

Visual Gatekeeping – Selection of News Photographs at a Flemish Newspaper

A Qualitative Inquiry into the Photo News Desk

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Abstract

As ethnographic studies of the visual gatekeeping process at newsrooms are scarce and the increasingly digitised news era demands for reconsideration, this article focuses on the results of a qualitative study at the photo news desk of a Flemish newspaper in Belgium. Our aim has been to provide an update and a broadening of previous studies on visual gatekeeping processes, and the findings are based on observations, in-depth interviews and reconstructions of the visual selection process. Our results show that routine and organisational influences as the ‘newsroom culture’ and the ‘rhythm’ of the newspaper outweigh individual preferences of photo editors. In-house photographers are systematically preferred to wire photographs. The information value of photos prevails, but aesthetics and good taste add another layer of deliberation. In addition, layout policies explicitly steer photo editors in their decision-making process.

Keywords: visual gatekeeping, news values, news photos, news ethnography, photo editors

Introduction

Due to sociocultural and technological changes in the last twenty-five years, visuals in newspapers have become increasingly important. As a result, the importance of visual journalism research has also increased. Garcia and Stark (1991) were among the first to use eye-tracking technology to study newspaper reading behaviour. They identified pictures and graphics as the main entry points to stories and found that the content, size, placement and colour of photos draw readers into pages. Other researchers have studied content of visuals in combination with the effect on the audience, for example the impact of political candidate photographs on voting attitudes (Barrett & Barrington 2005) or the effectiveness of visual framing on several domains (for an overview see Fahmy & Neumann 2012).

As visuals have become an important part of the news product, it has become equally important ‘to uncover the routines which help to create the visual news’ (Lowrey 1999:10). We aim to contribute to that goal by scrutinising decisions taken during the news picture selection process in the digitised newsroom: Which pictures are included

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or rejected, and why? What are the criteria visual gatekeepers base their decisions on? What levels of influence do play a role?

Though gatekeeping theory has a rich tradition, only a few gatekeeping studies focus on images. Moreover, as new technologies and ideologies within the news industry are expected to change the gatekeeping process (Bro & Wallberg 2015), it is important to continue research on (visual) gatekeeping. We proceed as follows: First, we give an overview of gatekeeping theory in general and visual gatekeeping in particular. In doing this, we focus on news values as well as on levels of influence. Next, we set out the purpose of our study as an update and widening (outside USA) of existing studies. The explanation of the purpose is followed by the methodology and findings of our study. Findings are discussed in light of the literature in the discussion section and summarised in the conclusion.

Gatekeeping theory

Gatekeeping theory (Lewin 1947) was first applied to newspaper newsrooms by White (1950) and the theory has given us insight into a series of decision points where multiple news items are stopped at ‘gates’ while a few others make their way to publication. Decisions are based on news values and affected by a myriad of individual, organisational and extra-media influences.

News values

Galtung and Ruge (1965), in their seminal study on foreign news items in Norwegian newspapers, composed a list of twelve news values: threshold, frequency, negativity, unexpectedness, unambiguity, personalisation, meaningfulness, reference to elite nations and elite persons, consonance, continuity, and composition. The existence, accumulation and concentration of news values increased the probability that a certain event would be selected. The taxonomy was not a normative list of criteria of what news ought to be nor a working list for journalists, but rather an analytical tool for shedding light on the intrinsic elements that made an event turn into a news event.

Harcup and O’Neill (2001) reclassified the news values into a new list that also included celebrities, entertainment, good news, and newspaper agenda. More recently, Harcup and O’Neill (2016) also took social media into account and added exclusivity, conflict, drama, audiovisuals and shareability, while at the same time acknowledging that ‘no taxonomy can ever explain everything’.

Journalistic practice differs from theory as journalists themselves testify to ‘a seemingly self-evident and self-explaining sense of newsworthiness, the journalistic gut feeling’ (Schultz 2007:190). Schultz argued that the ‘gut feeling’ entails both explicit news values such as timeliness, relevance, identification, conflict and sensation, as well as implicit, unspoken news values, for example exclusivity.

Levels of influence in news selection

Shoemaker and Reese (1991, cf. 2014) identified five levels of influence on news processing as represented in a model of concentric circles: 1) the individual level of experiences, attitudes and values in the inner circle of the model, 2) the professional

routines (among them the reliance on news values, but also routine sources and working practices), 3) an organisational level including ownership and structure of the enterprise, 4) social institutions such as advertisers and interest groups and, finally, 5) the outer circle of the social system including ideological, cultural, political and economic factors.

Shoemaker and Reese emphasized foremost the forces beyond the individual's control. Voakes (1997), who focused on the ethical decisions of journalists, likewise found that small groups, organisational, and extra-media factors all weigh more than individual influence.

Visual gatekeeping

Galtung and Ruge (1965) made no reference to visual elements in the news. Similarly, Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2016) did not focus on visuals, although they recognised 'picture opportunities' as a news category in itself (2001:274) and included audiovisuals in their latest version of news values (2016).

In contrast to the above studies, Bednarek and Caple (2012) explicitly took images into account in their discursive perspective on news values. They added the value of aesthetics to the classical news values, described as 'the aesthetically pleasing aspects of an event or issue' (Caple & Bednarek 2016:439) or the ways in which images are balanced through their compositional configurations, including colour, movement and clarity (Bednarek & Caple 2012). The news values of images are constructed mainly through *what* is represented in the image and to a lesser extent through *how* the image is technically realised: shutter speed, aperture, focal length, lens, and angle (Caple & Bednarek 2016).

In her case study at The Philadelphia Inquirer, Seelig (2005) found that photo editors looked for both traditional news values, especially personalisation, elite status and proximity, as well as aesthetic values such as the overall composition of the image, colour, movement, clarity. Though news editors and photo editors shared an underlying professional philosophy, photo editors, or 'the visual elite', weighed the aesthetic value more than news editors did.

Nilsson and Wadbring (2015), in turn, focused on the use of amateur images in the daily news flow of print and online newspapers, which brings new challenges to newsrooms with respect to gatekeeping and selection. They observed only a minor use of amateur photographs due to high professional standards that are not met by such images.

Levels of influence in news photo selection

Bissell (2000a) kept close to the classic study by White (1950), both in method (observation) and focus (individual gatekeepers). Bissell stressed the individualistic decisions photo editors make on the basis of personal biases: 'Each decision made by a gatekeeper represented one individual's perspective of reality' (Bissell 2000a:11). In line with this, Bissell found that many decisions seemed to be based on race, gender, age, or political orientation. It was only in her second article (2000b) that Bissell also explicitly addressed routines and organisational influences.

Peterson and Spratt (2005) also focused on the individual level, demonstrating how picture editors are influenced by emotion and traumatic personal experience in their

decision-making. They are 'professionals for whom emotion plays a role' (Peterson & Spratt 2005:8).

Human interest and human emotion appeared as strong selection criteria in the photo coverage of Hurricane Katrina (Fahmy, Kelly & Kim 2007). Emotion, in this study, is not situated at an individual level but considered a media routine, part of the 'photo editors' professional values, traditions, and practices' (Fahmy, Kelly & Kim 2007:558). Deference to audience interests is another media routine, as found by Wanta and Roark (1992-1993), who conducted a content analysis of wire photos in newspapers. They concluded that selection patterns reflected the society newspapers serve (routine level) as well as a specific newspaper's tradition (organisational level).

Schwalbe et al. (2015) were interested in the perceptions rather than the practices of visual gatekeepers, both photographers and photo editors. In their perceptions, the gatekeepers' own judgement and values – thus, the individual level – played the most important role in choosing newsworthy visuals. After factors at the individual level followed work routines such as work habits, responses to deadlines, codes of ethics, newsroom culture, and technical factors such as the source of the visual, quality, immediacy and availability. Outside factors such as the interests of the media played, in their view, a lesser role.

Ethics in news photo selection

Harris (1991) pointed to the digital manipulation problem, which results from software such as Photoshop, which essentially endangers truthfulness and leads to deception or, in his words, 'gives rise to a "slippery slope" ethical decision making' (Harris 1991:164). The most direct way to attempt to correct this situation, according to Harris, is through peer pressure, protocols and the 'how-to's' of ethics rather than codes (Harris 1991:169).

With regard to The Philadelphia Inquirer, Seelig (2006) found that no digital manipulation was tolerated with regard to hard news. However, feature photos could be composed before the camera and slightly manipulated. Overall, editorial policy was characterised by reticence: 'a news photo is to remain within the boundaries and conventions of legitimate news' (Seelig 2006:18). Standard practice encompassed dodging, burning, cropping, balancing of colour, contrast adjustments, and correcting technical defects in a photo such as dust spots.

Several studies focus on singular cases of war, conflicts, violence and the selection or rejection of shocking images (e.g., Fahmy 2005, Fahmy, Kelly & Kim 2007, Kratzer & Kratzer 2003, O'Brien 1993). According to these studies, newspapers do not intentionally seek shocking pictures, but only a minority chooses not to use them at all. Although final decisions concerning publication diverged a lot throughout the studies, all decision takers were aware of ethical implications. Overall, organisations' codes of ethics were perceived to be less important in the gatekeeping process than personal ethics, political sensitivity and situational context. The studies pointed to such traditional practices as 'the breakfast test' – not disturbing people over breakfast – or mechanisms explained by Potter and Smith (2000) such as the observation that a close-up image of a violent act is more graphic than a long shot of the same act, or that the degree of physical alteration of the victim (e.g. lying in a pool of blood, the eyes wide open instead of shut) matters in the visual selection decision.

Aim of the study

Though gatekeeping theory has a rich tradition, only a few gatekeeping studies focus on images. Even fewer studies make use of ethnographic observation research methods. The notable studies of Bissell (2000a, 2000b) and Seelig (2005, 2006) focus on identifying the decision makers (gates), and describing the process of decision making (gatekeeping). Their observations, however, date back to 1997 (Bissell 2000a, 2000b) and late 1999/early 2000 (Seelig 2005, 2006) and are based on case studies of a single newspaper (Bissell 2000b, Seelig 2005, 2006) or two newspapers (Bissell 2000a) located in the USA.

There is an urgent need for more recent studies reevaluating news photo selection criteria within an increasingly digitised media environment, on the one hand, and case studies located in media systems outside the USA, on the other.

Here we present a 2014-2015 case study of a newspaper in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Hallin and Mancini (2004) labelled Belgium a democratic corporatist country, similar to the Nordic countries but different from the liberal USA. In democratic corporatist countries, newspapers have a long and strong tradition, journalistic professionalism is high and state intervention is mildly accepted. Of all the democratic corporatist countries, however, Belgium is closest to the polarised pluralist model (ibid:169). In polarised pluralist countries, state intervention is higher but professionalism is lower.

Our research questions focus on visual news decision criteria and levels of influence at work at the photo news desk:

1. Which criteria are decisive in selecting news pictures?
2. What levels of influence play a role in photo editors' decision making?

Data and method

A qualitative study incorporating observation and in-depth interviewing was carried out between December 2014 and the end of February 2015 at the photo news desk of a Flemish newspaper with a circulation of circa 95,000 copies. Responsibility for the media in Belgium lies with the regions and not with the federal state. The newspaper studied is located in the region of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The news desk staff operates in three daily shifts: morning, day time, and evening. The newspaper is also published online but print dominates above online with 86,350 sold copies in print against 14,185 sold online copies (Centrum voor Informatie over de Media 2015). Most online articles are edited versions of the print edition. The photo news desk works primarily for the print edition; the online department has no separate photo desk.

Two methodological approaches – qualitative in-depth interviews and observations – were combined. Seven face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted: five photo editors – men and women, including the editor in chief – were interviewed in addition to one general news manager and the newspaper's ombudsman. Interviews were conducted between 16 December 2014 and 26 March 2015. Each interview contained questions regarding the staff's background and working experience as well as open-ended questions dealing with selection criteria and perceived influences on their work.

In addition, we made retroactive reconstructions of the news photo selection process on two days in February 2015 (25 and 26 February, a Wednesday and a Thursday) by discussing the actual news product, i.e. the print version of the newspaper, the day after

production with three photo journalists. Thus, ‘comments, memory and discussion in the course of a semi-structured interview’ (Banks 2007:65) were invoked. As Gillárová et al. (2014:608) explain, compared to the traditional in-depth interview, ‘the research participant becomes [in these conversations] the narrator who describes her/his photos’ and consequently is more in control and probably more self-confident than in the traditional interview setting.

Besides in depth-interviews, we collected data through observations of the newsroom during February 2015. Photo editors were observed during the selection and editing of news photos and in interaction with other journalism professionals such as other photo editors, photographers who were given assignments, and general news editors. On two occasions (3 February and 26 February, 2015) editorial meetings were included, this in order to look for implicit and explicit utterances of news values and selection criteria.

The multiple qualitative techniques used in this study make it possible to move from interpretations of what a researcher can observe towards the viewpoint of the photo editors as expressed in their own words. The retroactive reconstruction interviews offer extra clarifying information on specific and concrete cases of photo selection or rejection.

Data were gathered with the permission of the editor in chief and all observed and interviewed staff of the newspaper. Field notes were written out during free moments at location and every evening after observation days. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and open coded, followed by axial or second cycle coding and selective coding. Firstly, we immersed ourselves in the data. Secondly, texts were cut up into meaningful segments. Descriptive labels were assigned to capture the meaning of each segment and later higher order labels were also attributed. This process was repeated several times until a general code scheme was derived.

Results

We distinguished five steps in the visual gatekeeping process: 1) the selection of news by news editors, 2) the search for visuals matching the news by photo editors, 3) the selection of visuals by photo editors based on criteria of ‘what’ is pictured, ‘how’ it is pictured and eventually ‘why’ it is relevant, 4) consultation between photo editors, news editors and layout, 5) final decision making either in consensus or by hierarchical decision. First the process (steps 1, 2, 4 and 5) will be discussed, followed by the criteria (step 3).

The visual decision-making process

As the news editors decide which topics the newspaper will cover, the first step in the process is taken before the photo editors enter the scene, in this way the photo editors are limited to ‘illustrating’ the chosen news. They have three main sources to do so: firstly, photo editors give assignments to a pool of about 15 freelance photographers; secondly, they select visuals supplied by agencies as Belga, Photo News, Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France Presse and The European Pressphoto Agency; and thirdly, they search archives for suitable photo material. One editor described it as matching supply (wire photo’s, archives, photos by photographers) to demand (news topics).

Photo editors narrow down the possibilities to only a few but actual decision-making tends to be a collaborative process. Interviewees referred to lengthy discussions with

other staff members, including other photo editors, news editors, page designers and the art director. Most discussion takes place between photo and news editors and not within the group of photo editors. A frequent discussion topic occurs when a news editor opts for a wire photograph while the photo desk has sent a photographer on location. In these cases, the photo desk always prefers its ‘own’ photographer’s picture.

In general, photo selection decisions on the front page and pages two and three tend to be made in consultation with the news editors, while picture issues on the pages further back are either decided on by photo editors alone or in consultation with layout professionals. Decisions are made in consensus – ‘If we really can’t work it out, we can push it through but we try to avoid the conflict model because it’s not pleasant’ (photo editor, male) – or by the highest in rank: ‘If we really do not agree, I say: “Ask the editor in chief” and he decides’ (photo editor, female). When violent and shocking images are on the table, no editor decides alone. Instead, lengthy discussions are held to debate about whether the images are fit to print. The debates are aimed to unite the staff behind this kind of delicate decisions. Finally, the editor in chief decides.

Without using the word ‘socialisation’, our interviewees referred to a certain type of learning process:

There are no strict guidelines or prohibitions but when you are working here for a while, you feel the newsroom culture, what is allowed or not, and what has been published a lot before. (Photo editor, female)

All respondents referred to an unwritten newsroom policy, not least the photo editor in chief: ‘There are six people working for me. In fact, you try to make all these people look with your eyes because you want to have photos in the newspaper that you yourself would choose.’

Early in their careers, new photo editors start working on less risky pages such as the Culture or Economy sections. These pages are sent to the printing department by 6 p.m. and still have a lot of other ‘gates’ – people and checks – to pass. More risky pages – those whose pictures are selected closer to the deadline and where there is less control afterwards – are the responsibility of more experienced editors. Evidently, the front page is the one you only ‘earn’ after many years of hard work and experience. In those years, a photo editor selects less risky photos, learns the job and makes the norms and values of the newspapers his or her own.

Implicit photo selection criteria

It is not an easy task for the editors to describe selection criteria explicitly. Choosing a picture is partly driven by emotion: ‘When I look at photos, at least one thing has to happen: either in my head, in my heart, or in my belly’, one editor claimed. When words are chosen to name the self-evident, ‘truthfulness’ is the first word that came to the mind of the photo editor in chief since ‘the photographer is a transmitter of reality’. The information value of the photo prevails: ‘A photo has to fit in with what the newspaper stands for and that is, above all, giving information. Information above aesthetics.’

Another photo editor referred to the ‘illustration value’ of photos. This does not mean that pictures have to be ‘neutral’: a strong image is ‘an image that speaks for itself and reverberates for a long time’. A good image tells a story and gives news facts a face.

Truthfulness not only applies to contents (what is pictured) but also to technical aspects (how it is pictured). Truthfulness implies natural and spontaneous photographs. Ideally, one does not notice the hand of the photographer in the photograph, according to the editors. They prefer images that look as if they have been cut out of reality, are full of energy, and dynamic. For that reason, photos of people are always preferred to landscapes or buildings. Truthfulness also implies that digital manipulation with the use of Photoshop is not acceptable when it leads to a false representation of factual events. It is only considered acceptable to enhance the quality of the picture, for example in lightning conditions. Re-using images in different contexts, e.g. an archive photo of children in a school canteen in a new article on child poverty, is disapproved of.

According to the editors, images need to be correct, and preferably dynamic, but also 'serene' and 'detached'. Other words that were used to describe the newspaper's house style are 'responsible' and 'quiet'. The aloof attitude manifests itself in, for example, long shots instead of close-up images of a violent act or car accident. Interviewees also referred to the same aspect as a matter of 'good taste'. The newspaper wants to dissociate itself consciously from tabloids and sensational press by a serene style – 'You have to avoid shocking only to shock', one of the interviewees said. In judging shocking images, the notion of 'relevance' appears as an additional 'why' component next to the 'what' (contents) and 'how' (camera technique and aesthetics). Explicit photos of decapitations by the Islamic State, for example, were not deemed relevant to understanding the news story and therefore not published.

We also asked the photo editors about the impact of the ethical code for journalists on their selection decisions. The current code in Flanders was formulated by the Council for Journalism in 2010 (and updated in 2012, 2013, and 2015) and deals with four domains: truthful information, independent reporting, fair play and respect for privacy and human dignity. Next to textual information, 'images' are explicitly referred to in the code as falling under the demand of truthfulness: substantive manipulation of images is not acceptable or has to be communicated to the audience; archive photos need to be recognisable as such (Raad voor de Journalistiek 2015:Article 3). Additional restrictions rest, for example, on photos of minors who need protection from journalists (ibid:Article 15).

Journalists and editors in our study were aware of the ethical code but did not actively or consciously fall back on it. They take it for granted and consider its principles intrinsically interwoven with the profession of journalism:

It's something like doctors washing their hands after every visit. I think it has become an automatism so you don't wonder every time: oh yes, that's the code.
(Photo editor, female)

When in doubt about the suitability of a specific image – for example, with regard to the protection of the right of privacy of people depicted in the photograph – editors told they tend to opt for another picture in order to avoid problems. The tendency to avoid problems supports the reserved and cautious newsroom policy and can also be singled out as a decisive factor:

I would not choose a certain picture (...) if I know there is a great chance we might get into problems with it. And if I know there are other pictures available, why

would I take the risk? It's not that we want to protect those people but we don't want problems. (Photo editor, female)

The newspaper has an ombudsman, who in turn actively reverts to the code in his columns and advice. The ombudsman does not receive many complaints about photo selection in the newspaper but the majority of them deal with privacy or identifiability of people and shocking images raising questions about relevance. Notwithstanding the cautiousness of the staff, these topics are not without controversy among the readership of the newspaper.

Contextual photo selection criteria

Besides the content of a photograph (with criteria such as truthfulness, information value and correctness, as well as serenity and distance) and technical aspects (with criteria such as quality of the image and spontaneity), 'contextual' aspects also play a vital role in the selection and rejection process. By 'contextual' we mean external to the photo itself but dealing with the immediate newspaper context. Editors pointed at trivial factors such as 'avoiding the colour red' due to the low quality of paper print, at economic/amicable factors such as the preference for 'house photographers' above wire photographs, and at rather decisive elements concerning pages' layout, display issues and composition:

If there are already two 'landscape' orientated pictures on the pages before, you need to look for a 'portrait' orientated picture, otherwise there seems to be a fixed pattern. (Photo editor, male)

Sometimes we make the choice to insert several smaller pictures instead of one larger photo because there are already quite a few pages with only one bigger photograph. Then we say it's time for a collage. (Photo editor, male)

Consequently, decisions are not only made on the basis of the qualities of one picture alone, but in accordance with what comes before and after a picture or a page. The newspaper as a whole strives for an alternation between small and large photographs, between different orientations (portrait and landscape) and contents (people, buildings, landscapes etc.). The 'rhythm' of the newspaper appears as one of the leading concerns in making visual selections: 'A good newspaper issue has a bit of everything' (photo editor in chief).

Even advertisements play a role in the layout of pages and consequently in the choice of news photos, with regard to form, shape and contents: next to a garish advertisement, the photo editors opted for a quiet and serene photo. In short, final visual selection decisions were always taken with an eye to layout.

Discussion

Visual gatekeeping takes place at different stages with multiple gatekeepers at every gate. Photographers who receive their assignments from the photo desk reduce their shots to just a few and wire agencies make a selection to send out to clients such as newspaper organisations. In this study, we focused on selection by photo editors, whose main task consists of making the final daily selection of photos to illustrate the news.

‘Deciding what’s news’ is the competence of the general news desk while the photo desk illustrates the news. Traditional news values, therefore, do not appear as strong decisive elements in selecting or rejecting photographs. Nevertheless, photo editors still have to weigh one picture against another. They do not consider it an easy task to name their criteria but are inclined to consider their choices as autonomous, intuitive and even emotional. This observation reminds us of the ‘journalistic gut feeling’, described by Schultz (2007:190) as self-evident and self-explanatory. In interviews, editors tend to stress their autonomy in the job (cf. Schwalbe, Silcock & Candello 2015) but our observations and deeper conversations put this autonomy into perspective and point to the dominance of organisational influences as the ‘newsroom culture’, ‘house style’, the ‘rhythm’ of the newspaper and ‘peer pressure’ over individual preferences.

The findings support Schein’s (1990) ideas regarding ‘organisation culture’ including a behavioural (e.g. professional practices), a cognitive (e.g. guiding philosophy) and an emotional (e.g. values, belonging) component. Culture is explicitly described by Schein (1990:111) as ‘learning’, that is ‘what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems’ through ‘the socialisation of new members entering the group’ (Schein 1990:115).

The socialisation thesis by which new people are socialised into the routines of the newsroom goes back to Breed (1955) but was also found in the context of visual gatekeepers by Bissell (2000a). In the words of Breed (1955:328) the learning of a policy is ‘a process by which the recruit discovers and internalises the rights and obligations of his status and its norms and values. He learns to anticipate what is expected of him so as to win rewards and avoid punishments’.

The description of the three stages (Breed 1955:332) through which the staffer progresses – from the cub stage in the first few months or years in which the new employee learns techniques and policy, over the ‘wiring-in’ stage, wherein newsroom values are assimilated, to the ‘star’ or ‘veteran’ stage, in which the staffer typically defines itself as a full, responsible member of the group – links up seamlessly with the process described by the photo editors in our research: starting with non-risky pages early in the career to get acquainted with the job and its criteria and then moving on to front page selection and taking full responsibility as a veteran for the visual outlook of the newspaper.

The photo editors refer to lengthy peer discussions but in the end the highest in rank decides. This observation corresponds with earlier findings by Harris (1991) and Seelig (2005). Harris (1991:170) referred to the ‘constant threat of “editorial override” by editors higher up in the chain of command’. The house style (or ‘culture’) of the examined newspaper is that of a broadsheet newspaper dissociated from sensationalism and obtrusiveness. This culture, with its criteria of truthfulness and serenity, is a basic selection criterion. Wanta and Roark (1992-1993) came to a similar conclusion based on a content analysis of wire photos in newspapers.

In line with its reputation as an informative newspaper, news photos are selected first of all for their content and can thus be called ‘content-driven’. At the same time, the focus on content is the subject of possible disagreement between photo editors on the one hand and news editors on the other. Seelig (2005) made a similar observation: while news editors tend to choose ‘purely’ content-driven photos that clearly depict the events captured even when the photos are visually uninteresting, photo editors try to combine news value with aesthetic value. According to our results, however, visual

gatekeepers did not go so far as to put aesthetics above information. Images that were ‘well-composed and aesthetically pleasing’ were preferred *if* they matched the news in the first place. Our findings do not confirm those of Bissell (2000a:11) who found that ‘in many cases, selection was made according to what was appealing rather than on how well the photograph told the story’ but do confirm Caple & Bednarek (2016) in the observation that content of images is more decisive than technical realisation.

Visual gatekeepers at the newspaper under study prefer balanced, tasteful images and avoid sensation and ‘shock simply to shock’. That manifested itself, for example, in opting for long shots of a violent act instead of close-up images which are considered more intrusive (Potter & Smith 2000). The photo editors did not refer so much to the sensitivity of the readers (as Bissell 2000a did) but to a policy of ‘good taste’, which supports the observation of O’Brien (1993:72) that ‘issues of taste may often hinge more on aesthetics than ethics’.

Ethical considerations do not seem to play a paramount role. The ethical code was rarely explicitly referred to, although its main principles seem to be assimilated by journalists and editors. If high-impact cases were on the table, lengthy discussions were held with both colleague photo editors and news editors. As Voakes (1998) found a strong correlation between newsroom discussion and ethical awareness, the culture of discussion and consultation in itself is a good instrument to ensure ethical considerations play their part. The appointment by the newspaper of an ombudsperson is another. The ombudsman, in turn, systematically and directly refers to the code in response to readers’ questions or on the occasion of events.

The photo desk is not an isolated island on the news floor. Editors make their choices in consultation not only with news editors but also with the art director and layout department. This aspect of decision making has enjoyed far less attention in the literature. The fact that house photographers are systematically preferred to wire photographs was also found by Bissell (2000b) who concluded that, in this respect, the publisher dictates photographic content – as they pay to have photographers, they need return on investment. Other elements have remained underexposed in the literature. These elements may appear trivial – placement and size issues – but are at the same time crucial and finally decisive. The final product, the published issue, is a product with a certain rhythm and a variation between contents and formats. This total product includes advertisements and, as they have been laid down in advance, they can impact on later visual choices with regard to news, adding another layer to the chain of visual gatekeeping.

Conclusion

We observed and interviewed photo editors of a newspaper in Flanders in order to get two questions answered: Which criteria are decisive in selecting news pictures? And what levels of influence play a role in the decision-making process of news photographs?

Selection criteria

The photo desk’s main task is to illustrate the news with visualisations, not to search for visual news. Consequently, the most decisive criterion is a photo’s capacity to tell the

news and to give essential or additional information about the news event. Information value and truthfulness prevail over aesthetics but are preferably combined with aesthetic values. Photo editors clearly give more weight to the aesthetic and more generally to the 'appealing' character of a picture than news editors do but they try to come to a decision in consensus or at least in consultation with one another.

Aesthetics has to do with artistic value and professional quality (technical aspects such as composition, colour and lighting) but also with good taste. The newspaper in this study has the status of a broadsheet newspaper and wants to live up to that expectation. It dissociates itself from sensation, which is considered a characteristic of popular newspapers. In the words of its editors, it chooses distance, serenity and balance instead. Starting editors internalise these values through experience, observations of other staff and peer discussions or, in other words, through socialisation.

Photo editors do not consider a series of single photographs only but they consider the whole of the visual newspaper, its complete visual composition. Photos are weighed one against another in the light of the bigger picture. Placement issues and possible (dis)harmonies with surrounding pictures, advertisements, and layout elements may appear as trivial but are nonetheless decisive criteria for selection and rejection. A newspaper is a total product and balance therefore is not only a quality on the level of one single picture but also a quality on the level of every single page and of the newspaper as a whole.

Levels of influence

Individual editors tend to overrate the individual decision level (with its individual preferences, emotions and tastes); both conversations and observations point to the importance of the routine and organisational levels. Routines in work are unavoidable and indispensable in order to meet deadlines. Some routines or standardised practices are prompted by sources: the newspaper's own, local photographers are systematically preferred to wire-service photographs. Other routines are inspired by the audience: the newspaper is seen as a quality newspaper which has to live up to that expectation to inform about events rather than entertaining the public.

Peer discussions are very much part of the routine and can also be considered part of the learning process. The more controversial the issue (e.g. violent or shocking images, involvement of minors) and the greater the ethical implications (e.g. invasion of privacy), the more important the discussions become, resulting in shared decision making instead of individual choices. Moreover, the more controversial the issue, the more the hierarchy in the newsroom comes to the fore: in delicate cases, editors in chief take their responsibility in making difficult and final decisions. The professional environment wherein photo editors work is clearly broader than only the photo desk or even the newsroom as a whole. Furthermore, extra-editorial influences, such as advertisements and layout policies, define the framework within which decisions are made.

Influence of digitization

According to our findings, increased digitization of the production process has not fundamentally changed the gatekeeping process since the 1990s or 2000s: it essentially

remains an interplay of criteria and influences at divergent levels. Some findings, however, can be considered in light of the digitization processes.

Increased possibilities to manipulate news pictures (e.g. Photoshop) led, at the same time, to increased awareness of the risks involved and to a clear and shared rejection of manipulation. This rejection is also registered in the ethical code. Similarly, as the re-use of archive photos became easier in a digitised environment, the risks of re-use became recognised by editors and registered in the ethical code as well.

In our study, at last, contextual factors such as the newspaper layout and format appeared as strong decisive elements, which might be, at least partially, due to a digital production process wherein not only page designers but also photo editors are already in an early stage confronted with composition issues.

Future research

Overall, the findings give insight in the visual gatekeeping process at a middle-sized newspaper in Flanders and contribute to existing theory on visual gatekeeping and methodology on news ethnography. Future research can look into smaller sized newspapers and mass oriented newspapers. In Flanders, not all newspapers have a separate photo desk; in some newsrooms lay-outers and copy editors make the photo selection themselves. Whether they are driven by the same criteria as ‘real’ photo editors is one possible question to ask in future research.

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