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Introduction

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Introduction

Photojournalism and Editorial Processes

Global Similarities, Local Differences

Astrid Gynnild, Maria Nilsson, Anne Hege Simonsen
& Hanna Weselius

News media content is becoming increasingly visual. In the digital world, news editors have access to large amounts of visual materials from a multiplicity of sources. In particular, the rapid development of accessible technologies and the possibility of instant sharing of imagery on social media have helped usher in a democratization of photography. If anyone can take a photo, according to an oft-repeated rhetorical question, what is the role of photojournalism in our time? (e.g. Allan 2015, Newton 2009, Ritchin 2013) Does it matter, any longer, who the photographers are or how they work?

The idea of putting together a journal issue on photojournalism and editorial processes was inspired by our collaboration on a panel at the NordMedia conference in 2015. The panel proved to be a truly productive and inspiring forum for sharing research and discussing visual journalism. As scholars of visual journalism from three Nordic countries we sensed a kind of urgency, given the fast pace of media changes, and a need to collect more research in a field of rapid and unpredictable growth. Thus, we wanted to put out a call for papers to comprise new research and international perspectives on photojournalism and editorial processes. The result, presented in this special issue of *Nordicom Review*, is a collection of articles whose authors address the topic through various theoretical and methodological lenses and in different contexts.

As we set out to work on the journal issue, we noted the well-known trend that, in tandem with the proliferation of visual storytelling on several platforms, professional roles and newsroom processes are changing rapidly. Photo departments are being reduced or even eliminated, and news organizations are increasingly turning to agency and freelance content. Important research on visual gatekeeping, a direction within gatekeeping research, has addressed editorial processes for the publication of images (e.g. Bissell 2000, Seelig 2005), and studies on citizen photojournalism (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti 2011, Patrick & Allan 2013) have examined the impact of user-generated content and social media on photojournalism.

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However, given the rapid growth and change in the field, there is a need to continuously update the literature and to address overlooked areas. One such area is to nuance perceptions on photojournalism and editorial processes as globally uniform. Another area concerns visual expertise and the professional role in practices and routines. In these and other areas of editorial processes, photojournalism has not received the scholarly interest it deserves within the field of journalism research. Even though the worldwide visual turn in the media reflects the combined forces of globalization and digitization, research on visual journalism remains a subaltern area of study, probably due to the still remaining power structures in the field.

These fields of tension, expressed in discourses of marginalization and fears of a kind of usurpation by the image, raise a set of important questions this volume aims to explore. For example, in what ways can we seek to understand the complexities of the expanding role of photojournalism in editorial processes? And how can an ongoing professionalization of photojournalism appear to go hand in hand with a de-professionalization of visual news coverage?

In this special issue, we are neither assuming a nostalgic perspective suggesting that everything used to be much better in the past, nor do we adhere to a determinist discourse where the technological development rules. Rather, our aim is to problematize the changing field of photojournalism as well as the discourses surrounding it. For instance, we wish to challenge a rather uniform portrayal of the effects of digitization on photojournalism.

In agreement with Zelizer (1995), we suggest that there is a prevailing ambivalence towards the photograph and photojournalism as a practice. This ambivalence may have made it easy to dismiss and, as some media companies' business models indicate, even dismantle it completely. For instance, a photo editor interviewed in one of the studies in this volume reflects on why visual expertise may be possible to discard by management when making strategic plans; since the expertise and work performed by photo editors is somewhat invisible, in contrast to reporting, writing and editing skills, it is more easily overlooked, this editor suggests. In a way, it is quite ironic that a medium and a practice that deals with vision are somehow invisible.

'Not quite journalism'

In their article, 'Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism', Deuze and Witschge (2017) propose that it is time for media scholars to move 'beyond journalism' and the 'newsroom-centricity' in media research. Deuze and Witschge point to how several aspects of journalism, understood both as a practice and as (an) institution(s), have so far been left relatively uncovered:

Not only are [...] contractual working arrangements of newsroom colleagues under-represented in discussions of the profession (about itself) and, subsequently, in surveys and ethnographies of news organizations, but also the myriad of additional functions in the newsroom ranging from technical support staff, copy editors, ombudsmen and reader representatives, designers, producers, and programmers are often left out of the conversation. (Deuze & Witschge 2017:7)

Although visual journalists and photo departments are not mentioned specifically in this overview, we would argue that they might well be added to the list. Indeed, given the changing roles and job descriptions in many news organizations, we believe it is important to examine the various functions involved in the production process for photographs and other visual materials, as well as professional identities within visual journalism. Given that photojournalists increasingly work under freelance contract delivering content to various clients, including but perhaps not exclusively to the news media, there is all the more reason to broaden the perspective on newsroom processes.

The articles in this issue

Taken together, the articles in this special issue of *Nordicom Review* show an interesting range of local adjustments that calls for further investigation.

In the opening article, Sandra Štefaniková and Filip Láb present the results from interviews and a survey of photojournalists and photo editors in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, and thereby add the perspective of practitioners whose voices are often not heard in the debate. Their article focuses on the effects of digitization on professional practice and describes a familiar trend towards freelance contracts and higher workload with a perceived lower image quality. The notion of the ‘cinematic way of shooting photography’, introduced by the authors, refers to a new way of seeing and photographing where the classic ‘decisive moment’ is bypassed in a digital photographic practice of rapid exposure to ensure capture of the topic. In the article, the respondents say they increasingly curate their own work, a shift perceived as negative by some who prefer the expert eye of a photo editor. A particularly interesting finding is that the photojournalists seem to fear competition from amateurs, while the photo editors, in contrast, report that they seldom publish work by non-professionals. Perhaps this contradiction is a sign of an uncertain professional identity and status in the face of an increasingly competitive field, or it may be the result of a pervasive discourse where amateur images are regarded as a threat to professional photojournalism.

‘The visual power of news agencies’ is the title and focus of the article by Astrid Gynnild, who broadens the conceptual perspective on editorial processes to encompass the increasingly complex global networks of visual news production and dissemination. Specifically, the author analyses the global ascendance of power of news agencies in supplying visual content to its news clients. As wholesalers of visual material on a hardening market, news agencies experience new competitive challenges posed by new technological options for higher speed and increased quests for live-streaming. The reduction of staff photographers combined with the distant editing of visual material from stringers and citizen photographers challenge the ethical handling of visual news content by news agencies as well as by newsroom editors. Gynnild’s conceptual piece is informed by Manuel Castell’s theory on communication power applied to empirical data from a multitude of sources. Its contribution to the literature include analyses of ‘editorial dilemmas’ in processes of selection and verification of images and video of distant crises, exemplified by terror attacks, where the notions of visual truth and ethical standards are key. Summarized, the investigation indicates that the visual power of today’s news agencies rests on three interconnected processes of handling imagery: agency infrastructuring, technological structuring, and newsroom infrastructuring.

The following two articles examine various processes of visual gatekeeping and decision making. As a result of the rise of social media and citizen photojournalism, gatekeeping processes are undergoing shifts that have led to a re-evaluation of the very notion of journalistic gatekeeping – concepts that are increasingly used in the present era are ‘gatechecking’, ‘gatewatching’ (Schwalbe, Silcock & Candello 2015) and ‘curating’ (Bakker 2014).

In their contribution to this volume, Hedwig de Smaele, Eline Geenen and Rozane De Cock focus on the daily routine of the photo news desk of a Belgian newspaper. Their article is a welcome contribution to newsroom ethnographies where processes for photojournalism have been seriously understudied. Based on observation, interviews and reconstructions of the visual selection process in a mid-size Flemish-language newspaper, the authors identify routine and organization influences – ‘newsroom culture’ and the ‘rhythm’ – as the most prominent factors in image selection. Particularly noteworthy, given the prevalent discourse of digitization as a paradigmatic shift for journalism and media more broadly, is their finding of continuities rather than major changes in the criteria for image selection. Furthermore, peer discussions and the socialization process of junior photo editors were found to be important, a result contributing to our understanding of visual expertise in editorial processes.

In turn, Maria Nilsson examines processes of image selection and the perceived function of news photographs in a Swedish newspaper, foregrounding the news photo editor function and the production of in-house news stories for print and digital editions. As many news organizations in Sweden are implementing strategies of multi-journalism, where specialization is replaced by so-called multi competence, the integrated newsroom in this study is among the few that still have photo editors on staff.

Based on observations and interviews conducted a year apart, the author presents a gatekeeping process where the production and selection processes for in-house news stories are intertwined. The photo editor asserted visual expertise was found to have become less involved in some decisions regarding images, resulting in lessened technical image quality in some cases. In agreement with previous studies, routines, publication formats and resources are identified as key factors in image selection, yet with some challenges found to be posed by mobile publication formats and a focus on routine news. Drawing on theories of news value and the communicative function of photographs, the study identifies shifting notions and definitions of a news photograph and its functions.

Chances are that we no longer view images of global crises first in the news; in the networked era, visual content spreads widely and fast through social media, putting pressure on editorial processes when it comes to controversial photographs in particular. This is the point of departure for Mette Mortensen, Stuart Allan and Chris Peters who focus on the impact of so called iconic images on editorial processes in a digital age.

Specifically, they analyse editorial self-reflexivity regarding the widely published photographs of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old boy who drowned tragically in the Mediterranean while fleeing to Europe with his family in 2015. Drawing on literature on iconic news photographs in their analyses of newspaper editorials and commentaries published in Danish, Canadian and British newspapers, the authors found certain salient themes, including a perceived influence of social media and ‘normative associations of affective qualities’. Situating their project within a ‘convergent digital media ecology’, the authors provide valuable insight into processes and reasons for a shifting epistemology

concerning photographs and their relationship to knowledge and experience.

The volume concludes appropriately with the aptly titled, ‘Crisis, what crisis? Three Nordic photo departments fighting back’, by Anne Hege Simonsen and Jon Petter Even- sen. Their article addresses newsroom strategies for coping with and adjusting to the widely known ‘new technological, economic and political realities’ of journalism that includes widespread cuts to photo departments. Tools from organizational psychology are applied to interviews with photo editors in Norwegian and Danish news organiza- tions known for their commitment to photojournalism. Through a consideration of how organizational culture, climate and visual editorial competence intersect, the authors demonstrate how visual editors adjust and formulate strategies for visual journalism in the face of significant changes. By focusing on unique local and regional examples, and by addressing the status of visual expertise, the authors highlight the impact of visual strategies and help question a prevailing discourse about the impending demise of photojournalism.

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