

PROFESSIONAL PHOTOJOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

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ABSTRACT. The article focuses on the challenges that professional photojournalism is facing in the New Media age when the ability to provide news images is no longer restricted to professional photojournalists. Due to the rapid development of the digital technologies, professional photojournalists need to adapt to new forms of production and of distribution, along with new preferences of news consumption. The paper provides a general overview of professional photojournalism industry highlighting the changes due to the online medium. Furthermore, the study explores the difference between citizen photojournalists and professional ones, also referring to the employment of professional photojournalists and their professional standards. Finally, the paper investigates the experiences of local professional photojournalists that have been practicing photojournalism both in new media and in print media epoch.

Keywords: professional photojournalism practices, photojournalist, new media.

Introduction

Nowadays, in the digital era, almost everybody has the technical possibility to take pictures and disseminate them, for free. The current study has the objective of answering the question - what could or should professional photojournalists offer so that news-desks and media consumers would be willing to pay for? Professional photojournalism is being challenged not only by the cheap large-scale technology that allows nearly everyone to take photos and distribute them, but also by other immediate effects of the

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digital world – new forms of presenting the photos (sophisticated multimedia galleries instead of the traditional print media news photo or feature) which require knowledge in multimedia production, new ways of financing a photo project (such as the crowd-funding model) that require marketing skills and others. Certain issues have to be taken into consideration – Has the profession of a photojournalist become more insecure due to the digital age? Is freelancing in photojournalism a real competitor for professional photojournalism? Is copyright more challenged today? Are citizens photographers a challenge for the news industry? How should professional photojournalists adapt to the online medium in order to stay on the market and which is the biggest professional challenge in relation with the age of media?

Methods

In order to answer the research questions, in the beginning the paper presents a general theoretical background and some considerations regarding professional photojournalism. Further, in order to verify specific challenges from the photojournalism industry, we have also discussed these problems with four professional photojournalists who have practiced photojournalism both in “print and online epoch”.

General Considerations. Professional photojournalism and the news industry in the digital age. The challenge of citizen photos

Beginning with *The Illustrated London News* in 1842 and the first mechanically reproduced photograph in *The New York Daily Graphic* in 1880, photojournalism has been profoundly influenced by new technologies (Campbell, 2013). Technology has always played a key role in the advancement of photojournalism; it has affected the content, distribution and social function of photojournalism (Langton, 2008). Today, as the author of the *Photojournalism and Today's News: Creating Visual Reality* considers, „newspaper photographers and writers are being forced to adjust to new technology and new ways of telling stories with varying degrees of success and acceptance” (Langton, 2008).

first photo about the airplane accident in the Hudson river was the one that Janis Krums took and twitted using his iPhone. His twit – *There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy* - was instantly spread around the world and picked up by numerous blogs and news websites within seconds (Beaumont, 2009).

The example confirms that, especially in crisis situations like accidents, citizen journalism and photographers may contribute with their news content and become important news communicators simply because they are the first that get to the scene. Photo source: <http://twitpic.com/135xa>, retrieved December, 4, 2015.

Today, the proliferation of online news and web blogs creates opportunities as well as potential problems. Some view the ability that virtually anyone can post information on the web as democratization of communication, while others view the web as an invitation for misinformation, banality and unethical practices (Langton, 2008).

Citizen photos, in comparison with professional ones, do not have the necessary information background. Citizen photojournalists may produce an image from an event, but without a story attached to it. Professional photojournalism is about also offering storytelling, considers Chicago Tribune photojournalist Alex Garcia on the Assignment Chicago photo blog which is one of the rare photo blogs by an individual photographer on a major U.S. news site (Garcia, 2013). Garcia believes that “citizen photojournalism is especially needed in other countries that suffer from a paucity of news from non-governmental sources” and he mentions Cuba as an example. When referring to the quality of a photo taken by an amateur or a professional



There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy. 954,742 1864 days ago

photojournalist, Chicago Tribune's photojournalist explains that there can be a huge difference in what somebody cognitively experiences at a situation and what the picture communicates.

Professional photojournalists use specific research methods that allows them to put together details, link events or statements, provide the audience with the necessary background, so that the subject is clear. And these methods need skills and media competencies. Professional photojournalism needs to stick to the standards - when it comes to quality, sources, updated photo-technique and logistics, accuracy, objectiveness and correctitude. In time, this will make the difference between an amateur photo and a professional one - and, eventually, this could be the lifeboat for photojournalism as a profession. In the *Associated Press Guide to Photojournalism*, AP photographer and photo editor Brian Horton explains that "journalists are not artists - they should not be artists because artists have a point of view, while photojournalists are reporters who should report what happened in an objective manner; if the photo does not communicate anything, it might be great on someone's wall, but it has to tell a story" (Horton, 2001). In the same photojournalism guide, referring to the new digital era, Horton mentions that "photojournalists quickly switched to the new digital technology pushed by budget consideration and operational needs alike".

In order to produce a professional photo assignment it takes time and patience that an amateur photographer is unlikely to spend. When it comes to a good photo feature for example, there are photo reporters that dedicate weeks or even months for a single photo project - initially they spend time for the preparation (research on the topic and technical equipment) and after that they go on the field and get in contact with the „subject/s“ of the feature. There are special situations that require more attention and time, such as covering an ongoing event or a natural disaster where photojournalists must pay attention also to the follow-ups. Another special case is the one of photo-covering minority groups of any kind (ethnic, religious) that above all requires to get in contact with the community and then to spend time to get their trust and acceptance. It is our opinion that amateurs simply don't have the professional expertise and techniques to manage this type of assignment.

Professional photojournalism examined by scholars

The Neiman Journalism Lab, a project of the Nieman foundation established in 1938 at Harvard, publishes the quarterly magazine *Nieman Reports*, the nation's oldest magazine devoted to a critical examination of the practice of journalism. In the spring 2010 edition of *Nieman Reports* that was dedicated to visual journalism editors point out that newsroom budget cuts, multimedia possibilities and the digitalization, alongside with the later innovations in technology produced all the changes in (*Nieman Reports* www.nieman.harvard.edu/, 2015).

In an article on photojournalism in the new media economy, in the same edition, David Campbell believes that *the successful visual journalist in the new media economy is going to be someone who embraces the logic of the Web's ecology* and he mentions the main advantages multimedia provides for visual storytellers. Among them, we mention the possibility to produce more content, and the idea that multimedia *can overcome photojournalism's objectification of people by giving subjects their own voice*, according to Campbell. Finally, the author concludes that today photojournalists *are using the best digital technology has to offer to distribute their work as widely and as effectively as possible* (www.nieman.harvard.edu/, accessed 2015).

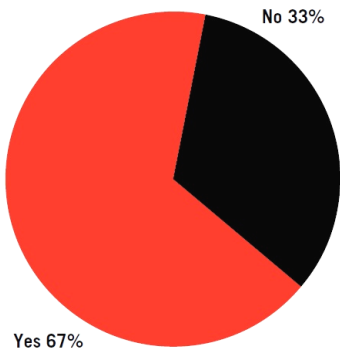
Essentially, in the Spring 2010 edition of *Nieman Reports*, editors conclude that we find ourselves in a new golden age for photojournalism and *the claim that photojournalism is dying is actually about the collapse of traditional systems of distribution and payment rather than the end of visual forms of information*. Therefore, the *Nieman Reports* edition on Visual Journalism concludes that to be visual and to have a significant presence on the Web requires multimedia storytelling – which means text, audio, photo and video all together.

Professional photojournalism practices in Europe

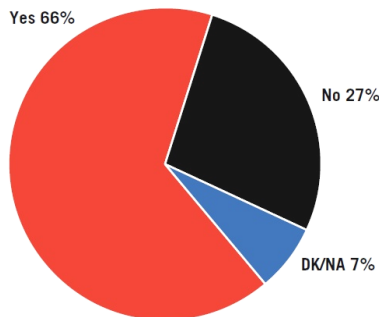
More and more often, media associations have conducted their own research on press industry in order to investigate aspects regarding new forms of production, distribution and consumption, new skills and editorial policies developed due to the rapid expansion of the digital technology. The challenges due to the online medium were expanded also by the economic crisis from recent years which had a significant negative impact upon media news industry around the world.

The European Federation of Journalists, for example, published the results of a project titled *Photojournalists: An Endangered Species in Europe?* that was established to examine the best practices and to improve the working conditions of European photojournalists, since the organization believes that *photojournalism has entered a critical phase of its relatively short history, and faces a range of economic, social and political challenges which affect the living standards and quality of employment of photojournalists, and has a harmful effect on professional standards, journalistic ethics* (McCairley, 2009).

3.1.3. Do photographers receive any remuneration when their work is being reused in different format (internet, archives, other media)?

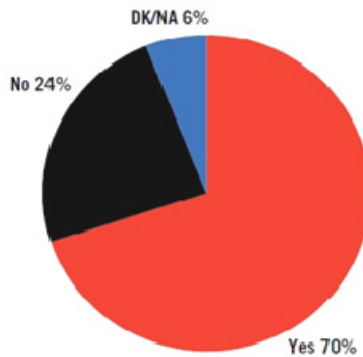


2.5 Do employers cover the costs of digital equipment (camera, laptop etc.)?



The 2009 project main goal was to define strategies to help photographers working in the media survive and defend the quality of their work, as stated in the introduction of the report. Along with the challenges imposed by

3.5.4 Do photojournalists in your country also exercise PR photography / commercial photography like business portraits, advertising photography, wedding and event photography?



the digital technologies, the report explains that photojournalists work under the pressure of increasing restrictions on photography and they must also

struggle to find ways to secure their copyrights within the online medium where users are spreading visual content without worrying about the author's rights. When asked about additional remuneration when their work is being reused in different formats on the internet, 33% of European photojournalists indicated that they are not paid for the reuse of their product, according

to the (McCairley, 2009). According to the indicated report, professional photographers started to exercise other type of photo activities most probably as a market need and as a supplementary financial opportunity – PR, advertising, event or wedding photography (McCairley, 2009).

Some of the main conclusions of the report on photojournalism industry in Europe refer to the problems such as the one of *multi-skilling* – it is considered that media unions should negotiate enhanced rates and further training for additional journalistic tasks (lately a photojournalist is also required to produce video content); *editorial budget-cuts* – caused by both the economic crisis and the user-generated photos (which is usually offered for free); or the problem of *education and training* – the need to establish a set of European standards of training and education for journalists. However, the report indicates that citizen journalists (understood as amateur photographers that send their photos to news desks) and *crowd sourcing* (defined as the situation when media desks invite the audiences to submit photos for commercial use) are threatening professional photojournalism. (Graphics source from the Report: *Photojournalists - An endangered species in Europe?*, European Federation of Journalists, Retrieved December 10, 2015, from <https://newmediagr.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/photojournalists.pdf>).

The changes of photojournalism in the multimedia epoch is the central focus of a recent research project conducted under the auspices of the World Press Photo Academy and directed by Dr David Campbell – *Visual Storytelling in the Age of Post-Industrialist Journalism* (Campbell, 2013). The project began from the premise that the global media economy is undergoing. However, one of the major challenges is to see how the production of quality content through these means (multimedia including sound, video and text) can be supported and expanded. How to pay for the new modes of storytelling in the new media economy remains the most challenging issue. Finally, as the cited author considers, *in the new media economy all media is multimedia, social media, and it is increasingly mobile* (Campbell, 2013).

Photojournalists on the Challenges of Professional Photojournalism in the Digital Age

In order to verify how photojournalists from the news industry consider and handle these challenges, we interviewed four local professionals in the field of photojournalism (in October, 2013). The interviewed professionals were:

1. Dan Bodea, a professional photojournalist that has approximately twenty years of professional experience, who has worked with numerous newspapers, magazines and news agencies;

2. Călin Ilea, a professional photographer with over ten years of experience that has worked with several national newspapers, magazines and photo news agencies;

3. Vakarcs Loránd, a professional photojournalist with fifteen years of activity that has worked with many newspapers, magazines and news agencies;

4. PhD Professor Dorel Găină, an expert in photography that is member of different national photography associations and the author of numerous personal or group photo exhibitions. The questions addressed are the following:

1. Which are the most important challenges for professional photojournalism in the digital era?
2. Is professional photojournalism challenged by citizen photographers who disseminate photos for free on different platforms (blogs, social networks)?
3. How should photojournalism, as a profession, adapt in order to stay financially sustainable on the media market?

When asked about the most important challenges for professional photojournalism in the digital era, Dan Bodea does not necessarily believe that digitization necessarily means trouble, but he considers that it is even easier now - you can take more pictures, and the challenge is to choose the best. Călin Ilea considers that the important challenge for professional photojournalism is to keep the focus and the quality level in a time when access to technology has become very affordable and cheap. Photojournalist Vakarcs Loránd believes that the first and most important challenge is that a photo gets to the readers/viewers in a very short time, and it can be seen by a large number of people across the globe. Speaking about photos, we must mention the universal language that can be understood by all consumers of media, regardless of what country they are. In the online medium, there is the possibility to organize photo galleries, multimedia stories and to be professionally present on social networks, which back in the „print era” was not possible. Finally, PhD professor Dorel Găină considers that due to the available technology, there are strong temptations to modify reality. He says that nowadays, society has no more respect for photojournalism as a

profession; politicians, for example, almost detest the honesty of a photo feature. Photojournalism as a profession is being threaten just like any other professional field that requires technological investments.

Regarding the impact of amateur photographers and the free dissemination of photos, professional photojournalists say that „professional photojournalism is not threatened in terms of picture quality, but some amateur photographers may be present to some events at the right time and then there is the problem of the advantage of sending and publishing a photo sooner” (Dan Bodea). Călin Ilea believes that „professional photojournalism is being destroyed by amateurs, but the essence can not be threatened because for the information and visual quality, it takes much more than to click a button”; while Vakarcz Loránd believes that there are some type of events (accidents, catastrophes etc) that may be covered only "in real time" - in this situation, an amateur that could be „the right man in the right place” becomes more valuable than a professional whow arrive to the scene too late to take a photo. This citizen journalism has a certain beneficial role in many situations. Professional photojournalists are threatened only in these situations where the reaction time is very important – it is crucial to get to the subject as soon as possible. Since the online medium, news editors do not value so much professional photojournalists and this could be easily seen in terms of quality, style of photos. In the online era quality is no longer the important attribute; but quantity is”. Finally, PhD professor Dorel Găină mentions that “citizen photographers do not pay attention to the general background and by doing so they can produce immoral acts, but on the other hand they push professional photographers to continuous training”.

Regarding the financial sustainability of photojournalism on the media market, professional photojournalist Vakarcz Loránd sees freelancing as a solution for assuring the financial sustainability on the media market. However, he consideres that this decision is up to the owners and to the editors-in-chief. In Romania freelancing is still in the early stage, and I hope that it will develop as a viable option for both sides included. As a freelancer, theoretically speaking, a photographer has more free time and mood for different topics and approaches, along with developing other personal projects. Professional photojournalist Călin Ilea believes that the response was not found by the managers of media institutions - since this is a problem of the media in general. Finally, professional photojournalism will be sustainable

thanks to its quality, training, information related to the event, and to the team work photo reporter-reporter (photo/visual information and text!) as concluded by PhD professor Dorel Găină.

Conclusion and Discussions

In the digital era, when everybody has the technical possibility to take photos and disseminate them, the important role of a photojournalist is *to explain*, not only *to inform!* The study analyzed aspects of the complex impact that the digital new technologies have upon photojournalism. The professional photojournalists interviewed within the article expressed their fears and hopes regarding the present and the future of their profession in a time when it takes only a click to take a photo and share it with the entire world! *Quality, training, expertise in "telling a news story" (not only presenting an image), linking the events, providing a general background and the team work photo reporter – reporter (photo/visual information and text!)* are considered to be the main attributes of a professional photojournalist, while *freelancing is mentioned as a possible solution for assuring financial sustainability*, according to professional photographers interviewed in our article. Future research could investigate into what formats the photojournalism genres will develop to best answer the changes regarding the process of production, distribution, consumption and financing media projects in this digital age.

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