

Submission to the Helsinki Photomedia 2024 conference, “Contact of models”

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Subtheme: 3. Images and representations

Title: Accidental and intentional narrative logics in visual news from Ukraine

Abstract

This project focuses on the intersection between global image flows and local (national) editorial processes, explored through the lens of the war in Ukraine. The aim is to contribute knowledge about the boundary work of journalism and how editorial practices may inform current theoretical debates about photography in the digital age. Theoretically, we examine these global and local visual narratives through critical perspectives on news flows and the status of the image. Traditional concepts of photographic performativity and iconicity processes, as well as authorship and mass production, intersect and collide with recent theoretical work on digital visual reproduction, marked by “series, repetitions, sequences, rapid volleys” (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013) and concepts of flows (Henning, 2018). Today, digital images exist simultaneously in different places, and this has been understood to have significant theoretical bearings on our understanding of photographs as representation and on exploratory practices such as close reading. Our approach does not subscribe to a sharp theoretical distinction between analogue and digital photography. Following Henning, we see them as bringing together “questions of consciousness, attention and perception with technical structures that are built in, hardwired or designed into different media.”

The proposed Helsinki Photomedia presentation draws empirically from our study of newsroom practices at Norwegian and Swedish national news outlets covering Ukraine after the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. Five media houses in each country were selected, including newspapers and broadcast media. Using a mixed-method approach, we conducted bi-modal qualitative analyses of visually driven stories and visual agency feeds, and conducted newsroom interviews with visual editors and other relevant functions at the news outlets. Our proposed presentation draws from the visual and bi-modal analyses of published visuals with the aim of identifying storytelling modes and representations.

Key findings include two distinct narrative logics identified in the visual materials. One logic is theoretically grounded in theories of flow, and attempts to conceptualize photography in new ways (e.g. Lister, 2013; Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013; Henning, 2018). The other logic is theoretically grounded in photo-theoretical classics (such as Benjamin, 2003; Barthes, 1977; Flusser, 2011). We label these narratives “accidental” and “intentional” coverage, based on the following characteristics: *Accidental coverage* refers to how visual media professionals, mostly on the home desks, operate image flows provided by international news agencies. Accidental coverage occurs when news professionals search the news agencies’ image feeds to select photographs that can illustrate or document news stories, in particular breaking news. The term “accidental” is chosen because the influx of images to choose from is vast, and there is usually limited time for comparisons and deliberations. The selection is dependent upon what the feed can offer when the search is being conducted, and this temporal dimension makes the selection somewhat arbitrary. The indexicality, understood as the bi-modal link between text and image, is often weakened because of the conceptual (symbolic) nature of illustrative images. *Intentional coverage* refers to visual stories initiated by a local (national) media house, or their representatives in the field. Intentional coverage is close to what traditionally has been conceptualized as photojournalism, or visually driven news narratives with an identifiable “author.” Photojournalistic storytelling implies a strong text/image connection that secures the reliability of the photographic indexical value. Premediated stories also speak to the relations between the media house and its audiences.

Our project addresses the Helsinki Photomedia 2024 conference theme, “Contact of models,” through a focus on boundaries, tensions and intersections between different models for visual narratives: one driven by algorithms and the other by photojournalistic storytelling.

Keywords: photojournalism, Ukraine, war photography, visual narratives, boundary work

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