

The Visual Power of News Agencies

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Abstract

While staff photographers are losing their jobs, news agency networks have become main suppliers of visual content to the news media. A global news site such as the Guardian leans to news agencies for most of its selected visuals. In tandem with the expanding visual power of new agencies, the ethical standards of the wholesalers are challenged by increasing amounts of user generated content, distant editing, and the live-streaming of breaking news. This article discusses editorial dilemmas prompted by proliferate, high tech processing of visual content by the news agencies' global networks, exemplified by the coverage of terrorism. The analysis is grounded in a variety of empirical data, and aspects of Manuel Castells' theory on communication power provide a theorizing framework for the discussion. The study suggests that the visual power of today's news agencies rests on three interconnected processes of handling imagery: agency infrastructuring, technological infrastructuring and global newsroom infrastructuring.

Keywords: photo agency, new technology, visual journalism, communication networks, terrorism.

Introduction

A news agency is a networked organization that collects, produces and disseminates large amounts of news items to vast numbers of global and local clients. In our time, the language of the news agencies is built around compelling imagery, and every day, most of us consume a considerable number of images and videos stemming from sources such as the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. In some countries, news agencies have close ties to the government, in other countries agency activities are regulated solely by the general quest for news commodities.

Several authors have investigated how the digital turn changed the dynamics of international news agencies (Gursel 2007, Ilan 2012, Lehtovaara 2011, Nicey 2013). In his ethnographic study of Reuters, Ilan (2012) in particular investigated the processes of commercializing and industrializing visual content for an international market. However, less is done on the impact of such processes on clients and other users of online news imagery.

Similar to corporate media, the agencies are undergoing fast pace and far-reaching transition processes. Heavy investments in new technologies that allow nanosecond competition (Lehtovaara 2011) are going hand-in-hand with the lay-off of staff photo-

graphers in favour of extensive stringer networks. The motion from manual to automated production of news imagery accelerates, and with the technological advancements, agency services multiply.

In spite of the growing market for visuals, though, established news agencies are under heavy pressure. The increasing rivalry for compelling imagery is prompted by digitization and new technologies. For instance, agencies face the pop-up of high tech imagery start-ups that exploit technological competitive potential to the maximum. In this competition, the *handling of visuals* appears to be key.

In a keynote speech in 2012, the CEO of Agence France-Presse (AFP), Emmanuel Hoog, suggested that global agencies are pressured in four ways. First, Hoog emphasized, the agencies have lost their previous monopoly of speed; citizen journalists and social networks are just as quick. Second, after 150 years focusing on their relationship with the news media in a one-to-many relationship, news agencies are transitioning into a many-to-many-mode. Third, news agencies used to be associated with the accountability of the written word; today, the power of the news agencies relies primarily on the credibility – and speed – of their visuals. The fourth challenge pointed out by Hoog concerned the difficult financial situation of the agencies' main client group, the edited news media (Hoog 2012).

In the same speech Hoog pointed out the following: 'If you want to create an event, you first have to create the visuals' (ibid:1). His statement speaks to the hardening temporal and spatial visual race of the leading news agencies. In this article, Hoog's statement is used as an exploratory springboard to investigate what I tentatively call the visual power of news agencies.

Aim, empirical data and approach

The aim of this article is thus, more precisely, to discuss editorial dilemmas prompted by the temporally escalating, proliferate processing of visual content by news agencies. Based on these challenges the overall goal is to provide a conceptual grip on the visual power of news agencies as journalism actors in the networked society.

This theorizing approach to news agency processing of visuals is grounded in different types of empirical data. The collection and subsequent coding, comparison, and analysis of the multiple data is inspired by grounded theory (Glaser 1978, 2008) – a method that generates theoretical hypotheses based on empirical data. The textual data comprises global news agencies' self-presentations on the Internet (Reuters, AP, and AFP) plus the self-presentations of the Nordic agency Scanpix and their 30 collaborative agents. Included in the textual data, understood as texts and imagery, are investigations on the visual coverage of terror acts, in particular those of the so-called 'Bloody Friday' on June 26, 2015.

Moreover, the analysis is based on close reading of relevant online and offline literature, and systematic searches of visuals that relate to the Bloody Friday 2015 in the Scanpix database. Oral sources include five follow-up interviews with photo editors in the news agency Scanpix and front-end editors and photographers in Norwegian regional media respectively.

Manuel Castells' theorizing on communication power (2009, 2011) is used as an explanatory framework for the study. It should be noted that the agencies' expanding

role as providers of news imagery includes picture divisions of large news agencies as well as photo agencies.

Background of the study

This project was sparked by a study of visual transparency in online journalism, where surveillance clips and their captions in online news sites were studied (Gynnild 2014). The findings indicated that the news media's visionary statement of transparent and truthful journalism is a two-edged sword. Visual material provided even by trusted news agencies does not always document the truth; the imagery might just as well contribute to information opaqueness and fake documentation of events. These findings were surprising since the attraction and clicks of news sites is built around images, and the agencies' market share depends on their ability to provide truthful, compelling imagery.

The findings were also surprising as the verbal facticity of imagery is a hallmark of journalism; verbal facticity is what distinguishes journalistic pictures and videos from other visual genres (Tuchman 1978). Exactly the captions, the concrete information on time, place, people and event, are normally considered to ensure the accountability of the visual material. The study suggested that whereas live-streaming automatically integrates captions of time, place, event, and people, recycled video clips were not tied to verbal facticity in the same way. Rather, the massive recycling of video clips opened up for considerable re-editing and re-contextualizing at a newsroom level. It even appeared to prompt editors to remove the factual information that would tie the visuals to a concrete reality.

Quite often, the study indicated, the original source of video clips provided by news agencies was hard to find. News websites typically referenced back only to the news agency itself, for instance the Associated Press or Reuters, or they cited each other, whereas the original captions are left out. The latter technique of what I have termed 'cyclic referencing' implies that news sites earn credibility simply by referencing the most prestigious or accountable site in the chain, for instance The Washington Post. Cyclic referencing also serves as a way of borrowing/lending journalistic legitimacy. These are all aspects of lacking journalistic transparency that rather support the opposite, namely journalistic opaqueness (Gynnild 2014).

Rather than serving as documentary proofs of contextualized realities, the study demonstrated that the online recycling of images and videos make them increasingly serve as main ingredients in *decontextualized* storytelling. Imagery that is detached from its original context might, in turn, contribute to myth shaping and the conservation of cultural prejudice.

The news coverage of the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in Paris in 2015 made me even more interested in the current role of news agencies. The civic actions in the wake of the attack demonstrated a tremendous impact of news imagery on large audiences, given their potential capacity to evoke immediate emotional responses among viewers. Visual messages can educate, entertain, and persuade. 'But the flip side to such visual power', as pointed out by Lester (1995:1), 'is that images can also offend, shock, mislead, stereotype and confuse'.

Castells: Capturing people's minds

While collecting data on the editorial uses of news agency imagery, it became clear that the web of news agency agents was indeed a news world of its own. To get a better grip of what was actually going on, I turned to Manuel Castells' theorizing on communication power and used it as a framework for my own theorizing.

In our network society, Castells (2009, 2011) proposes, the communication foundation lies in a global web of horizontal communication networks. According to Castells' theorizing, media are not holders of power but constitute the communication space in which power is decided. Within this increasingly contested communication space, Castells suggests that the structural power of a social actor lies in its ability to impose its will over other actors.

Furthermore, Castells (2011) proposes that communication power in our time resides not primarily in the communication networks or in corporate owners. Rather, the global communication power rests on the diffusion of messages by a multitude of senders and receivers on the Internet. The versatile, open-ended, and diversified characteristics of the World Wide Web open up for new ways of capturing people's minds, Castells suggests.¹

Castells' hypotheses raise a host of issues concerning the formerly established gate-keeping functions of news agencies. In particular, his theorizing calls for rethinking and reinvestigating the impact of the visual messaging of the agencies. My point of departure is that global news agency networks are potentially powerful social actors when it comes to capturing people's minds through visual storytelling. But with the new communication spaces, it is unclear in what ways news agencies are actually able to influence users or steer the enormous amounts of provided visual material in any specific direction.

Whereas Castells' discussions cover the wide spectrum of communicative constellations in the global network society, the term 'visual communication networks' refers in this article to the complex and intertwined partnerships of a great variety of news agencies/picture agencies that operate on a global scale.

In order to understand the current strategic moves of news agencies, however, it might be helpful to draw the longer lines back to their traditional bases of power. Thus, in the following sections, I will first provide an historical introduction to news agencies as wholesalers of news items across countries. Second, I will discuss accountability implications of the hardening competition of visual materials provided by a multitude of news agencies. I will make these challenges concrete by including an example of media coverage of terror attacks.

The visual coverage of terrorist actions is particularly interesting to study since such actions represent some of the most difficult breaking news to cover for news agencies. Terror attacks are deliberately staged to spread fear among citizens and the many unexpected factors of such actions put journalistic judgment to test constantly.

Finally, based on the news agencies' competitive challenges of speed, mass, and visuals, the last section of the article discusses the visual power of news agencies within the framework of Manuel Castells' theorizing.

Three technological stages of news agencies

How have news agencies, or, more specifically, the visual divisions of news agencies/picture agencies, operated throughout history? Based on the data of this study, I will

argue that global agencies currently are at the third stage of a longitudinal technology race in which the influence of the individual photographer on his or her visual end product is radically minimized. The development is driven forward by the most time saving technologies available at any given moment in time.

The following analysis is grounded in the news agencies' self-presentations on the Internet and existing research literature in the field. From the coding of the data it emerged that the first stage of news agency development focused on building a global information reach. The second stage focused on network expansion through new technologies. The third and current stage is characterized by immediacy goals and the multiplicity of services.

Stage 1: Building a global information reach

Before digitization and the turn of the last millennium, news agencies were professional distributors of written and visual news from around the world to local and national news media. For many decades, the Associated Press (AP, founded in the United States in 1835), Reuters (the United Kingdom, 1851), Agence France-Presse (AFP, France, 1944), and Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA, West Germany, 1949) were considered the most powerful agency actors in the international news market. Initially, the agencies were meant to provide news items only to newspapers. But as time passed, the rapidly developing modern media such as radio, television, and Internet adapted the services of news agencies as well.

As the major global news agencies – the AP, Reuters, AFP and DPA – used to divide the world market in four, continents and countries were thoroughly split between them (Ilan 2012). In order to serve a wide variety of subscribing newspapers and newscasters, the agencies were acknowledged as providers of 'journalism information' rather than providers of breaking news. News items and images from the agencies were so neutrally wrapped that they were often perceived as raw material. The aim was to ensure credibility and objectivity; as a result, however, agency news typically had to be reworked, re-contextualized, and re-angled by local editors to be aligned with the news cultures of its subscribers. The following definition of news agencies stems from 1953:

A news agency is an undertaking of which the principal objective, whatever its legal form, is to gather news and news material, of which the sole purpose is to express or present facts, and to distribute it to a group of news enterprises, and in exceptional circumstances to private individuals, with a view to providing them with as complete and impartial a news service as possible, for payment and under conditions compatible with business practice and usage. (Unesco 1953:24)

Even though this definition does not explicitly take into account the distribution of visual material, it does identify news agencies as providers of news items to news enterprises. As pictures and videos are traditionally integrated in the concept of news, the definition provides an illuminating link between news agencies and news media before and after digitization.

As distributors of seemingly objective journalism material, news agencies appeared for decades to operate in the shadows of leading news organizations such as the BBC, the Guardian, and CNN. News agency journalism was not paid much attention by researchers either. And yet, as argued by Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen (1998), the old and well-established news agencies were considered decisive contributors to the emergent

globalization of the news. The implications of the agencies' actions were thus powerful. As wholesalers of news, the news agencies were among the first organizations 'to operate globally in the production and distribution of "consciousness" through the commodification of news' (ibid:5).

To understand the long-term implications of these actions, we have to take into consideration the ongoing dialectics between local, national, and international agencies. From the beginning, news agencies were considered vital providers in forming the nation state. In order to be acknowledged and respected as nation states, the nation states were concerned about establishing one or more national news agencies (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen 1998). These agencies would serve as the nation state's disseminators of its national image onto the world.

At the very heart of modernity lay the bonding between national formation and global formation; each country needed if not a spokesperson then a spokes-organization. In this perspective, the perception of news agencies takes on a new meaning. It explains how news agencies, for instance in Eastern Europe, served as machines of political propaganda rather than providers of apparently objective information.²

Stage 2: Network expansion through new technologies

With digitization around the turn of the last millennium, the communicative networks of news wholesalers expanded steadily. During this period, established news agencies were able to interact digitally with corporate, mainstream news outlets and expanded by interconnecting with emerging, autonomous online outlets. News agencies even intermingled with propaganda agencies steered by terrorist organizations (Ilan, 2012).

The established news agencies invested heavily in technologies to handle the extended visual demands. For instance, in 2006 Reuters launched Paneikon editor, a remote editing software that automated transmission of low resolution images from the photographer's camera directly to editors located far away from the event (ibid.). This specific software provided Reuters with a competitive market advantage: once pictures were taken, they were now downloaded by remote editors, edited, and sent to the Reuters' global offices in London or Singapore, or even directly to subscribers or clients. Thus, editing jobs that would previously have taken hours were done instantly, with editors choosing and editing the images they wanted independent of photographers' opinion. Now an editor could 'crop the photo and send it to another editor to tone in Photoshop and add a caption ready for transmitting to costumers' (Stock Photo Talk 2007).

The Scandinavian picture agency Scanpix International exemplifies how the global web of news agency actors started operating on national levels. Scanpix International is the collaborative database of four photo agencies situated in four North European countries: TT News Agency in Sweden, NTB Scanpix in Norway, Scanpix in the Baltics, and Scanpix in Denmark. According to their self-presentations on the Internet, each agency supplies subscribers with a daily flow of more than 2,000 images, news videos, and raw footage.

Thus, subscribing organizations such as news publishers, broadcasters, and magazines have access to millions of archived images and videos distributed by Scanpix International. The material is brought into the Scanpix International's database by a web of so-called agents. The networks, in which nearly 30 agents are listed, comprise a rich variety of national news agencies (particularly in Europe, but all continents are

covered). These wholesalers operate in addition to the imagery provided by the AP, Reuters and the AFP.

Among these 30 agents, though, only one bureau explicitly presents its editorial values online. The Canadian Press states that:

Our work is urgent. Speed must be a primary objective of a news service committed to the deadlines of newspapers and broadcasters in six time zones. Online news has no deadlines – or more precisely, the deadline is right now. *But being reliable is always more important than being fast.* (The Canadian Press 2017/n.d.)

Stage 3: Immediacy and multiplicity of services

With digitization and direct presence on the Internet, three agencies in the western world, Reuters, AP, and AFP, still stand out as major providers of news imagery. These agencies have typically invested huge efforts in their network-based news coverage worldwide, and, in particular, the visual services. The picture divisions of established news agencies have evolved into high tech institutions where cutting edge technologies and immediacy are the most important competitive assets (Ilan 2012). The commercial use of photography along with clients' quests for more live streaming prompts more innovation.

With remote editing technology at their fingertips, news agencies are no longer dependent on photographers to do editing in the field. Similar to the strategies of mainstream news media, news agencies reduce their investments in staff photographers in favour of building extensive stringer networks. Stringers are significantly less expensive than fulltime photographers as they are paid per piece of work. They often work in trouble spots and conflict zones of the world. Despite the lower pay, lack of employee protection and risky work conditions, there has been an increase in the number of agency stringers after the turn of the century (Spinner 2014, Meirick n.d.).

In addition to the stringer networks, news agencies, just like the news media, have unlimited access to documentary imagery provided by social media. Photo agencies and picture divisions of news agencies operate on competitive arenas in which the potential supplies of visual material from for instance Instagram and Facebook are without end. News images and videos are increasingly considered a public commodity disseminated on a growing diversity of platforms – a product with unlimited sales potential on a global market. In this new world, the immediacy and diversity of visual material is what counts the most. For example, Reuter's video services include raw footage, packaged-ready-to-run-clips, live video feeds, captioned video, user-generated content, archive video, partner video, custom video services, and lives and packages (Thomson Reuters 2017/n.d.).

Reuters presents its services in this manner:

Reuters multimedia news crews are positioned in every corner of the globe, ready to deliver high-quality, up-to-the-second video footage of every major international news event. Our 24/7 coverage produces over 200 stories every day, available raw or ready-to-run, and accompanied with detailed scripts and shot lists. (Reuters 2017/n.d.)

The agency names itself the largest multimedia agency in the world, with 2,500 journalists, 600 photographers, and 20 offices.

According to the Associated Press' home page, more than half of the world's population sees their content every day. The agency's news teams operate in more than a hundred countries and 263 locations worldwide. These teams produce 2,000 news stories per day, and a million new images and 50,000 new videos a year (The Associated Press 2017/n.d.). According to the agency, close to 7,000 multiplatform news organizations regularly disseminate texts and visual material from the AP.

Agence France-Presse reports that it publishes up to 3,000 photos and 200 videos a day, delivered by a network of five hundred award winning photographers and editors 'covering all the global news, including politics, conflicts, general news, fashion and more' (Agence France-Presse 2017/n.d.). The agency keeps up 200 bureaus in 150 countries. Video and mobile content are on their priority list and in the last decade, AFP has experienced a considerable increase in the number of customers. The agency is constantly looking for ways to extend their networking networks, for instance by embracing start-up companies like Citizenside, which specializes in new ways to utilize user generated content or citizen journalism (Nicey 2013).

While the number of imagery providers has multiplied and the boundaries between professionals and amateurs are being wiped out, there is little accessible information as to what extent staff photographers are substituted with stringers. But given the mobile revolution, there is a tendency that increasing amounts of imagery from breaking news events are shot by ordinary citizens and edited and captioned by news agencies. In their online self-presentations news agencies point out that their trustworthiness and credibility is ensured through immediacy, independence and accuracy, of which immediacy and accuracy are their foremost assets. However, the general growth of the wholesale organizations, especially when it comes to visual data gathering and dissemination, makes it pertinent to discuss to what extent these agencies manage to keep up with the promises of non-compromised quality of their journalistic content.

The databases of the agencies are the direct product link between the news agencies and their clients. Given that decontextualized storytelling is spreading rapidly even in the news media (Gynnild 2014), one might think that the news agencies are to blame for any missing factual information of the imagery. However, according to established routines of the agencies, the factual information that follows each image or clip in the database should contain all relevant data, including the full name of the photographer.

The dilemma is that these prescriptions do not ensure that the captions follow the visuals all the way from the databases to dissemination. Visual content, for instance, might be re-contextualized by editors at news agency as well as at newsroom levels, and editors at these levels may not know the original facticity. At a newsroom level, editors might simply leave out or proactively conceal factual information about visual content (*ibid.*).

Thus, the collection, editing and dissemination of visual material by the news agencies typically prompt accountability issues that can hardly be avoided. Picture agencies have evolved into high tech institutions where cutting edge technologies, immediacy, and extensive networking are the most important competitive assets. In the increasingly rapid, global web of visual news wholesalers, ethical standards and services are constantly contested. At the bottom of the immediacy promise lies of course the opportunities for making big money. To maximize profits, picture bureaus are competing in nanoseconds to be first with breaking news imagery.

With this profit hunt in mind, let us go back to the statement by Emmanuel Hoog – ‘if you want to create an event, you first have to create the visuals’. Whether we like it or not, terrorists are experts at setting the world emotionally on fire by staging attacks that prompt immediate action by the media.³

A case-investigation of the immediacy promise

So far, I have discussed the quests for visual immediacy theoretically as well as part of a general journalism-tech-development in society. In this section I will use a specific day, dubbed ‘Bloody Friday’, as a case for closer investigation of the visual news beat pressure under which news agencies operate. The day of June 26, 2015, turned out to be the one day in which ISIS terrorists attacked targets in five different countries almost simultaneously. All in all, several hundred people were killed and injured. The acts of terrorism called for instant visual coverage. The immediacy promise of the news agency networks to their clients was put to new tests.

On this day, visual material from in particular one of the terrorist attacks, in Tunisia, illustrates reoccurring dilemmas of the constantly evolving power of visual communication networks. The attack in Tunisia, where 38 tourists were killed while sunbathing on a beach, was the visually most focused in western media, followed by the decapitation of a person in France. A number of international TV stations and news sites were immediately on the newsbeat. News agencies’ indisputable capacity to hunt breaking news was demonstrated by the armada of professional photographers, cell phone amateurs, and live-cast executives who arrived shortly after the killings, and reported directly from the small town of Sousse.

In less than one hour after the tragic killings, the Norwegian vgtv.no provided live-streaming glimpses from the beach where several dead bodies were lying. The tragic event made it possible to study yet another source of valuable data while the news was livecast from the scene of the tragic events. The vgtv.no is of particular interest as it is one of the largest news sites in Scandinavia and a leading company worldwide specializing in live-streaming.

Before the live-cast the Norwegian studio host, sitting at a safe distance from the event, warned the viewers three times that the glimpses from the streaming website contained disturbing scenes. The host emphasized to viewers who might not want to watch the cruelties to look away or do something else for a couple of minutes. The message was later repeated in red writing on the website along with the released video. In all its cruelty and sadness, the story exemplifies what Manuel Castells proposes: once the visuals from a breaking news event get on the Internet, they are out of the senders’ control and start living a life of their own. And yet, it appears that the diffusion trajectory of visual content is quite predictable from case to case; it follows specific patterns.

The streamed glimpses from the Sousse beach illustrate a major dilemma of real-time coverage of brutal actions such as terrorism: the problem of message-responsibility. Whereas editors of the subscribing news organizations traditionally have controlled the visual selection process, the use of livecast technologies reduces that option drastically. The criteria for acceptable versus non-acceptable footage is at best blurred. With the message being the message and the livecast cameras on, the gatekeeping is left to the end user; you and me.

A search in the database of Scanpix International shows that during the first 24 hours, the news agency published 450 images from the town of Sousse. The pictures were made available for subscribers and on-the-go-buyers to varying costs. The pricing for the imagery depended on each clients' time for purchase and the amount of imagery requested. According to Scanpix editors, the really big money lies in the temporally first visuals that are released from any event.

Before the terrorist attack, systematic searches indicate, the same town in Tunisia hardly existed on any picture in the database of Scanpix International, or any of its close to 30 agent bureaux in other countries. However, 48 hours after the tragic event, 1,450 pictures were available to clients under the keywords 'Sousse Tunisia' in the Scanpix database. And yet, in this particular case, the news agencies, or their stringers, apparently came too late to make the Sousse event highly profitable.

A closer examination of online and offline news coverage indicates that a reoccurring picture from Sousse that was heavily exposed, at least in Scandinavian news media, did not stem from a news or photo agency. In Norway's largest newspaper Verdens Gang (VG) and its website vg.no, this particular picture was repeatedly referred to as 'Private'. In practice, this means that the primary source of the picture was not retrievable; the name of the photographer was apparently undisclosed.

Illustration 1. Verdens Gang (VG), June 27, 2015.



The byline of the main picture says 'Private'. (Published with permission of Verdens Gang.)

The lack of signature suggests that the individual behind the picture was allotted the privilege to be anonymous. It also signals that this scoop picture was not provided by

a news agency, but sold directly to selected news media by an individual. There are issues to be discussed when pictures are bought from secondary sources with anonymous photographers, such as credibility, accuracy, and contextualization of news imagery; each element will be discussed later in the article.

Interestingly, the other leading tabloid in Norway, *Dagbladet*, had picked exactly the same picture. But in this case, the source of the photography was specified as ‘Photo: Chervonec/Instagram’. This information suggests that both newspapers favoured a photo that was first posted in social media. According to the picture editors who were interviewed for this study, this picture, shot by an amateur photographer, appeared more documentary than the 450 news agency pictures from Sousse that were retrievable from the Scanpix database on the same day.

The captured image contained an uncovered, dead body on the beach of Sousse. In the selected pictures, the upper part of the body was blurred; only the legs were visible. In other pictures provided by the many agencies with which Scanpix collaborates, in contrast, dead bodies were covered with blankets.

Illustration 2. *Dagbladet, June 27, 2015.*



In *Dagbladet*, the same picture was identified as ‘Photo: Chervonec/Instagram’. (Published with permission of *Dagbladet*.)

The same day, the news agency AFP posted a number of pictures from a terrorist attack in France. The bureau claimed that the terrorist, who decapitated his boss and put the head on a stake, did a macabre selfie that was sent via WhatsApp to an American phone number before he was killed. It has not been possible to verify these rumours while working on this article; but as a message in its own right, the rumours serve a mission. It supports anecdotal evidence that sees the capturing of people’s minds as a main aim of terrorists.

Interestingly, even though Al-Shabaab militants killed 70 African Union Soldiers in Somalia on the ‘Bloody Friday’ of 2015, the event never went viral. It hardly got a

small text note on major web sites. Qualified checks in the Scanpix database indicate that no images or videos exist from the place of the attack. In the interviews for this article, picture editors at the agency level as well as at the newsroom level repeatedly emphasize, though in other words, what Emmanuel Hoog, CEO of AFP, brought up: the most crucial issue when covering breaking news is the access to compelling visuals.

The observant reader might comment that nothing in the case of the terror attacks on June 26, 2015, is new or special in any way. In our highly competitive, digitized news world, breaking news imagery is handled in this manner. With satellite technologies coupled with the mobile equipment of innumerable professional and amateur suppliers of imagery, live-streaming breaking news is taken for granted. The ultimate goal of 24/7 immediate coverage is clearly articulated by news agencies; it doesn't actually matter who does the shots and clips, as long as the captions guarantee that content verification is taking place in accordance with agency standards. Thus, whereas full time professional photographers are dramatically reduced in numbers, we are witnessing the rise of locally based stringer networks and extensive use of citizen eyewitnesses. These networks serve as suppliers of visual raw material tailored to the global market by nodes in increasingly complex networks of imagery stock breakers.

As always, acts of terrorism stir the emotions of a global society. The increasing visual power of actors such as the ISIS, lies in their capability to twist normally joyful public events into scenes of horror – accompanied by full visual coverage to global audiences. The impact of such spectacular staging of shocking, unexpected events is maximized by the coexistence and interconnection of mainstream media, social media, autonomous Internet sites, and citizens equipped with capturing tools such as mobile phones. Additionally, the growing focus on events-driven reporting is the breeding ground for extended *sousveillance*⁴ of and by citizens through emergent visual technologies.

Prioritizing immediacy to make news breaking imagery accessible for paying clients as soon as possible also raises another concern, namely that of disseminating violence and its consequences. Within very short time spans the imagery is to be controlled for content and caption quality by the agency's desk editors. The material should be varied, possibly cropped but not manipulated in any way, and consideration should be made concerning cultural diversity on the international market before it is made available in protected databases (Ilan 2012, personal interviews with agency editors).

For instance, some national agencies and some local news media in some countries are more apt to prioritize violent imagery than agencies and news media in other countries. In the follow-up interviews conducted for this study, editors emphasized that the editing staff at news agencies is trained to take such differences into consideration before imagery is edited and captioned. Even though Scandinavian news media tend to be rather restrictive regarding the use of brutal imagery, several newsroom photo editors have noticed a general move towards accepting more brutalities in visual storytelling in general. But as explained by a photo editor in a major multimedia house in Norway: 'When you work very quickly with a lot of pictures, you just have to trust that the agencies have done their editing job well.'

Discussion

Global news agencies are undoubtedly proud of the many millions of images and videos indexed in their databases, and the thousands of new items that are added each day. But on what premises is the material accessible, and what visual power do the news agencies actually have? As professional image brokers on a hardening visual market, desk editors at picture agencies increasingly serve the role as market focused gatekeepers of global news imagery. Their successes and failures are measured and quantified daily on the basis of visuals sold to news media on a global scale, and to what prices (Ilan 2012).

This study suggests that throughout the decades, the visual power of news agencies has evolved in stages. First, through the systematic building of a global information reach; second, through network expansion through new technologies, and third, through the further development of immediacy and the multiplicity of services. A striking feature is the expansive investments in adopting and adapting new technologies for visual purposes.

Thus, the study indicates that the visual power of news agencies is influenced by agency infrastructuring – the ways in which visual material of news agency databases is collected and edited, and subsequently sold to users. It also indicates that the visual power of news agencies is impacted by technological infrastructuring – the general diffusion of new technologies with potential to change database content of news agencies. Finally, the visual power of news agencies is impacted by what I term globalized newsroom infrastructuring – the processes of re-editing and re-contextualizing visual content by newsroom clients across continents.

However, the issue of visual agency power is clearly more complex than indicated so far. Normally, we tend to think that the sender of a message is at the construction of its meaning. But in the digitized network society, as proposed by Manuel Castells, this logic is turned upside-down: The basis for network power, networked power and networking power is actually the *removal* of control over message distribution.

In his theorizing, Castells emphasizes the apparently self-evident fact that communication networks are the messengers but *not* the message. Castell claims that what is broadly shared ‘is the culture of sharing messages from multiple senders/receivers’ (Castells 2011:417). As soon as a message is posted on the Internet, its content and use are out of control. The power lies in the complex diffusion processes of a message – at any stage, the message *is* the message. Castells proposes that communication power, as a consequence, is mainly exercised by the ‘construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication enacted in local and global multimedia networks of mass communication’ (ibid:416).

As global wholesalers of visual news material, this holds good for news agencies of all sizes. It also holds good for national and international news media as extensive buyers of agency-transmitted imagery. Thousands of local stringers and staff photographers are ready to go wherever the breaking news directs them, and citizen photographers are mobile eyewitnesses. While news institutions locally and internationally subscribe to services from a number of agencies, they are of course likely to pick and choose visuals that they consider best fit for their news needs. The tendency is to keep looking for visual material in social media ahead of the agency searches. Preparing and editing emotionally appealing visual content for a multitude of international audiences is thus a main aim of the agencies’ desk editors. This nearly a law of nature is explained

by Castells in this way: ‘Publishers and editors tend to index the salience of news and viewpoints according to the perceived importance of a specific issue among the elites and in public opinion’ (Castells 2011:159). With respect to complexities of diffusing cultural diversity, indexing diminishes users’ choice of alternatives when interpreting visual content from international sources.

And yet, in the moment the imagery is out in the digisphere, the control of its use and interpretation are left to others, even for global institutions such as news agencies that have a focus on immediacy through networks in every corner of the globe.

Right there lies the communication power of the news agencies. At this moment in history their visual power is stronger than ever because the previous stages of agency development and the interconnected processes of handling visual materials collapse into building the infrastructures of the globalized newsroom. In conclusion, the power lies, now as in earlier times, in making the visuals accessible and tradable to anyone interested. The big difference is the encompassing technological and psychological global reach. Even if we master the technologies, we know very little about the longterm neurological and social consequences of the competitive visual capturing of people’s minds.

Funding

This article was written within the framework of the ViSmedia project funded by the Research Council of Norway.

Notes

1. Castell further claims that:

[N]etworked communication power lies in its potential for impacting the neurological pathways of human minds. This impacting takes place through agenda-setting, priming, and framing. Agenda-setting refers to the assignment of special relevance to one particular issue or a set of information by the source of the message (e.g. a specific media organization) with the expectation that the audience will correspond with heightened attention to the content and the format of the message (Castells, 2011:157).

Priming implies shaping considerations that people should take into account when making up their minds on an issue. Priming is thus interrelated with agenda-setting. Framing is, furthermore, the process of ‘selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution’. (Entman 2004:5).

2. It should also be noted that a handful of photo agencies slowly emerged from the 1940s onward. Magnum Photos was founded in 1947 by five photographers and is a photographic co-operative of great diversity that is now owned by its photographer-members.
3. Since the Charlie Hebdo terrorism attack in Paris, on January 7, 2015, many parts of the world have experienced a growing number of terrorist attacks. The killing of 12 journalists at the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo marked a time shift in the history of free speech, and in the media coverage of terrorism. In tandem with global live-streaming from the terrorism site in Paris, the slogan ‘I am Charlie’ was shared four million times on Twitter within hours after the killings (Smyrniaios & Ratinaud 2017). Since then, many cities have been turned into scenes of horror by terrorists. We need only mention keywords like killing trucks in Berlin and Nice, airport bombs in Istanbul and Brussels, and concerts in Paris and Manchester.
4. *Sousveillance* refers to being observed, or observing others, from below, and stands in contrast to surveillance, which means to observe from above (Mikael 2015).

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