obtained 106 interactions, a percentage considerably higher than she had before the actor got involved in the issue (Image 5). She also took a photo of the actor's post and posted it on her Facebook to show the legitimacy that their claim had obtained. In this context of interaction, a neighbor tells her that "It seems that they have forgotten about us" and Doña Herminia answers: "The process continues... we have the support of the press" (Image 6).

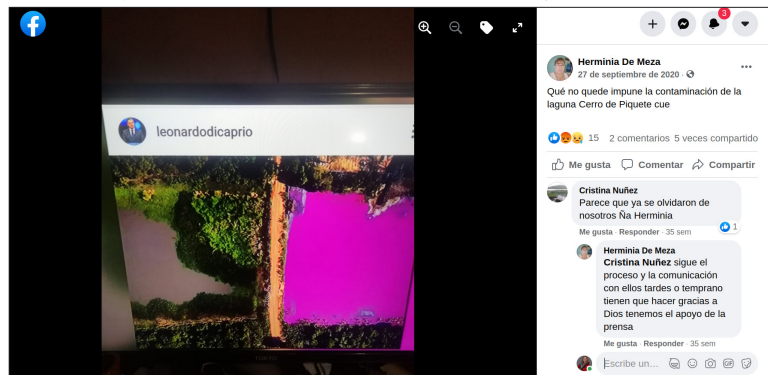
² DiCaprio was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace on Climate Change and has been awarded the Clinton Global Citizen Award and the World Economic Forum's Crystal Award. As noted on the United Nations website: "Award-winning actor and four-time Academy Award nominee, Leonardo DiCaprio has been an outspoken environmental activist for much of his career. In 1998 (...) Mr. DiCaprio created the foundation that bears his name, whose mission is to protect the last wild places on Earth and implement solutions to forge a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature." See: <https://www.un.org/es/mensajeros-de-la-paz/leonardo-dicaprio>

Image 5. Doña Herminia Valdez poses with the shirt printed with Jorge Sáenz's photograph next to the contaminated Cerro lagoon



Source: Doña Herminia Valdez's Facebook – Post from September 5, 2020.

Image 6. Post by Doña Herminia Valdez on her Facebook account sharing Di Caprio's post

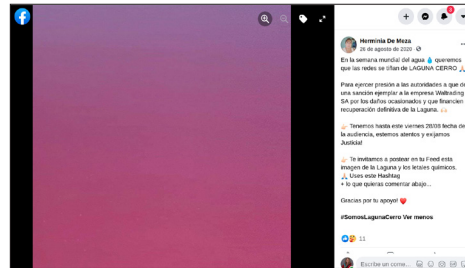
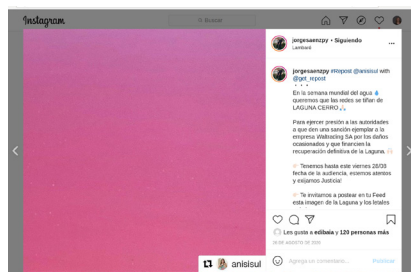
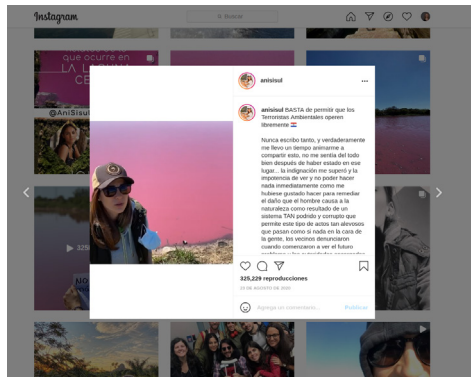


Source: Doña Herminia Valdez's Facebook – Post from September 27, 2020.

After Di Caprio's post, the MADES went to the site and took samples of the contaminated water. Thus, it was confirmed that there were low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water, which implied a significant impact on the ecosystem of the place. The Interdisciplinary Laboratory of the University of Asunción also came to the area and made a contribution with chemical analyses independent of those of the MADES, which were later used as evidence of the crime of contamination.

In late August, a Paraguayan Instagrammer, @anisul, joined the visibility campaign, went to the place, made an Instagram live transmission from there that had 325,229 views and called for posting a magenta square on social media, during World Water Week. The slogan of this *magenta action* was to dye social media with the color of the contaminated water. Doña Herminia, Jorge Sáenz and thousands of other social media users joined this call (images 7, 8 and 9).

Images 7, 8 and 9. Magenta Action: call for social networks to be dyed the color of the contaminated water during World Water Week



Source: Instagram accounts of @anisul and Jorge Sáenz. Facebook of Doña Herminia Valdez.

After exploring and describing the path taken by the press photography analyzed here, we support the hypothesis that given certain circumstances, photographic images can become objects of power and counter-power, a tool for social transformation and a key support for political and ecological activism.

2. VISIBILITY, IMPACT AND AGENDA-BUILDING

Sáenz's photograph taken with a drone at a height of 150 meters shows a geometric composition that acts by opposition. It allows us to simultaneously see what is happening in the two areas into which the lagoon is divided. The photographer opened the frame and expanded the observation capacity. The angle of vision that the drone allows would not be available to a spectator even if he were at the scene of the events. In a simple and forceful way, the photograph allows us to observe the conflict through striking colors. The magenta color generates curiosity, draws attention, and gives an aura of mystery to the image. At the same time, the photograph is a piece of evidence and becomes proof of a crime.

Unlike the photos taken by the neighbors and other professional photographers, Sáenz's image achieved a visual impact, thus constituting an image act in Bredekamp's terms (2017): "the intrinsic iconic act performs through the *potentia* of the form" (p. 186). In his theory, the German author argues that some images act through the power of the form, the conjunction of elements: colors, lines, drawings, perspectives, figures and models:

Images exist in the world of events in a relationship that is both of reaction and formation. They do not only repeat history passively, but are capable, like any other act or order of action, of creating it: as an image act, it creates facts, while establishing images in the world. (Bredekamp, 2004, p. 29)³

The photograph of the contaminated lagoon becomes an image act and thus inaugurates a succession of novel events.

Regarding what happened, Sáenz points out that

the composition I chose was the simplest, the path dividing in half the two bodies of water, the contaminated and the uncontaminated. It seemed to me that, in addition to being very geometric and colorful, it did not need much more to attract attention. I always believed that for the biggest problems that arise before me, I should be as simple and direct as possible. Trust more in the fact than in the rhetoric that I usually use in other types of essays and reports. (Interview with Jorge Sáenz for the preparation of this research, May 2022)

The photographer refers to the difference that exists between journalistic photographs and others of a documentary and/or artistic nature. In the first case, we refer to photographs inscribed on physical formats (newspapers, magazines), either printed on paper or digital, which are installed, in turn, in the public space through the media. Press photographs are usually invested with an aura of authenticity that generates a greater possibility of credibility, and the technical aspect of the shot reinforces this idea. The photographer relates (in a more or less conflictive way) to the editorial guidelines of the media or agencies for which he or she works. In this case, the photographs are products which are sold in the journalistic market. Immediacy, information, and current events come into play. While in other documentary/artistic works, photographers may have a greater degree of autonomy and, above all, more time to produce them.

In the example analyzed, the image organizes the perception of the event. The text complements the information, but Sáenz's photograph is capable of sustaining attention on its own. What we see is a *landscape photograph*; there are no people, a pure direct record that works as a visual statement. On one side, life, on the other, the indefinable, the artificial, the dead. The image was able to enter the media agenda by its own weight. Because it is a beautiful and dramatic

³ Translator's note: All quotes from authors that appear in Spanish in the original version of this text were translated into English by the translator.

photo at the same time: well-constructed, irrefutable and immediately understandable. As Judith Butler (2010) points out:

Thus it is not just that the photographer and/or the viewer actively and deliberately interpret, but that the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation – and one that may unsettle both maker and view in its turn. (p. 101)

The landscape photography was transformed at the same time into an *image of denunciation*. This is not something that is usual in this photographic genre, unlike others more closely linked to documentary photography. Its aesthetic value is usually acknowledged, but its capacity for political action is rarely recognized. In this case, the combination of beauty and devastation strengthens the message.

Omar Felipe Giraldo and Ingrid Toro (2020), in a research focused on *environmental affectivity*, develop the concept of *empathy with nature*, originally defined by Tam (2013) as the tendency to “understand and share the emotional experience, and in particular the suffering, of the natural world” (Giraldo & Toro, 2020, p. 71). In that text they ask:

What kinds of affections are inscribed in our bodies when we inhabit landscapes of great beauty, but also those in which cruelty towards different forms of life is normalized? How is cruelty normalized when we inhabit spaces where nature is reduced to merchandise? (pp. 119 and 120)

The authors employ the metaphors that Rita Segato (2018) uses to talk about the *pedagogy of cruelty*⁴:

What happens when the constant repetition of violence makes us get used to it and creates the low levels of empathy required for the normal development of the predatory enterprise? Once cruelty becomes not the unusual but the norm, not the exception but the rule, our bodies inevitably end up desensitized, anesthetized to the suffering of others. This is how, gradually, we can no longer feel the pain of the mountain as pain, nor the scream of the earth as a scream, nor the crying of the forest as crying. (Giraldo and Toro, 2020, p. 120)

Wishing for a beautiful landscape, wishing for a clean lagoon, is therefore one of the paths that leads to the defense of the environment. Not only through rational criticism or blame – something that is used by many environmentalist discourses–, but through the vindication of desire, of the need for beauty. A way of disputing desire with the capitalist system itself, which uses it so well for its own reproduction.

4 Segato (2018) refers as pedagogies of cruelty to all acts and practices that teach, accustom and program subjects to transmute the living and its vitality into things. Every extractive company brings with it the idea of nature-thing, just as trafficking uses the body-thing of women.

In a way, the photograph allows to experience the event through the media; to “see” the pollution. The aesthetic and communicative dimension of the image influenced the political, media and legal decisions that were made after its publication. Representation and action are thus intertwined. The message it carries and the social objective it pursues are transmitted through a communicatively effective photograph that had the capacity to convert what it captured into a public event. The photograph is relocated and linked to environmental pollution in other places.

There is no ambiguity, the contamination leaves the margins where it is produced and becomes public, it becomes visible beyond the borders imposed on it, on the one hand, by geography and, on the other, by the negligence, corruption and premeditated concealment on the part of the different actors involved. It lends its potency, its demonstrative capacity, its force of truth, it builds the proof and makes it known, it confirms the crime. It is not necessary for us to personally see the lagoon, it is not necessary for us to personally feel the putrid smell, the image acts by means of the visual, by the force of credibility that it possesses. In some way, the photograph replaces the lagoon. It allows the visibility of the fact and makes the news travel, move and persist in time. As Umberto Eco (1986) points out regarding other iconic photographs:

The moment an image appears, its communicative itinerary begins: once again the political and the private have been traversed by the plots of the symbolic which, as always happens, has proven to be a creator of reality. (p. 296)

The journey of the image allowed it to enter both the Paraguayan national journalistic agenda as well as the international agenda, it managed to go viral on social networks and enter the legal field. Immersed in this communication chain, it was reproduced, shared and retransmitted in various formats and media. It multiplied in the hands of different social actors, crossed local and national borders and acted as a trigger tool. By being shared simultaneously by news agencies, national and international media and social networks, it began a double journey: on the one hand, in the media universe, and, on the other, in the world, precisely, of social networks. Once the image was put into circulation, it was made available to environmental and social organizations. The photograph was the raw material for a new journey that social networks multiplied. As Merlinsky and Serafini (2020) state:

A decisive element for these conflicts to come to light and have public repercussions is the change in their scale of influence, that is, when they become political issues that go beyond the initial scope in which those affected made the claim public. (p. 15)

In this case, based on the mobilization of a group of neighbors, a well-known

photojournalist with a long career in Paraguay and Argentina, who also works for one of the most important international agencies in the world, took a photo of great beauty and technical efficacy that became an irrefutable proof of contamination. The image generated a “tacit” contract of legitimacy and credibility between what it revealed and whoever looked at it. The plot of the symbolic is intertwined to build a new reality. Thanks to the dissemination of the image, the boundaries of denunciation are expanded; the event is removed from the paralysis of the state, the complicity, concealment and inaction of the government.

Susan Buck-Morss (2005) argues that

the twentieth century distinguishes itself from all previous centuries because it has left a photographic trace. What is seen only once and recorded, can be perceived any time and by all. History becomes the shared singularity of an event. (p. 158)

But image circulation patterns have also changed, they “circle the globe today in de-centered patterns that allow unprecedented access, sliding almost without friction past language barriers and national frontiers” (p. 146). Although Buck-Morss clarifies that, of course, they are produced amid “global relations that are wildly unequal in regard to production capacities and distributive effects” (Ibid.).

In the case analyzed, Di Caprio’s role was central to twisting this inequality. Newspapers from Paraguay and other countries echoed the news of the lagoon’s pollution from his post⁵. As is commonly known, the use of celebrities who enjoy great popularity is a long-standing advertising strategy. The effectiveness of these “sponsors” depends on the significance of the public figure in question, the identification that they generate, the admiration and respect that they arouse. In advertising terms, the use of popular personalities promotes a rapid recognition of a product, increases appeal and desire, and can improve the attitude towards a brand and its word of mouth. Depending on the figure, it can have a positive impact; that is, it allows a transfer of meanings and attributes from the celebrity to the associated brand, topic, product or service. Likewise, the person’s appeal can make possible a quick call to attention, much more so if the assessment the public has regarding the celebrity or figure is transferred to the message given or reproduced.

Di Caprio, in particular, joined the dissemination of the photograph on his social networks of his own free will; he was not hired or paid for it, which gave more authenticity to his involvement. He has no specific interests in the lagoon

⁵ See, as an example, the circulation in some Paraguayan and Argentine media: Última Hora (Paraguay): <https://www.ultimahora.com/leonardo-dicaprio-se-hace-eco-la-contaminacion-la-laguna-cerro-n2900246>; La Nación (Argentina): <https://www.lanacion.com.py/sociales/celebridades/2020/08/16/leonardo-dicaprio-se-hace-eco-de-lo-que-sucede-en-la-laguna-cerro-de-limpio/>; Clarín (Argentina): https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/paraguay-lago-rosa-contaminado-preocupa-leonardo-di-caprio_0_0nrLMvmKh.html; El Destape (Argentina): <https://www.eldestapeweb.com/atr/fenomenos-naturales/el-lago-rosa-de-paraguay-que-preocupa-hasta-leonardo-di-caprio-202082517120>

nor was he part of an organized advertising strategy. The actor's fame allowed him to attract media attention and boost the claim. In a world saturated with ads, messages and news, Di Caprio made it possible to differentiate the message, make it circulate and remove it from the tangle of information installed in the agendas. Public recognition in one field of action (cinema) was transferred and used for recognition in another field such as the ecological struggle.

The actor's action, added to the effective photography and the information that came from it, increased the *newsworthiness indexes* of the case (Wolf, 1987): novelty, originality, unpredictability, importance and seriousness of the events, geographic proximity of the event to society, magnitude due to the number of people affected, hierarchy of the people involved, among others. The media in general, and certain forms of political functioning, primarily pay attention to events that impact public opinion. Urgencies and short-term political gains often determine the actions within these respective fields of action, journalistic and political. That which was invisible due to the logics of power was transformed by the action of various actors –the residents of Limpio led by Doña Herminia, the photographer Jorge Sáenz, and the actor and environmentalist Leonardo Di Caprio, among others–, achieving a greater scale of circulation, which gave it its transformative potential.

Access to the media is a phenomenon intersected by acute social inequalities. In addition to material inequalities, there is inequality in the access to public voicing and to the way in which that voice is represented, if it has media space. As Becerra and Mastrini (2009) have studied, mass and hegemonic media are often characterized by a lack of plurality and diversity, a consequence of structural barriers such as the high degree of concentration of media ownership. These barriers have resulted in the exclusion of vast social groups from the possibility of expressing themselves through them and have systematically suppressed a wide range of media (small, community, local) to the benefit of large economic groups.

In this case, the photograph not only showed the contamination, but also made visible the protesters who manifested against it. The gratitude and understanding of what the photograph meant was demonstrated by the fact that the neighbors had a photo of Sáenz printed on the t-shirts they had made to highlight the pollution situation. The chosen photo was an image that was more in line with the perspective these people have regarding the lagoon. Thus, unheard voices became visible. According to Saénz, when he took the photo, the group of neighbors had been denouncing the pollution of the lagoon for at least six months, without any response from the town council. Although they had managed to get precautionary measures in place, these were not being obeyed. They had protested, filed complaints and mobilized. They had managed to get a local newspaper to talk about their claim and show a photo of the lagoon, but in no case was it enough to stop the pollution: the municipality was a direct

accomplice of the owners of the tannery and allowed it to continue working and polluting despite the complaints made. It was the visibility achieved through the aforementioned journey that allowed the actions of the neighbors to gain further relevance and legitimacy.

In this sense, contemporary collective action movements demand concrete and specific demands, but also the right to social and public existence. As Voirol (2005) points out, “the struggle to be heard or seen is not considered a peripheral aspect, but rather a central aspect of contemporary political and social uprisings” (p. 108). The struggles for rights (social, ecological, political) imply an articulation between acknowledgment, visibility and the right to be socially recognized. Every social movement, in order to sustain its demands, requires a strategy of visibility, showing itself to others in order to expand its claims and denunciations. Hence, Todd Gitlin (1986) has stated that protest movements need large-scale communications to garner public support for their demands. They choose different manifestations, which are sometimes planned, although on many occasions they arise in a more spontaneous way, as a result of the need to show themselves to others and to express their demands: “ollas populares” (community meals in public spaces), hunger strikes, marches, pickets, occupation of symbolic places, parties, dances, rallies, flags, slogans, songs, flyers, petitions, graffiti, organization of artistic strategies, walking in circles. All of these are different ways of giving visibility to the public issues they are fighting for. With these visual, aesthetic and political demonstrations, they seek to gain support and establish the framework of confrontation, agitation, provocation. Hence, they are often subject to demonization, biased or confusing information, to the stereotyped and prejudiced presentation of the facts and their protagonists. In these cases, the search for visibility clashes head-on with what the different powers try to make invisible, to snatch away or to eliminate. According to Tassin (2013), the political struggles of subordinated subjects are struggles for visibility, oriented among other elements to the recognition of these subjects by society. In political demonstrations, protesters seek not only recognition of their demands and claims, but also to be recognized as subjects of law, for which they necessarily need to become visible in public space. This is something that Jesús Martín-Barbero (2001) summarizes when he states that

one of the most flagrant forms of citizen exclusion today is the dispossession of the *right to be seen and heard*, which is equivalent to the right to exist/matter socially, both on an individual and collective level, both for majorities and minorities. (p. 53)

(In)visibility is a knowledge tool, a power device and a mediation for social interaction. In this case, the photographer turned out to be a key link in a chain of events that managed to modify this reality and make the demand visible.

3. PHOTOJOURNALISM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: NEW FORMS OF CIRCULATION OF IMAGES

Globalization, digitalization and technologies have changed everyday life, the ways of communicating and behaving in contemporary societies. They have reorganized information and restructured the way people relate to each other.

The Internet and social networks, as accessible, cooperative, instantaneous, flexible and decentralized media, allow some news to have a massive reach. In this regard, Mario Carlón (2014) points out that:

In this sense, as it has been said many times, it is not horizontality that which characterizes the communication that weaves the fabric of today's society, but a new and dizzying circulation, both upwards and downwards, derived from the fact that practically anyone, as long as they have access to the Internet, can produce and publish statements in public spaces. (p. 30)

On social media, the spaces where a significant part of public discussion takes place today, the production of content and its publication is within reach of anyone with access to this technology. This allows the bypassing of the conventional filters of the editorial process and media concentration. On this new network of networks, photographers –and those of us who share their images– have the possibility of publishing and sharing their images without the mediation of media publishers, which allows them to build their own archive and publish their own selection of photographs. This gives them a certain autonomy regarding the circulation of their images.

Social media have changed the way information and images circulate and, consequently, the forms of citizen participation and intervention. Until the 1990s, the possibility of reproducing and controlling information was in the hands of a few, especially with regard to the editorial lines of mass media. The possibility of generating counter-information was among the objectives of the so-called *alternative media*. The major media controlled the flow of images and information circulating in them, which determined the knowledge that people could have of the events that could only be accessed through the media. And although the dominant actors continue to intervene in social networks, the control of the narrative, the topics of discussion and what circulates no longer resides exclusively in their interests, but also depends on the decision of the users, who, even though having less impact capacity, still influence the setting of the discussion agenda and the dissemination of different messages. Of course, the asymmetry continues to operate and only a tiny percentage of accounts generate the majority of circulating topics and content, but it is still possible to generate other issues and content on which to focus.

In the case analyzed, a particular confluence of factors manifests itself. An international news agency like AP that accepts the inclusion of the news based on the initiative of a photojournalist on its staff. A photograph with great impact, the arrival of the photographer's social networks and Di Caprio's sharing, who develops as a *network authority* due to his privileged position (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020), ended up shaping the media success of the photograph and what was expressed in it as a social demand and complaint by the residents of Limpio regarding the contamination of the Cerro lagoon.

The media and social networks are mediators between people and the world around us. Outside of our family and neighborhood space, we always deal with "second-hand" realities, we know what others tell us, what others saw. Faced with such a vast, complex and unfathomable world, we are only able to address a small portion of reality. The media historically determined what is called *media relevance*: the level of importance that a matter has based on their editorial line. Today, social networks have altered this pattern and have shown that they can be effective as intermediaries for complaints and to make problems such as the one described visible, but also as accelerators of hate speech and organized symbolic violence. Based on algorithms that "learn" from the ways in which users use them, they reproduce thematically related content or content with which the user is supposedly predisposed to interact, thus generating *audience bubbles* through personalized filters. But in the case we are studying here, we see how these same characteristics can serve to bring together distant people with similar interests who seek to be part of a transformative action woven in a more horizontal way. A kind of *imaginary community* (Anderson, 1983) that is transformed into a pressure movement based on the versatility and capacity for connection that social networks provide.

4. PHOTOGRAPHY, JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In his book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1962) talks about the so-called speech acts, *performative statements* that, in specific circumstances, generate an effect in the world, produce a fact, generate a transformation. There are images that also produce facts from their own existence. The analyzed photograph acts in relation to power devices that operate as "machines to make see and to make speak" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 155). The image became a power in itself. This case allows us to reflect on the possibility a photograph has to influence the generation of social changes. What are the limits and potentialities of images, in particular those transmitted by the media, to promote social action? Which ones collaborate to mobilize us and shake us out of everyday inertia?

Visual studies reveal that an image, also read as a text, is a construction produced by a certain historicity, subject to economic and social relations, as well as to networks of power and desire. Images are part of the ideological

disputes that bring into play systems of representation, they build and destroy values and truths, highlight and hide fields and subjects. As Mitchell (2003) says, “visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not only the social construction of vision” (p. 26).

We could say that it is not so much the photograph itself which causes a certain effect, but the image in the context of the action of movements and social actors that manage to modify the state of correlation of political-cultural forces and the forms of relationship they establish with these photographs. It is never an image on its own, but a visual regime that defines what is visible and invisible. Zubero Beascochea (2016) analyzed the relationship between mediated knowledge and social action. A first conclusion is that knowing something can be a possible first step towards action. In any case, the author warns that it is a fantasy to believe that knowledge can automatically awaken consciousness:

Although we may be informed, we are not necessarily *concerned* by such information. If ‘feeling means being involved in something’, as Heller (1985) stated in *A Theory of Feelings*, most of the time ours is an insensitive knowledge. (Zubero Beascochea, 2016, p. 92).

Although photographs have great potential to make facts and situations visible, on their own they need a context that inserts them into the exercise of social actions. As Jacques Rancière points out in an interview with Fernández Savater (2010), images never go alone, but rather are part of a *visibility device* that defines a certain set of relationships between the visible, the sayable and the thinkable, so that “making an image is always at the same time deciding on the capacity of those who will look at it.” For his part, Beascochea (2016) argues that “in this creation of capacities and possibilities, the perspective of the creator of the images is essential” (p. 94).

On this basis, it is worth mentioning that Sáenz had already carried out another long-term photographic work that had concrete and tangible results. In 1997 he published the book *Rompan filas*⁶ (Break Ranks), which registered over six years in the Paraguayan military barracks while he worked for the newspapers *ABC Color* and *Noticias*. Sáenz entered the barracks to make different journalistic articles, but in that period of time he developed a personal work that managed to expose what was happening with the Paraguayan Compulsory Military Service (known by its Spanish acronym, SMO). The result was a document about *child soldiers*, forced labor, exploitation, abuse and deaths in the barracks of Paraguay. The book became a tool used to change the SMO by the Conscientious Objectors Movement that was mobilizing throughout the country. With the publication of the book that included dozens of photographs, the mobilization had a qualitative leap. In 2007, a law was passed that prohibited

6 See: https://issuu.com/jsaenz/docs/rompan_filas

minors under 18 from doing the SMO and in 2010 another law was passed that prohibited providing or facilitating weapons to minors under 18 years of age (Manzoni, 2019). Of the 20,000 soldiers who annually made up the draft, today less than 1,500 participate in military service.

In this regard, Sáenz points out:

It is beautiful to be part of a movement, especially when it succeeds because it is something that very rarely happens to us journalists. With the book *Rompan filas*, more than 360,000 children were saved from the injustices of the Compulsory Military Service. That is one of the greatest personal pleasures that life may give you. (Interview with Jorge Sáenz for the preparation of the investigation, May 2022)

In an article written by Claudio Zeiger (2002), Sáenz adds that “the spheres of power have very little awareness of what a photo can provoke. And that facilitated access to the places where photos can serve to denounce social injustices” (Zeiger, 2002).

The work of the photojournalist, both in *Rompan filas* and in the photos linked to the contaminated lagoon, shows a committed way of practicing journalism, in which the photographer, while denouncing, gets involved and “does not let go” of the subject. He does not limit himself to reproducing the media agenda, but helps to create it. That is why reconstructing the photographer’s career is a key element to understanding effectiveness in cases such as the one studied.

Along these lines, Zubero Beascochea (2016) –following Lootz (2007), Didi-Huberman (2004) and Klein (2007)– points out that *if showing means opening a gash in the world*,

we can claim the value of the image as an irruption or interruption of normality in a world, that of global capitalism, organized as a ruthless machine of *disimagination*, as expressed by Didi-Huberman. In contrast to *shock capitalism* (Klein, 2007), which (...) weakens citizen resistance, the humanism of the flash that disturbs, raises awareness and mobilizes. (Zubero Beascochea, 2016, p. 96; emphasis added)

5. VISIBILITY, IMPACT AND ECOLOGY

One of the problems with environmental pollution is that in many cases its effects are not immediately visible, but rather over time; sometimes, a long time. Imperceptible changes, such as many ecological changes are, sometimes prevent immediate social and/or political reactions from taking place. They are alterations that are invisible at first sight in the territories, and like some types of cancer, when they are seen it is too late. Ecological problems, paraphrasing Bourdieu (1997), “like the continental drift that goes unnoticed at the present

moment, take years and years to occur, and their effects are felt over time” (p. 133). This can contribute to a kind of *structural amnesia*, given that the logic of the speed of everyday life, of instantaneousness, discontinuity, the gain of quick results and the succession of intertwined news often does not allow events to become intelligible or to be repositioned in a system that explains and contextualizes them. On the contrary, in the case we are studying here, part of the intrinsic force of the photography made the visualization of pollution to be noted as immediate. It was seen and smelled in the territory and it was visible in the image.

In this regard, Giraldo and Toro (2020), based on the aforementioned reflection on environmental affectivity, believe that this tendency towards involvement is seen when people, for example, feel anguish when seeing the image of an abused animal or when they are exposed to images that show “the consequences of environmental devastation” (p. 71). It is a feeling that presupposes an emotional connection with nature and does not occur in all people. Both authors point out that the environmental concern that people develop is closely associated with the way in which people see themselves in relation to their environment. When they see themselves as relatively independent from their environment, or when they have an *extractivist vision* of nature, environmental devastation does not create greater interest in them or, at most, they have a concern motivated by instrumental interests. On the contrary, those who have a notion of themselves in continuity with nature feel emotionally attached to other expressions of life and tend to get involved as a form of defense. It has to do with a different ontological vision of the relationship between human beings and nature, similar to that of indigenous peoples. Instead of thinking about nature as something that can be appropriated or exploited at an accelerated pace incompatible with the times of replenishment of ecosystems, this way of thinking about nature is based on an integrated vision, a unity between human beings and environment.

Merlinsky and Serafini (2020) indicate that:

The intensive use of common goods such as water, minerals, land, soil and territory usage, implies extraordinary incomes for large international corporations and encourages behaviors in which local economic and political elites are oriented towards these gains. Thus, extractivism is also a political phenomenon that generates serious problems for democracy. In extractive territories, new legislations are created –or states of exception– that curtail labor rights and can even lower environmental protection levels. When these political strategies are more aggressive, true ‘sacrifice zones’ are produced, territories of enclave economies with few multiplier effects and in which the global order –which implies the primacy of the interests of extractive industries– prevails over the local scale. This can lead to serious human rights violations with the purpose of silencing the voices of environmental leaders. (p. 13)

This can even be seen in the discourse of companies and governments that use an economic language of cost-benefits and, at most, mention the environmental impact to decide the viability of this or that project.

In Latin America, there is an additional situation that various reports from human rights organizations point out: repression, criminal prosecution and the murders of environmental leaders, which have acted as true policies of control and deterrence of ecological protests in many countries of the region. National or municipal states have often chosen to criminalize those who carry out these demands, protecting polluting companies.

The photograph that we are studying here was a factor that helped to confront the forms of naturalization that denied the environmental crisis or justified it, and thus managed to avoid the silencing of the consequences of pollution.

6. SOME CONCLUSIONS, OR HOW A PHOTOGRAPH HELPED SAVE A LAGOON

Following the repercussions of Jorge Sáenz's photograph, a series of new events occurred. The MADES Prosecutor's Office initiated legal action that led to the closure of the Waltrading tannery, the imprisonment of the owner and the payment of a million-dollar fine⁷. The actions of a small group of residents were the origin of a complaint that was transformed into an image. The photograph initiated a communicative journey that allowed the visibility of social actors who were previously ignored and silenced. It forced the local municipality, the MADES, the Paraguayan justice system and the media of that country to change their actions. It became a link that was interrelated with other social actors, with the internal plots of the political, media, judicial and economic spheres in Paraguay. The photograph was the raw material for a new journey in which traditional media, social networks and influencers crossed paths. The image contributed its power, its demonstrative capacity and its force of truth to become a piece of evidence that revealed and at the same time confirmed the crime. In this sense, its media and virtual impact places it in line with other journalistic/artistic/documentary photographic experiences in which various social actors sought to and, in some cases, succeeded in altering the order of what was established, what was naturalized and/or invisibilized.

Visibility regimes are neither neutral nor natural, but rather complex socio-historical constructions. Thus, showing pollution and fighting invisibility made it possible to act upon reality. The photograph, combined with the national and international press and social networks, changed the course of events and became a powerful tool to increase the scale of influence of the environmental conflict complaint. The initial protest that prompted the journalistic

⁷ See, Redacción ABC: <https://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/2021/02/27/laguna-cerro-ordenan-prision-para-el-dueno-de-la-curtiembre/>

photo, coupled with the use of drone technology and the viralization via digital media and social networks, made it possible for a case of local contamination to achieve visibility on a planetary scale. The photograph, with its high technical resolution and social impact, expanded its dissemination. In this union between photography and social networks, ties were forged that gave rise to new forms of intervention and participation. The neighbors organized new actions to be transformed into photographs and thus continue the dissemination through social networks. The residents' actions, which had not been massive and had been inaudible to the real powers, managed to obtain a worldwide significance, especially after Di Caprio's intervention, and a concrete change in the situation that allowed the Cerro lagoon to be cleaned up. In this way, the photograph catalyzed and strengthened the claim: the convergence of the media with social networks made it possible for the photograph to become a powerful device for dissemination, denunciation and a vehicle for calling for action. As Reguillo (2008) states, "looking in a different way, being looked at in a different way, implies mobilizing the very foundations on which an asymmetrical, exclusionary and stigmatizing order rests" (page number not mentioned).

In February 2021, Sáenz returned to the lagoon and took a drone photograph from the same angle as the previous one which showed the pollution. The green lagoon could now be seen on both sides of the embankment and how the vegetation had grown (Image 10). He shared it on his social networks, accompanying it with the text: "Nature never stops working."

Image 10. Photograph taken by Jorge Sáenz – AP – Cerro lagoon, town of Limpio, Paraguay

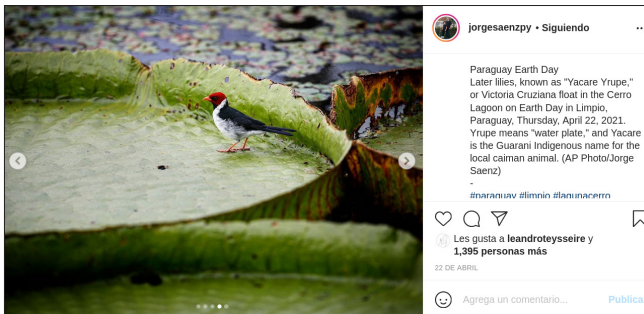
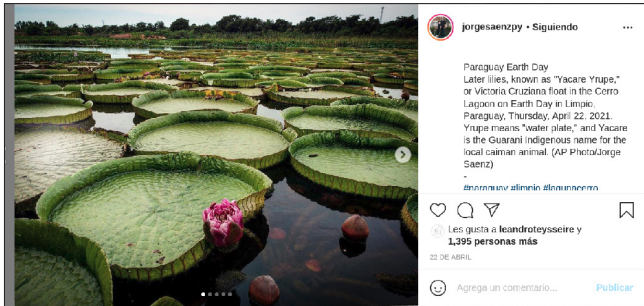


Source: Photograph by Jorge Sáenz / Taken on February 6, 2021.

On April 22, 2021, on International Mother Earth Day, designated as such by the United Nations General Assembly (UN), Sáenz visited Cerro lagoon again and photographed, this time from ground level and from the drone, how

the water lilies had begun to grow again – the Yacaré Yrupé, as the Guaraní called them (images 11, 12 and 13).

Images 11, 12 and 13. Photographs by Jorge Sáenz on the occasion of International Mother Earth Day



Source: Posts by Jorge Sáenz on his social networks – April 22, 2021.

By then, the August 2020 photograph showing the pollution had carved its own path. The impact it had in international media and Di Caprio's involvement connected the local demand with the struggles for the defense of the environment in other parts of the world. But it also made Sáenz win in 2020 the third prize of the prestigious National Press Photographers Association

(NPPA) –annual contest “Best of Photojournalism Awards” – as well as other awards and distinctions from The Pictures of the Year International and The White House Press Photographers Association.

With its evidentiary force and its aesthetic effect, with its role of denunciation and its symbolic factor, the photograph faced the inaction and/or complicity of the different powers, both local and national, regarding the actions of the polluting company. What happened in the territory transcended and multiplied thanks to the interventions carried out in the virtual space. In this way, a feedback took place, from the territory to the networks and from the networks to the territory.

The case analyzed demonstrates the power that a press photograph can have –under particular conditions– in the fostering of social change. The analysis, which combined studies on photojournalism, the media, social networks and the role of influencers, is a gateway to thinking about new ways of interacting and using images in favor of ecological struggles.

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* The dataset that supports the results of this study is not available for public use. The research data will be made available to reviewers, if required.



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