Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes

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PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE: CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING MEDIA SCAPES

Photojournalism and the Notion of Objectivity – The Particularity of Photography and its Relationship with Truthfulness

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1. Introduction

News journalism is a practice of reconstructing the reality. It needs credible images to support its evidence. This notion is closely tied to the eyewitness role within journalism. Åker (2012) says that the press photo is important to journalism because of its *"level of authenticity"*. So the resemblance between that towards which the camera is pointed and that which we see in the photograph needs to be absolutely convincing (ibid. 327). Furthermore, if the truthful nature of news photographs collapses, the whole credibility of the news collapses as well (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010: 454).

The idea of credible news photographs is closely linked to the objectivity norm operating within Western (European and North American) journalism. Objectivity is a moral ideal that guides journalists to separate facts from values (Schudson 2001, 150). In the context of this article, I consider objectivity as a principle which underpins the pursuit of truthfulness. Even though the concept of truth has many epistemological difficulties, it is a central norm for journalists worldwide. For example, Hafez (2002) compared journalism codes from Europe and the Islamic world and found a broad intercultural consensus that truth and objectivity should be central journalistic values (cited in Singer, 2007: 83). Similarly, a comparison of European ethical codes found that an emphasis on truthfulness, fairness and fact-checking was listed in the journalism codes of 32 countries in 2007 (Mäntylä and Karilainen, 2008: 26).

In this chapter, I aim to discuss the particularity of the notion of objectivity within photojournalism in contrast to written journalism. This particularity has often been unarticulated, when scholars (e.g. Boudana, 2011; Schudson, 2001; Wien, 2005) write about the journalistic objectivity ideal as one entity which applies to both text and images.

The objectivity ideal is seen here as a discursive practice through agency or action, and so I will explore it using concepts related to work practices. Professionalism, power and rituals are all rooted in the actual work of (photo) journalists, which as a premise creates tension between the ideological concept and practical work. For example, Carpentier and Trioen (2010) have conceptualised objectivity in two dimensions: objectivity-as-value and objectivity-as-practice. They argue that the gap between the concept and practice is unfillable and constitutive for the journalistic identity. This gap also lies at the core of this study.

There has, however, been a lot of debate about the applicability of the objectivity ideal to journalism. Some scholars agree that for a long time it has been an outdated and positivistic paradigm (e.g. Boudana, 2011; Wien, 2005). The origin of the concept lies in the American context during the late 19th century, from where it was later adopted with rather less fervour by European journalism (Schudson 2001). Taking account of these critiques, I argue that the old problem of the trustworthiness of a news image still remains. Relying on empirical material (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010, 2007), I suggest that it is even more crucial in the digital era of photography than it was during its analogue period. That is because innovations such as digital photo editing and amateur news images are triggering new discussions about the credibility of a news photograph.

Photographic truth has often been explained using at least two concepts rooted in the study of semiotics: iconicity and indexicality (for more on these concepts see Peirce 1955). The first refers to the resemblance between the photograph and its referent, whereas the latter suggests that there is a physical connection between the two. Photographs have both of these characteristics. Photographs resemble the objects photographed, and, moreover, photographs are caused by the radiated light from the object, which creates the physical connection. Presumably, the term index was associated with photographs by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce at the end of the 19th century. In his theory of signs, he used photographs as examples of indexical signs that have a physical connection to their referent (*Peirce* 1955, 106).

This ontological basis for a photograph establishes the fundamental difference between photography and writing within journalism. It links photography to objectivity stronger than any other medium and gives rise to inevitable differences between photography and writing at the level of journalistic work practices.

2. Professionalism

The notion of journalistic professionalism is essential in respect of the norms and ideals of the occupation. There is a large body of research concerned with professionalism and journalism, and many scholars have debated whether journalism is a profession or a craft (e.g. Singer, 2007, 2003; Deuze, 2005). The journalistic occupation does not fulfil the criteria that the traditional professions (such as law and medicine) fulfil, but, nevertheless, journalism has many professional characteristics, such as commitment to public service and professional ethics. Many media scholars have, therefore, considered journalism to be a semi-profession, mostly because it is not possible to exclude non-professionals from the field (Nygren, Degtereva, Pavlikova, 2010: 115).

For example, Deuze (2005) has approached the journalistic occupation as an ideology rather than conceptualising it as a profession. This primarily implies understanding journalism in terms of how journalists give meaning to their work. He lists the following key values, often associated with being part of the ideology of journalism: public service, objectivity, autonomy, sense of immediacy and ethics (ibid. 444). Furthermore, journalists share a sense of 'doing it for the public', of working as some kind of representative watchdog of the status quo in the name of the people, who buy their services. This is closely tied to the notion of journalists being neutral, objective, fair and thus credible information providers for their audience (ibid. 447-448).

For photojournalists, the process of professionalisation has been quite challenging, because, since the early days of journalism, images have been considered secondary to words at the level of work practices (see Zelizer, 1995). However, certain characteristics of the ongoing professionalisation of photojournalism are to be found both in the past and today. For example, photojournalists display a strong sense of professional ethics, and professional associations and training for photojournalists were established in the United States and Europe back in the 1940s (and even earlier in some countries).

As for professional ethics, most of the ethical codes of journalism only mention photographs in parentheses (Hafez, 2002; Mäntylä and Karilainen, 2008, 28). The particularity of photographs in comparison to writing is rarely articulated. This particularity has to do, for example, with the pressures that are imposed on photographic authenticity. That is, news photographs are commonly expected to be untouched originals, but written stories are not subject to similar requirements. Furthermore, this has led to a situation where, along with general codes of conduct, there are a number of specific ethical standards which aim to regulate the practices of news image production.

Besides the general codes of conduct usually agreed by national journalist associations, each publication and news organisation sets its own ethical standards. Photo editing in particular is an area where the number of the ethical guidelines drawn up by different media organisations has increased in recent years. The strong emphasis on ethics is illustrated, for example, by the way in which news organisations handle certain violations of photojournalism ethics. Reuters and the Los Angeles Times are examples of well-known news organisations which have dismissed photojournalists because of unethical photo editing. On the other hand, photographers seem to commit themselves to the ethical standards of photo editing more strongly than any other occupational group in the newsroom (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010: 460).

Furthermore, the paradoxical tension between the subjective photojournalist and the objectivity claim of journalism influences the core of professional news photojournalism. In view of this, the mechanical tool of the photojournalist, the camera, represents incorruptible objectivity, whereas the photojournalist as a human being may want to distort the "facts" with his/her photographs. This notion may provide explanations, for example, for the phenomenon that amateur news images are sometimes preferred to professional images because of their perceived level of authenticity (Pantti and Bakker, 2009: 482-483). In these situations, the amateurs are seen as "innocent" camera-users, who simply capture important moments with their mechanical devices. They are not expected to harbour similar institutional or individual intentions towards the photographs, as professionals may do. The use of amateur images and, for example, the use of surveillance camera images as news photographs, give rise to a situation where professional photojournalists may in some cases be replaced by machines. A similar replacement is much harder to imagine in the context of written journalism, even though it is certainly possible. However, the tools of the

journalists who write stories do not carry the same sort of cultural status that photographs enjoy as "mechanical camera images".

This puts pressure on professional photojournalists, who need to emphasise their personal ethics in order to fulfil the objectivity claim. In other words, their professionalism is constructed on the idea of how credible they manage to be as individuals who produce trustworthy photographs.

3. Power

As one of the theoretical approaches, I will discuss Michel Foucault's writings about knowledge and power. Power is a theme that has been approached in sociology and in cultural studies from several different viewpoints. Thus, Foucault's conception may be called the 'structural approach to power', in which he understands power as a network of relations rather than as a resource (Heiskala, 2001: 241-245).

Foucault's theories on power have often been considered unclear, because he does not depict the concept explicitly, even though he describes it from many angles (e.g. Foucault 1982, 1986: 109-165). In addition, applying his power analysis to today's empirical research is somewhat problematic. That is because his theories on power were originally connected to historical research on humanities (e.g. Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Being aware of these limitations, I shall use Foucauldian thematics to discuss the relationship between photojournalism and objectivity.

The structural approach in Foucault's terms, 'pastoral power', consists of the convergence of a very particular set of techniques, rationalities and practices designed to govern or guide people's conduct as individual members of a population (O´Farrel, 2010). The viewpoint of the pastoral power therefore rests with the subject who is being socialised "voluntarily" in line with the norms of the society or institutions.

For Foucault, one of the central characteristics of power is the intertwining of knowledge and power. Knowledge authorises the interpretations of the different actors and defines their discursive positions. Similarly, knowledge is produced and circulated in many other institutions as well (Foucault, 1986: 131-132). For example, in news photojournalism the objectivity ideal is discursively processed in daily work practices. Professional photojournalists have identified themselves "voluntarily" as "truth-tellers", producing images that do not lie. They advocate the objective news

image, for example, through discussions about veracity, visual information, documentary, naturalness and the decisive moment (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2007: 9). The truth-telling claim is rooted in the mechanical tool, the camera that the photojournalists use, and in the special cultural status that photographs have in society as evidence. This highlights a fundamental difference in knowledge production between photojournalism and written journalism.

Meanwhile, within these discourses professionals define the strategies of "good" news photojournalism to which photojournalism is able to constitute its objectivity claims. According to the professionals, good photojournalism reports the "facts" as they are and provides credible visual information for the news audience (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2007). Furthermore, the definition of good photojournalism has an influence on what becomes visible and invisible to the public through the media.

From Foucault's definitions of power, it is easy to see that knowledge that is defined as truth is currency that is produced and used differently in various arenas in society. From Foucault's viewpoint, the term "truth" does not refer simply to the relationship between representation and reality, but instead to the construction of representation in the "political economy of truth". Therefore, it would be more practical to talk about the norms and conditions that regulate the production of legitimate and useful knowledge in society. The production of knowledge is specifically human activity that is controlled by norms: power is visible in the kinds of procedures where the real and unreal, or what is or is not worth knowing, are separated from one another (Foucault, 1986: 132.)

It is possible to relate Foucault's conception of the relationship between power and knowledge to Gaye Tuchman's (1972) notion about the objectivity of journalism as a strategic ritual. Both Foucault and Tuchman share the constructivist approach to knowledge: for them, the most interesting question was not whether or not knowledge is objective, but rather through what kinds of procedures one is able to legitimate the notion of objectivity.

The rituals of objectivity are conventions to which the subject has to adapt in one way or another. Therefore, the strategies of objective journalism are at the same time strategies that construct the journalist as a subject. Within these strategies, the subjectivity is merged with knowledge production and the rituals that determine the practice. This is one central characteristic of power within journalism (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2007: 7).

4. Work practices as rituals

Photojournalistic work contains certain 'ritualistic actions' aimed at re-solving and negotiating questions concerning the credibility of the news image. Studies of different kinds of media rituals have recently gained wider attention among scholars (Becker, 1995; Couldry, 2003; Rothen-buhler and Coman, 2005; Sumiala, 2010), although the idea of the media ritual itself goes back to much earlier discussions. Carey (1989, 18-19), for example, has written about the ritual view of communication, where the highest manifestation of communication is not the transmission of infor-mation but the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action. In contrast to these approaches, however, my rationale here is to study the rituals inside media organisations themselves.

From this point of view, Tuchman's (1972) classical notion of "objectiv-ity as strategic ritual" refers to those tacit or explicit practices of news production that enable a journalist to defend his/her position as a neutral and objective transmitter of the facts. Tuchman argues that newspaper-men must be able to invoke some concept of objectivity in order to pro-cess facts about social reality. According to her, the rituals of news work that help to fulfil the objectivity requirement in work practices include, among others, the use of quotation marks, the verification of "facts" or the presentation of supporting evidence. The same kind of intent to invoke objectivity – even more intensively – is to be seen among photojournal-ists when, for example, they advocate unaltered images. These rituals are built up from very concrete choices, actual decisions that determine the limits of, for example, digital editing in the context of news production (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010).

One example of a ritualistic practice in photojournalism is the so-called "darkroom principle". By referring to this unwritten code, professionals define the limits of acceptable photo-editing by saying that the practices that were allowed in traditional darkrooms are also allowed in digital ed-iting (Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010: 471; Kobré, 2004: 332). By placing the new digital practices into a historical continuum together with the ana-logue period, one is able to explain, for example, why the old practice of cropping is widely accepted, whereas the use of some digital techniques such as removing elements by erasing is commonly condemned. Neither cropping nor erasing automatically changes the meanings of an image, but one practice is more accepted than the other. I argue that these practic-

es are, therefore, ritualistic in nature. By following practices tacitly agreed in the field, the professionals are able to legitimate the notion of objectivity in their work.

Within photojournalism, it is the claim for authentic news images in particular that leads to ritualistic practices such as the darkroom principle. The darkroom principle is an attempt to control the tension that digitisation has fuelled and to maintain the idea of objective status that news photographs have had over the past 60 or 70 years of the history of photojournalism.

5. Conclusion

I have argued here that objectivity is a discursive phenomenon that has a particular status within photojournalism in comparison to written journalism. Photojournalism's particular relationship with objectivity is rooted in the cultural status of photography. However, the grounds of the truth claim of photography are diverse. Nevertheless, representing the outside world through photographs is potentially more detailed and precise than through any other medium. Photographic images have a long history of telling the "truth" and being used as evidence, even though there will always be a drive to counterfeit it.

Photographs are produced by a mechanical apparatus, the camera and the indexical origin forms the ontological basis of a photograph. However, one can question how much emphasis the term index deserves in this discussion, as its main weakness lies in the suggestion that, by relying only on indexicality, one cannot say anything about photographic meaning. Furthermore, in the digital age, the idea of photographic indexicality has become more complicated than it was during the period of analogue photography. The notion of a direct, physical relationship between the photograph and its referent is controversial. Along with digitisation, the materiality of a photograph (film and paper) has been replaced by numerical data. For this reason, some scholars have concluded that indexicality alone might not be a very useful concept in defining photographic expression in the digital era (e.g. Cubby, 2010; Doane, 2008; Lister, 2007).

However, the connection between the ontological basis of a photograph and reality, photography's accurate depiction of objects and its history of being used as evidence make photography an ideal tool for news work. Photographs provide the evidence required to support the objectivity

claim in journalistic work. For these reasons, photography has a special relationship to objectivity in comparison to, for example, journalistic writing, which is often considered more subjective.

I have discussed the question of objectivity here through journalistic work practices and the concepts of professionalism, power and rituals. Objectivity is present in all of them in the way photojournalists control the new tensions of the work and legitimate photojournalistic work as objective.

As for journalistic practices, the particularly objective status of photojournalism means that news photographs are expected to be untouched originals, whereas written journalism is not accompanied by a similar kind of presupposition. Within photojournalism, the presupposition creates an ongoing paradox between the "objective camera" and the subjective photographer. This paradox is constitutive for the news photographers' professional identity: they need to substantiate their position as truth-tellers who produce credible images. In order to do this, they use certain discursive practices, such as defining good photojournalism as neutral and trustworthy. Meanwhile, that serves as an example of knowledge production and power within photojournalism.
In addition, professionals need certain ritualistic practices in order to protect their professional status and to strengthen the profession's boundaries. This is done, for example, through the use of new ethical standards and tacit knowledge commonly agreed within the field.

Finally, it seems that discussions about photojournalism and objectivity are not outdated, but in fact are more likely to continue at the present time, when the borders of the profession are blurring and amateur photographers are entering the professional field.

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