

Abstract for the Helsinki PhotoMedia conference 2024

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The future of visual journalism in Finland, Russia, and Sweden. Working with photographs as visual truths

At the time we wrote our research plan in the Spring 2022, photographs and video footage from the Ukrainian city of Bucha circulated in the international news media and on social media platforms. In the images we could see dead civilians in the streets, many of them with their hands tied behind their back. An international anger over these photographs clearly portraying war crimes was countered by the Russian leaders with claims of fraud and fabrication. This underlines how the images themselves can support many kinds of truth claims and cannot prove anything without accurate contextualisation and credible interpretation.

In this project, we will explore the relation between photography and realism in the contemporary media landscape and in the work of news media professionals. We will examine this thematic in three national contexts: Sweden, Finland and Russia (Russian photojournalists in exile). Motivation behind the study is, as we argue, that there is a general cultural mistrust in photography that has been furthered since the digitalization and fuelled by the social media, the continuous information wars and new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) (e.g. Cmiel & Durham Peters 2020). Since the contemporary societies and media landscape is very different when compared to, for example, 20–30 years ago, photojournalism professionals need to reposition themselves in relation to the changed media environment.

Theoretically, the project builds on the work of journalism and communication scholars such as Lilie Chouliaraki, John Durham Peters, Thomas Hanitzsch and many others in addition to science historians such as Peter Galison and Lorraine Daston and anthropologist Zeynep Gürsel. With the help of the work of these scholars, we aim to build a solid picture of the referentiality of photographs in the history and in the current media environment. We will then examine this historical continuum in relation to our empirical findings.

We will gather our empirical material by conducting participant observations and interviews among photojournalism professionals. In Finland and Sweden, we will concentrate on the so-called elite-oriented newspapers and evening press (tabloids) that use different platforms, including social media, to reach out to their users. From Russia we are planning to focus on news media organisations in exile and the photojournalists working for such media organisations.

The participant observations will be conducted at each selected site to map out activities, settings, and social contexts (preferably by taking part in staff meetings whenever possible). Then, the interviews with visual professionals at different news organisations will be planned and conducted with the help of knowledge gained from field observations. In addition, visual elicitation will be used for the interviews. This allows informants to show and discuss the images they have worked with themselves, or other visual projects within or outside the newsroom that they find interesting or problematic.

While our focus is on photojournalism professionals and photographs, we realise that they are inseparable from other visuals, texts, and also visual design. We approach visual producers as interpretative communities (Mayer et al. 2009). The aim of our project is to understand how visual professionals at news organisations classify, make, and present photographs as part of the broader context of visual journalism to make truth claims about the world. The focus on visual professionals' interpretations of visual truth and the degree of reflexivity in finding ways of presenting visuals is an underdeveloped area in studies about media. Studying the (reflective) practices of the visual professionals in legacy media is important, because they play a key role in shaping our understandings of the world (cf. Carlsson 2006), i.e. worldmaking (Gürsel 2016). We aim to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the negotiated epistemological beliefs of visual professionals in different types of photographs and what consequences do these beliefs have for the professionals' understanding of visual truths?
- 2) How does today's visual culture influence journalistic ideals and the interpretive repertoires around photographic image-making?
- 3) How can the technological and cultural context be related to continuity and change in how photographs are presented as trustworthy to users?
- 4) What are the central similarities and differences between visual journalism in the current media environments of Finland, Russia and Sweden?

This project has received funding for the years 2023–2025, but we are still in a very early stage of the research. We are just starting to gather empirical material and we are grateful for any ideas that would help to further the project. We would especially value ideas for the data gathering as well as ideas in thinking about the research setting between the three countries where the media environments differ drastically from each other.

References

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