

#PHOTOJOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM

ANDREEA ALINA MOGOȘ¹

ABSTRACT. As digital technology developed over the last decades, photojournalism experienced both opportunities and threats. Thus, digital photography opened a whole range of opportunities for the press photographers: they were able to take more photos, to check instantly their quality, to briefly edit and quickly send images to the newsrooms. But, on the other hand, as the cameras and the photo gear got better and cheaper, amateur photographers started to challenge the status of professional photographers. Media organizations increasingly went on publishing user-generated-content (UGC), partly under economical pressures. Nevertheless, there were several differences between the photographic content produced by professional photo journalists and the user-generated content. Due to these differences, even if the photo-sharing platforms allowed both professional and amateur photographers to share and promote their photos, people were more inclined to share a pro's photo as they were user-generated content.

Starting from these premises, the present paper examines several Instagram dimensions of the photojournalism concept, in order to identify *who are the visual elites on Instagram and how professional networks work; which are the most prominent photographic genres that are associated with photojournalism; and how amateur photographers behave and how they promote themselves on Instagram.*

Key words: Instagram; photojournalism; photographic genres; photo-sharing platforms; user-generated content, automated content analysis

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Journalism, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, mogos@fspac.ro

Introduction

The evolution of the digital photography over the last two decades confirmed that some of the cultural conventions used by the traditional photography remained intact and shaped the reception and use of digital image-making technologies, whereas other aspects have been completely transformed and introduce new modes of creating photographs which rely on interactions between software, file formats and protocols for information exchange that contribute to the meaning and use of photographs. (Hand, 1994:142) Photographic meaning is found in the technical, cultural and historical processes in which photographs are used (Tagg, 1993:118).

Digital photographs could be assessed using concepts like *media convergence*, *connectivity*, *ephemeral* and *performed*. (Bushey, 2014:36) Thus, Bushey refers to the smartphone as an example of media convergence. Most smartphones now combine a camera, a phone and a personal computer, which enables the user to transmit and receive data as audio, image and text. Media convergence affects the routine use of different devices and processes at each stage in the creation, management and storage of digital photographs. Photo-sharing and management sites are encouraging individuals and organizations to share and manage their digital photographs. In the context of photo-sharing communities and online image making practices, members acting as producers do not aim to create a complete product. (idem: 39). The social networking platforms encourage visual production that can be tagged, rated, shared. Digital photographs have a short life-span (they are ephemeral), because new technologies and social practices are changing the temporality of images, resulting in photography as a form of visual communication, but without any expectation of permanence (Van House cited in Bushey, 2014:41). Images can be made any time, any place and they can be instantly uploaded and shared. But digital images are often seen as both fragile and of short-term interest.

The idea of this paper originates in the assumption that there is a considerable overlap between Instagram and other “amateur” mobile photo apps and “professional” photojournalism. For example, *Getty Images*

and the *Associated Press*, two major providers of editorial photos, currently sell exclusive professional photographer's Instagram photos of high-profile fashion and sports events (Reinsberg, 2012).

Instagram is a photo-sharing platform launched in October, 2010, designed to run on a smartphone through which the social media user can convey both visual and textual meanings, and the viewers can interact with those meanings. In September 2017² Instagram reached 800 millions of users, who actively participated in the dissemination of their and other's photographs. These 800 millions Instagram users range from traditional media organizations to individuals who are trying to gain more visibility by posting and promoting their own or others' visual productions. This is why Instagram could be regarded as a kind of *social awareness stream* (Naaman, Boase, and Lai 2010), where the social network is asymmetric.

Categories on social media

The intensive use of the social media sites opened a new age to the digital photography. The number of the shared images increased exponentially, which lead to the need to categorize them. But the diversity of online photographs or other images and visualisations arises from the multiplicity of their contexts of use. Therefore, categorization of online visual content is often treated as a tag suggestion task; tags can be generated by individuals or by machine classification. Instagram use human-created hashtags and it lets the user add up to 30 hashtags to every photo, which makes it one of the most hashtag-rich SNS. But the copy and paste habit of many Instagram users also helps the proliferation of meaningless hashtags on Instagram. On the other hand, professional communicators use hashtags for certain stories, thus using community-generated classifications to enter existing conversations.

Whiteside (in Rahimi, 2015), describes bad hashtag etiquette by the media like this, "A lot of media organizations jumped in, and lot of

² According to <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/> (October, 2017)

people who didn't understand hashtags were using them thinking it was a magic bullet to get ideas across. Now, people have gotten a lot closer to using them for their original purpose – classification used to group overarching topics with lasting impact. It's really about cataloguing conversation.”

If tagging refers to a type of classification that allows the user to enter certain conversations and communities, including the media content in a genre category is a different type of classification. Yew & Churchill (2011) suggest that this type of categorization can be determined socially, based on people's interactions around media content without recourse to metadata that are intrinsic to the media object itself: “The social consumption of media can alter the way content is perceived and categorized. Media content that we believe to fit a particular genre is both constituted by, and constitutive of, the changing social contexts in which that content is produced, shared and consumed; genres are socially constructed.”

Amateurs versus professionals on social media

As the cameras and the photo gear got better and cheaper, amateur photographers started to challenge the status of professional photographers. Solaroli (2015) argues that the rise of new digital technologies and new amateur practices of photographic production have critically destabilized but also productively challenged professional photojournalism. But studies (Greenwood & Thomas, 2015:625) found out that there were several differences between the photographic content produced by professional photo journalists and the user-generated content, in terms of presence and number of people in the frame, distance to the subject, candid or posed moments, action or static activity and the use of composition techniques. Due to these differences, even if the photo-sharing platforms allowed both professional and amateur photographers to share and promote their photos, people were twice as likely to share a professional's photo as they were user-generated content, as NPPA study showed (cited in Hare, 2015).

Amateur photographers are seizing the promotion opportunities offered by the internet. “Microcelebrity” (Senft, 2013:346) is a new form of identity, linked almost exclusively with the Internet. People have now access to audiences that were only available to politicians and celebrities, and this affect the identity presentation and the social interactions of the individuals. As a social practice, microcelebrity changes the game of celebrity. In this case, audiences and communities, two groups traditionally requiring different modes of address, blend. Senft (2013:350) considers that “audiences desire someone to speak at them; communities desire someone to speak with them.”

Research questions

RQ1 Which are the most proeminent photographic genres associated with photojournalism? RQ2 and RQ3: Who are the visual elites on Instagram and what structure do these professional networks have?

RQ4: How do amateur photographers behave as *microcelebrities* and how do they promote themselves?

Method

To answer the four reasearch questions, it was used a data set consisting of 21.806 Instagram entries featuring the hashtag #photojournalism, created by 9882 authors. The data was collected from October 13 to October 22, 2016 using Netlytic³, a text and social networks analyzer that can automatically summarize and discover social networks from online conversations on social media sites. This tool allows data capturing from social media sites (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, RSS Feed); buiding, visualizing and analyzing online social networks using social network analysis.

³ www.netlytic.org

Text analysis

A total of 355.055 unique words were found with the aid of the Netlytic keyword extractor, which first removes all common words such as 'of', 'will', 'to' from a list of stop-words in 18 different languages (Arabic, Catalan, Czech, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish) and then counts the number of messages where each word appears. Several manual categories of words and phrases were created by the researcher to represent broader concepts such as: photographic genres, emerging photographers communities, and professional photographers communities (press/photo agencies and mass-media).

RQ1 Instagram redefinition of photojournalism genres

Instagram allows the users to add up to 30 hashtags to every photo, which makes this SNS one of the most hashtag-rich networks. If traditional photojournalism genres are well defined and established (newsphotography, feature photography, portrait, sports photography, photostory), Instagram users are free to attach the hashtags that they consider relevant for the content, for their lived experience or hashtags that give them access to professional communities and offer them recognition, and eventually monetization of their visual productions.

The most widely used hashtags in the *#photojournalism* corpus are *streetphotography*, with its derivatives (*streetphoto*, *streetphotos*), followed by *documentaryphotography* and *travelphotography*, which shows a different hierarchy, where the focus is not necessarily on events, but on the user daily experiences.

A brief comparison with the most popular photojournalism genre related hashtags shows that the three most popular hashtags on the internet are, in fact, related to photography genres that transcend the specific area of the photojournalism: *travelphotography*, *portrait* and *streetphotography*.

#PHOTOJOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM

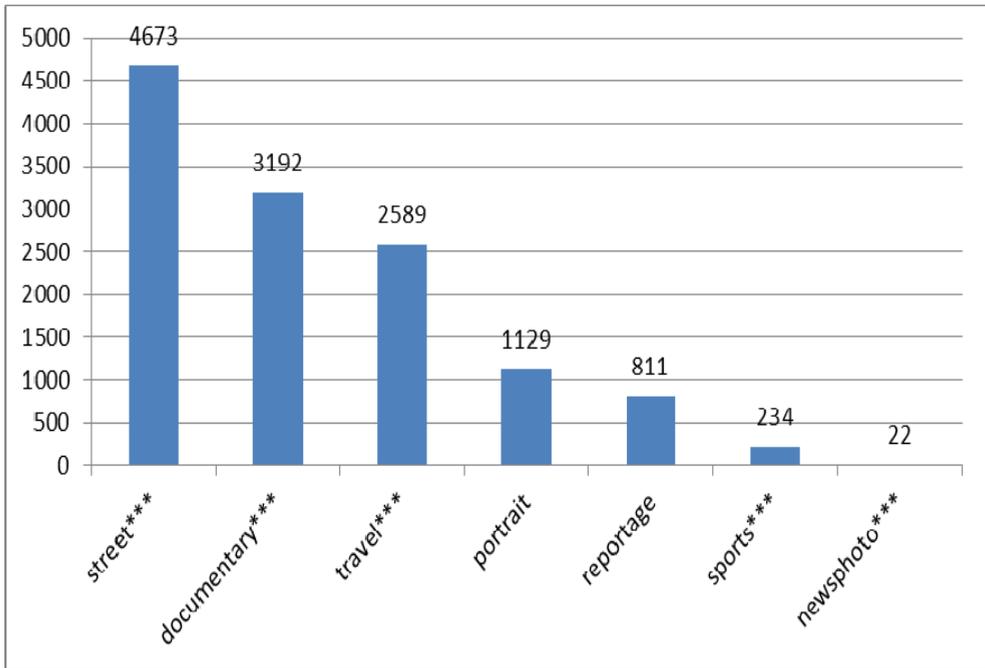


Figure 1: Genre related hashtags co-occurrence with #photojournalism

Rank	#	Statistics ⁴
1	#travelphotography	5.793M
2	#portrait	29.05M
3	#streetphotography	16.02M
4	#featurephotography	2.810K
5	#newsphotography	1.005K
6	#documentaryphotography	403.1K
7	#reportage	270.8K
8	#sportsphotography	229.3K

Figure 2: The most popular genre related hashtags on the internet (October, 2016)

⁴ Source: <https://top-hashtags.com/> data processing as of October 21, 2016.

The popularity of these three photojournalism genres related hashtags is related to the amount of user generated content on Instagram, which overpasses by far the professional productions. Though, the professional photography production outlets and the professional photojournalists who carefully stick to the quality standards still gather most of the likes on Instagram.

RQ2 and RQ3: Who are the visual elites on Instagram and what structure do these professional networks have?

The popularity of the Instagram accounts, measured by number of followers, can offer an image of the perceived elites (*media, photo and press agencies*) in the photojournalism world. According to the data available⁵ on the Instagram public accounts, among the photo agencies and image divisions of the press agencies that are producing high quality visual content, the most popular are *The Photo Society* (a collective of over 170 *National Geographic* photographers), *Magnum Photos* (a photographic cooperative owned by its photographer members, founded in 1947), *Reuters* (an international news agency headquartered in London, UK, founded in 1851), *Getty Images* (an American stock photo agency founded in 1995), *Agence France-Presse* (AFP photo is a division of the international news agency headquartered in Paris, France, founded in 1835), *AP Images* (a division of the Associated Press, an American multinational not-for-profit news agency, founded in 1846), *NOOR* (a collective uniting a select group of highly accomplished photojournalists documenting, investigating and witnessing our world, founded in 2007).

Data provided by the research corpus shows that out of the 9882 accounts (authors), only 27 gathered over 1000 likes for their posts. As the chart below presents, *natgeo* leads this group by far, with a sum of 84.370 likes for the posts using *#photojournalism*. *National Geographic* is one of the top leading brands by the number of Instagram followers⁶. By

⁵ According to the data available on Instagram as of December, 2017, *thephotosociety* has 5M followers, *magnumphotos* has 2.6M, *reuters* has 1.3M, *gettyimages* has 773K, *afpphoto* has 314K, *apimages* has 287K, *noorimages* has 173K, *epaphoto* has 6112 followers.

⁶ Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253710/leading-brands-ranked-by-number-of-instagram-followers/>

#PHOTOJOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM

October 2016, National Geographic account reached 63,1 millions of followers, a number that is constantly increasing⁷.

Other authors featuring popular posts are: *World Press Photo* (an independent, non-profit organization based in Amsterdam, Netherlands, founded in 1955, known for holding an annual press photography contest); *The Photo Society*, *Getty Images* and *Ami Vitale* (an American photojournalist and documentary film maker whose photographs have been published in international magazines including National Geographic, Adventure, Geo, Newsweek, Time and Smithsonian and won World Press Photos awards, POYi awards, and the Magazine Photographer of the Year award by the National Press Photographers Association).

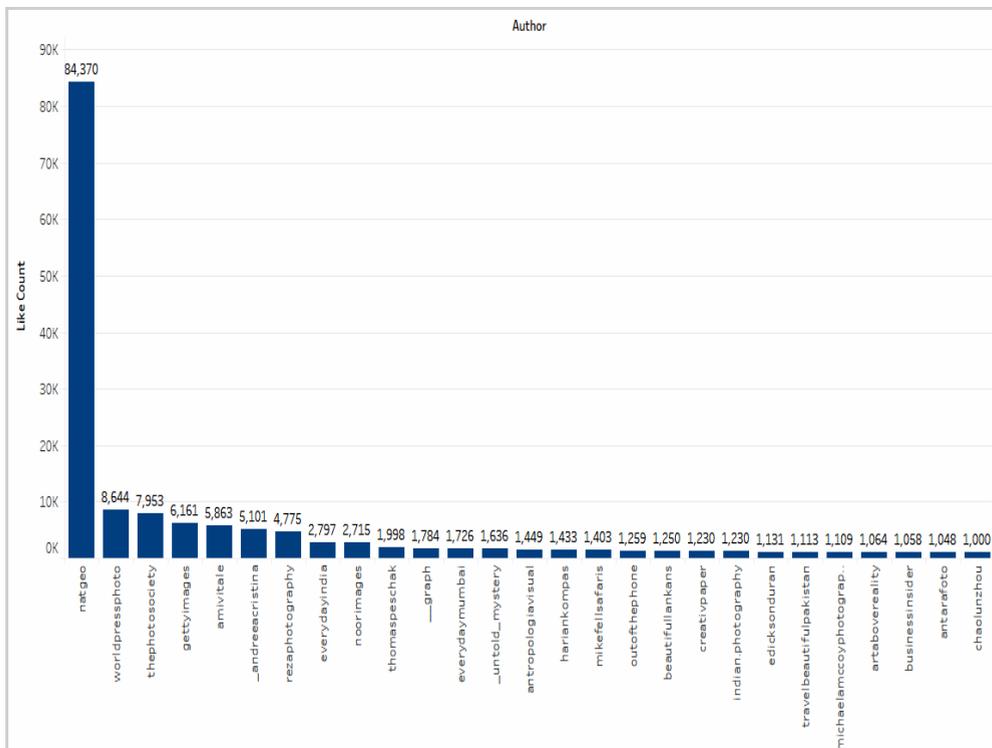


Figure 3: The accounts (authors) with over 1000 likes for their posts

⁷ In December 2017, *natgeo* reached 84.7M followers, being the leading brand on Instagram.



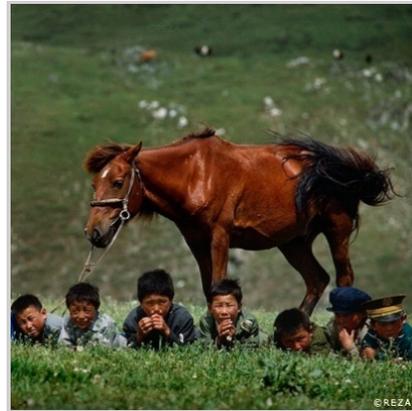
National Geographic's most successful post, authored by Ami Vitale (66.386 likes)



World Press Photo's Geographic's most successful post, authored by Matic Zorman, an independent photojournalist based in the Balkans. (1.869 likes)



Ami Vitale's most successful post (2.584 likes)



The Photo Society's most successful post, authored by [@rezaphotography](#) (7.953 likes)

Figure 4: The most successful posts of the first four authors

But, in order to better understand the structure of the network that have as a common feature the use of *#photojournalism*, a brief analysis of the name network, respectively of the chain network will be performed.

Who mentions Whom

The name network for Instagram is a communication network that connects each commentator to any user (author) mentioned in their post or comment. The network's size has a 41 nodes diameter (the number

of nodes it takes to get from one side to the other). The density measurement (0.000167461176917) shows that almost no one is connected to others in the network. The low centralization (0.006002970339977) suggests a decentralized network, where information flows more freely between many participants. Also, the high modularity (0.952545980776612) shows the existence of clusters that represent distinct communities in the network.

Our discussion will focus on two distinct clusters, which will be named *the elites cluster* (C1) and *the natgeo cluster* (C3).

Within cluster 1 the nodes representing photographic elite organizations with the highest centrality values are: *lensculture* (31), *visapourlimage* (23), *thephotosociety* (21), *gettyimages* (21), *magnumphotos* (16) and *noorimages* (13). In all of the cases (except *visapourlimage*), the indegree (the number of ties directed to or received by a node) is significantly higher than the outdegree, showing thus organisations that are most frequently mentioned by other users.

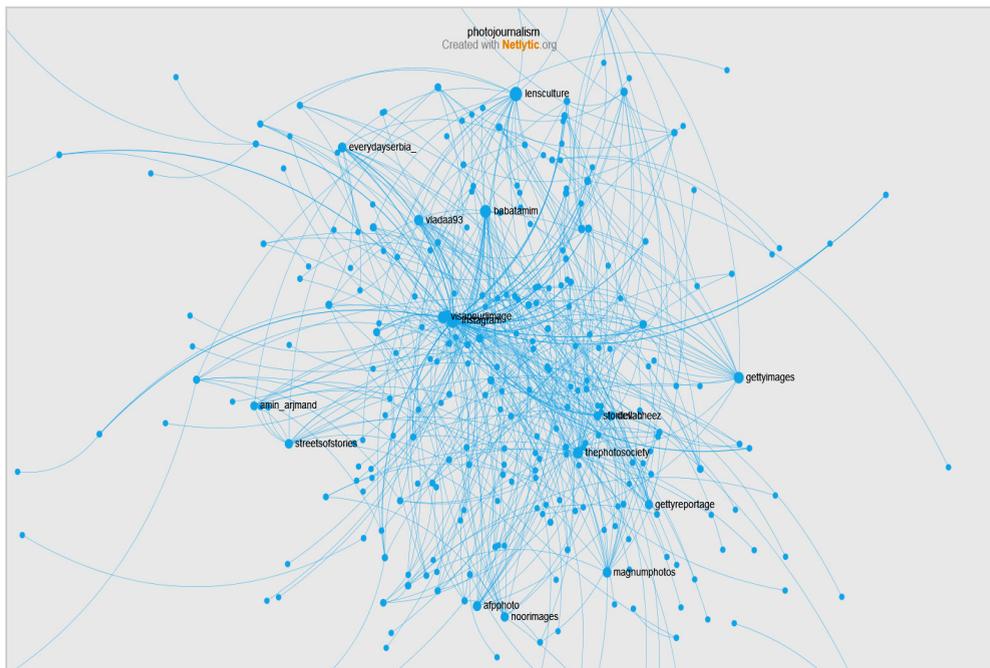


Figure 5: C1 – The elites cluster

In cluster 3, the nodes with the highest centrality values are: *natgeo* (50), *amivitale* (39), *natgeocreative* (33), *sararacamp* (15), *nrt_kenya* (14). This cluster features posts centered on nature conservation issues in Africa.

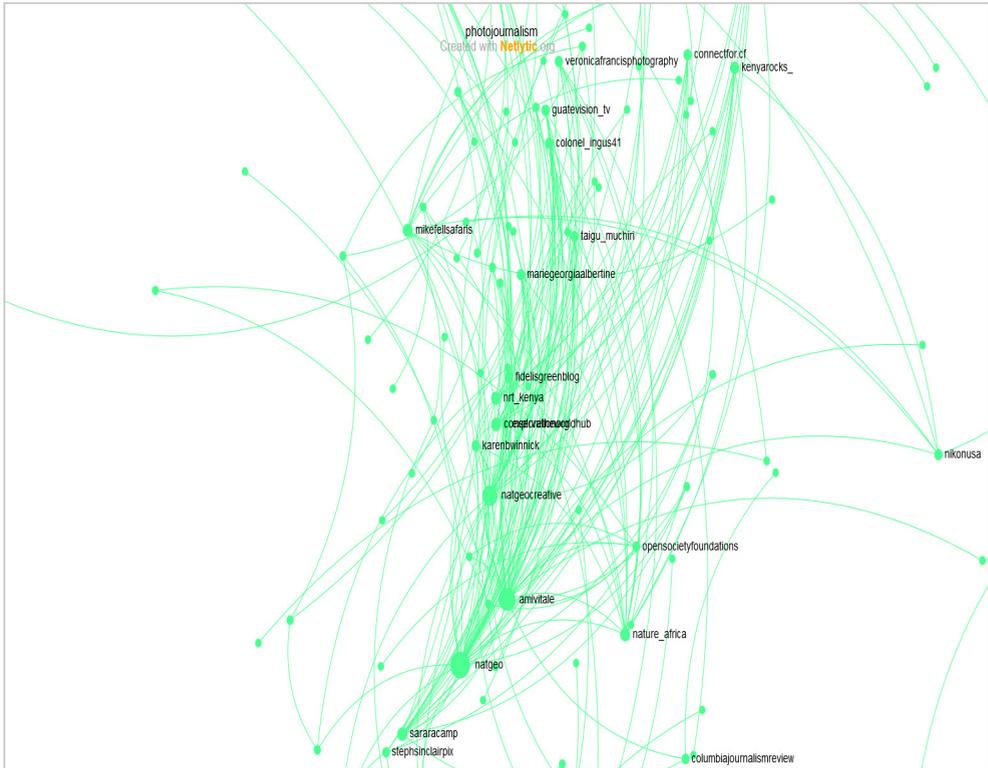


Figure 6: The natgeo cluster

Who replies to Whom

The chain network map, for Instagram, is a communication network that connects each commentator to the poster of the image. In comparison with the name network size (Diameter: 41), the size of the chain network is smaller (Diameter: 10). The density measurement (0.000115792830649) shows again that almost no one is connected to

others in the network. The reciprocity (0.000898876404494) shows a weak two-way communication, with few reciprocal ties. The low measurement of centralization (0.013125282921279), closer to 0, suggests a decentralized network. The high values of modularity (0.957268003571983) indicate clear divisions between communities as represented by clusters in Netlytic.

Cluster 1 is dominated by *anthony_gale* (107 posts, 6,873 followers, 1,928 following) Anthony Gale describes himself as a *Former archaeologist, former parliamentary bag carrier, now working as a media officer for @mercycorps_europe. All photos are mine, obv.*

The *anthony_gale* node has an outdegree of 86, that shows a particularly active communicator in comparison with the other nodes of the cluster.

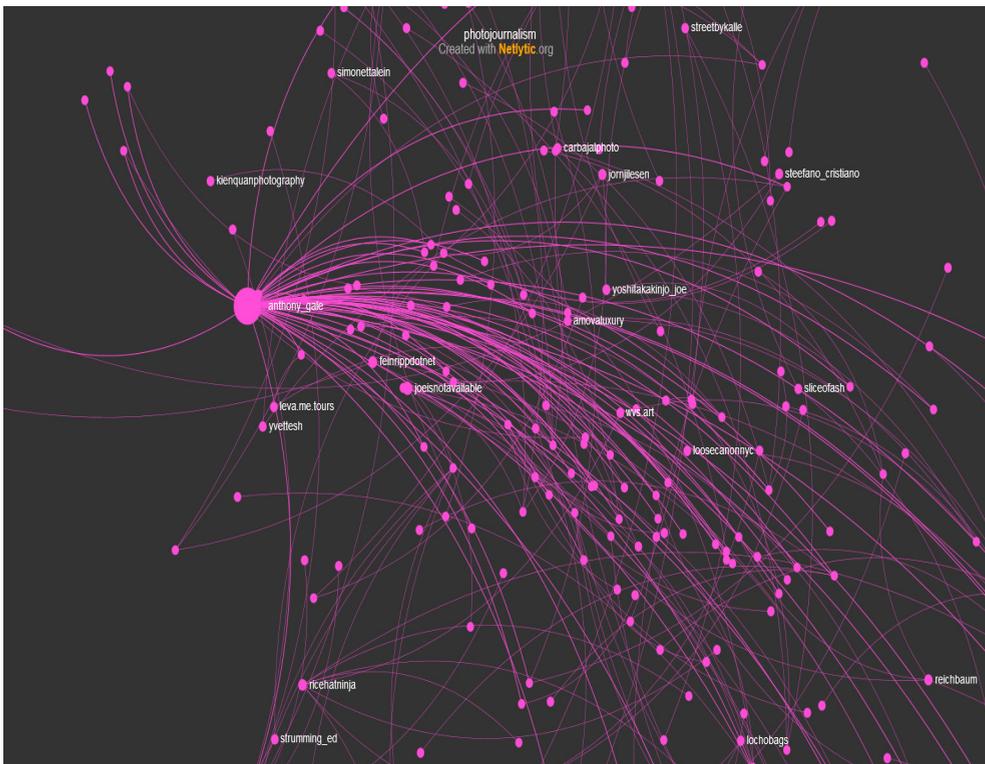


Figure 7: The anthony_gale cluster

Cluster 2 presents a radically different structure, clearly dominated by *natgeo*, with an indegree of 201, which shows the prominence / popularity of this particular author, who is the target of communication or interest.

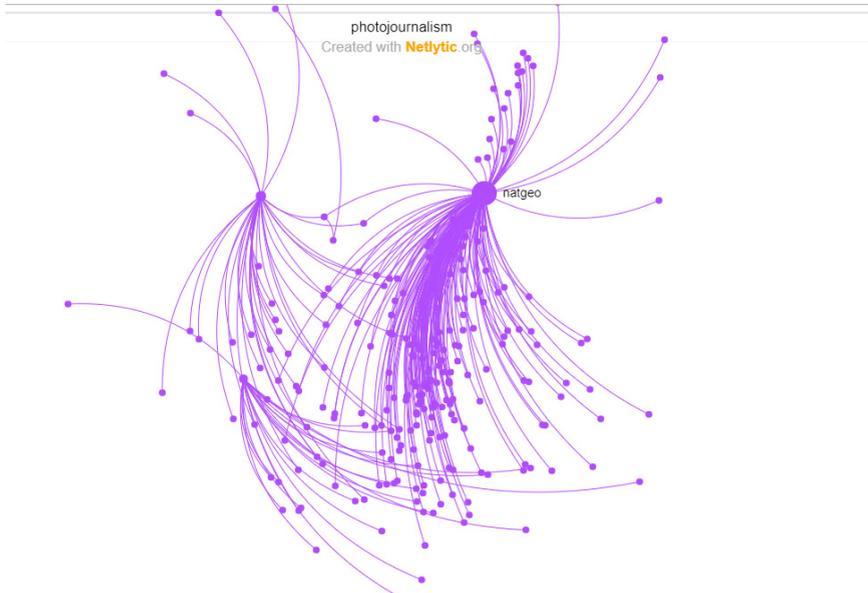


Figure 8: The *natgeo* cluster (chain network)

The clusters analysis shows that not only the elite photo outlets have the force to form clusters, which raised the RQ4: *How amateur photographers behave on Instagram and how they are promoting themselves?*

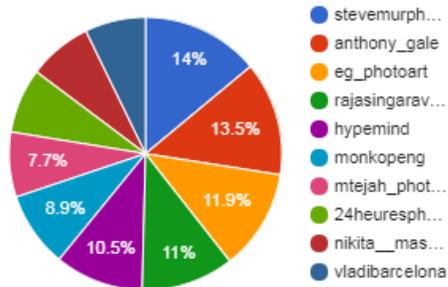


Figure 9: Top ten posters

In the #photojournalism corpus, the user *stevemurphy101* has 89 posts, but in spite using tags such as #photographer #photo #photographer #photography #photojournalism his post are almost exclusively inspirational quotes. User *anthony_gale* has 86 posts, all of them featuring a photojournalism genre. The user *eg_photoart* has 76 posts, focused mainly on portraits and street photography. Edwin García's Instagram account description is: "All the photos are originals by me. (c) I AM INTO STREET PHOTOGRAPHY AND CINEMATIC I do not take pictures, I make photos 📷 But, All the Glory to God."

A special attention need the user *andreeacristina*, who's post placed her on the 4th position on popularity list presenting authors with over 1000 likes. Andreea Cristina Stan⁸ (username: *andreeacristina*; 1,681 posts, 1.3m followers, 1,086 following; Instagram account description is: "SimplyAndreea BEAUTY • FASHION • TRAVEL Romanian in LAus") is a fashion blogger. Her post gathered 5101 likes and is present in the #photojournalism corpus due to the (abusive) use of hashtag *photojournalism* for a posed group portrait in front of the Berlin Wall, tagged with: #Berlin #berlinblogpost #andreeacristina #germany #tourism #traveling #travel #europe #art #artwork #travelblog #blogger #photojournalism #berlinwall #friendvacation #vacation #holiday. In this case, the user posts her own portraits made by someone else. This *microcelebrity* profile is an example of how the well marketed online presence, doubled by personal branding, leads to monetization.



Andreea Cristina's (fashion blogger) only and most successful post (5.101 likes as of October 2016)

Figure 10: Andreea Cristina Stan's most successful post

⁸ According to the data available on Instagram public profiles as of December, 2017.

A clear mark of the amateur photographers is the use of the Instagram filters (Clarendon, Gingham, Lo-Fi, Amaro etc.) for 10.81% out of the 21.806 photos in the *#photojournalism* corpus.

In terms of successful individuals, visible photographers are usually connected to one elite media outlet or agency (National Geographic, The Photo Society) or major event (World Press Photo).

Conclusion

The rise of new digital technologies and new amateur practices of photographic production and distribution have productively challenged professional photojournalism, in terms of .

The most prominent photographic genres associated with *#photojournalism* are *streetphotography*, followed by *documentaryphotography* and *travelphotography*. This result should be carefully examined, because the tags are not solely used to objectively describe the visual content. Instagram tagging practices are determined by promotion strategies and subjective descriptions of the user experience.

The photo agencies and image divisions of press agencies that are producing high quality visual content are still the elites of the digital photojournalism world: *The Photo Society*, *Magnum Photos*, *Reuters*, *Getty Images*, *Agence France-Presse - AFP photo*, *AP Images*, *NOOR images*. *National Geographic* is undoubtedly one of the the most popular brands on Instagram and its posts obtain large numbers of likes in a short span of time.

Photographers whos posts are the most popular are usually connected to one elite media outlet or agency (National Geographic, The Photo Society) or major event (World Press Photo). On the other hand, popular *microcelebrities* who are using hashtags pertaining to the photojournalism vocabulary are not necessarily photographers and how they are promoting themselves.

The current analysis, based on a limited corpus of posts from Instagram, tried to identify and explain how the development of digital photography technology and of social media platforms have been changing the definition of photojournalism over the last years.

References

- Allan, S. (2013). Blurring boundaries: Professional and citizen photojournalism in a digital age. *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 183-200.
- Alper, M. (2013). War on Instagram: Framing conflict photojournalism with mobile photography apps. *New Media & Society*, 1461444813504265.
- Borges-Rey, E. (2015). News Images on Instagram: The paradox of authenticity in hyperreal photo reportage. *Digital Journalism*, 3(4), 571-593.
- Greenwood, K. & Ryan J. Thomas (2015) Locating The Journalism in Citizen Photojournalism, *Digital Journalism*, 3:4, 615-633, DOI:10.1080/21670811.2015.1034528
- Hare, K. (2015). NPPA study: The most memorable pictures were taken by pros. Poynter. <http://www.poynter.org/2015/nppa-study-the-most-memorable-pictures-were-taken-by-pros/315391/>
- Hare, K. (February 22, 2016). National Geographic built an online photo community that has more than half a million members. <http://www.poynter.org/2016/national-geographic-built-an-online-photo-community-that-has-more-than-half-a-million-members/395759/>
- Holton, A. E., Coddington, M., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2013). Whose news? Whose values? Citizen journalism and journalistic values through the lens of content creators and consumers. *Journalism Practice*, 7(6), 720-737.
- Hu, Y., Manikonda, L., & Kambhampati, S. (June, 2014). What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types. In *Icwsn*.
- Irby, K. (March 5, 2015). Photojournalism ethics needs a reexamination. <http://www.poynter.org/2015/photojournalism-ethics-needs-a-reexamination/325217/>
- Keller, J. (April 4, 2011). Photojournalism in the Age of New Media. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/04/photojournalism-in-the-age-of-new-media/73083/>
- Mortensen, M. (2011). When citizen photojournalism sets the news agenda: Neda Agha Soltan as a Web 2.0 icon of post-election unrest in Iran. *Global Media and Communication*, 7(1), 4-16.
- Naaman, M.; Boase, J.; and Lai, C.-H. (2010). Is it really about me?: message content in social awareness streams. In *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*
- Newton, J. H. (2009). Photojournalism: Do people matter? Then photojournalism matters. *Journalism Practice*, 3(2), 233-243.
- Rahimi, S. (June 10, 2015). We're using hashtags less than ever. Here's why. <https://www.poynter.org/news/were-using-hashtags-less-ever-heres-why>

Solaroli, M. (2015). Toward A New Visual Culture Of The News: Professional photojournalism, digital post-production, and the symbolic struggle for distinction. *Digital Journalism*, 3(4), 513-532.