A R T I C L E

Misfortunes, memories and sunsets
Non-professional images in Dutch news media

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A B S T R A C T ● In the professional news media, invitations to submit photos and video material are the most common means of allowing citizens to participate in the content production, as opposed to merely commenting on professional material. Based on interviews with leading journalists in different media in the Netherlands, this study examines how professional journalists respond to the phenomenon of amateur photography, how it is assessed in terms of journalism's values and how amateur images are used in the established news media, both in the online context and in the broadcast or print context.[1] Our primary question is what amateur photography means for 'participatory journalism', understood in terms of conversation, collaboration and the democratization of news media. ●

K E Y W O R D S ● amateur images ● news ● participatory journalism ● user-generate-content

Non-professional images in established news

The most outstanding non-professional contributions to mainstream journalism have been pictures and videos taken by ordinary citizens in the midst of disasters, such as the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York and the 07/07 bombings in London. These kinds of images have the highest news

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value, and therefore, unlike most amateur material, they feature in broadcast news and on front pages of newspapers around the world. Also in the Netherlands, high-profile tragedies such as the Enschede fireworks factory disaster in 2000 or the ritualistic murder of the controversial filmmaker and journalist Theo van Gogh in 2004 were strikingly captured by ordinary citizens who witnessed the events before professional photographers and journalists arrived at the scene. Besides providing a non-conventional view, amateur images may also provide an 'outlaw' vision, since they are not governed by the same standards of ethics or credibility as professional journalism. The 'scoop' picture of the murdered van Gogh, showing his body lying on the sidewalk in Amsterdam, illustrates some of the ethical issues raised by amateur photography. Moreover, it also points to journalism's ambivalence about the place of the non-professional image in the news. The unfocused camera phone picture taken by a passer-by raised discussions regarding, on the one hand, the artistic and technical quality of news images and, on the other hand, the violent content of the image. The question asked was whether professional news media should use explicitly violent amateur imagery simply because it is available and exclusive, or because of the strong reality-effect of the image. The picture was published on the front page of *De Telegraaf*, the highest-circulation newspaper in the Netherlands, with the title 'Afgeslacht' ('Butchered'). Most other professional news media in the Netherlands used professional photographers' pictures, which either showed the body under a white sheet or paramedics covering the body.

Citizens' breaking news visuals and testimonies are likely to have contributed to the current enthusiasm for the collaboration between traditional news media and the public. However, inviting the audience to 'participate' has not progressed with the same pace and fervour in all countries and news organizations. The UK public broadcaster, the BBC, is often considered as a pioneer in adopting the 'pro-am model' in which citizens collaborate with professionals in the creation of content (Gillmor, 2004). This was accelerated by the London tube and bus bombings, after which the BBC website encouraged photo submissions from citizens. In a few hours the BBC received an abundance of visuals, the dramatic character of which led the journalists to regard the amateur material as highly newsworthy (Hermida and Thurman, 2008).

This article considers how professional journalists in the Netherlands respond to the phenomenon of amateur photography and how amateur images are used in the established news, both in the online context and in the broadcast or print context. Previous studies have explored how (online) news media have adopted consumer-created content (e.g. Chung, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Örnebring, 2008; Thurman, 2008), how journalism professionals view amateur content and what their motivations are for using it (e.g. Chung, 2007; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). However, the focus of these studies has either been on textual contributions from the public (blogs, forums, etc.), or they have examined citizens'

contributions en bloc, rather than distinguishing between textual and visual material. Furthermore, previous studies of participatory journalism have mainly been concerned with online journalism due to the interactive and participatory potential of new technologies. No previous study has paid special attention to the professional journalists' views and motivations regarding amateur images or to their criteria for assessing them. The aim of this study is thus to examine what amateur photography in mainstream news media may mean for participatory journalism: can amateur visuals be regarded as evidence of a democratization of the news making process?

We will first map how Dutch professional news media use amateur photography. Second, we will identify the types of content that are produced and published – that is, the kinds of genres that emerge from the non-professional visual material – and how this material is moderated within newsrooms. Third, we will look at how professional journalists perceive the value and status of amateur photography and its potential impact on professional journalism. The study is based on 20 expert interviews (conducted between October 2007 and April 2008) with Dutch editors-in-chief, editors and journalists from a dozen different news media. Before interviewing the journalists, we analysed the websites of the selected media to determine how users' contributions were requested and used online. We used the category system of Thurman (2008), in which several forms of user-generated content were distinguished (message boards, 'have your says', comments, Q&As, blogs, 'your media' and 'your story' options), but focused only on visual contributions.

We selected media that represent mainstream traditional print and broadcast journalism in the Netherlands, including both national and local news media (four television stations and eight newspapers). As we wanted to investigate the impact of amateur material on traditional journalism, we focused the research on broadcasters and printed newspapers. The consequence is that other important news outlets, with only an online presence, were not included. The most important among these would be nu.nl and geenstijl.nl – both Internet start-ups with a high online readership, and both also using text and visual contributions from the users. Including these and other online-only media in the research, however, would shift the focus to differences between traditional media and online-only media. The participants were selected as key-persons in terms of policy and decision-making and overview when it comes to the use of amateur images. First, the editors-in-chief and journalists from the two most important national TV news programmes, *NOS Journaal* (*NOS News*; public broadcaster's newscast) and *RTL4 Nieuws* (*RTL4 News*; commercial broadcaster's newscast), were interviewed.[2] After these interviews, representatives of other mainstream news organizations were interviewed. Among the participants were the editors-in-chief of two local TV news programmes, one located in Amsterdam (AT5) and the other in the southern province of Limburg (L1). Representatives of the three national newspapers with the highest circulation in the Netherlands were also included: a member of the chief-editorial team of *De Telegraaf*

(popular broadsheet), the chief of the photo department of *de Volkskrant* (morning quality broadsheet) and the chief of the internet operations of *NRC Handelsblad* (afternoon quality broadsheet). Additionally, the editors-in-chief of the Internet news of two national free dailies, *Spits* and *DAG*, were interviewed. Finally, the editors-in-chief of three local newspapers were interviewed: *Het Parool*, *Noordhollands Dagblad* and *Dagblad van het Noorden*. The interviews were semi-structured; participants were asked how their news organization used amateur imagery online and in traditional news outlets and how they valued this material in terms of journalistic quality and news values. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by both researchers.

Amateur images and participatory journalism

The expansion of mobile technology and digital distribution has greatly facilitated the making and public sharing of amateur photography, such as family snapshots or holiday photographs. In the new 'participatory culture' ordinary people may represent themselves and share their everyday creative efforts in commercial social network platforms such as YouTube and Flickr, which have turned photo and video sharing into one of the most significant features of contemporary Internet culture. John Hartley (2004) connects the emerging forms of consumer-created content with the shift from mass media or the broadcast model of communication to the interactive communication model, which is characterized by the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption. Thus, in the participatory media culture – which is not limited to new media – the audience has new opportunities to exceed its traditional roles as passive consumer or active interpreter of pre-made media texts and, instead, to participate in the creation of media content, in different forms and on different scales (e.g. Bowman and Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2005; Deuze et al., 2007; Gillmor, 2004; Jenkins, 2006).

In 'participatory journalism', audience members' contributions take place within the framework of professional journalism; news organizations control the audience involvement and participation (see Nip, 2006). Spurred by increased competition among news channels for images that sell, mainstream news organizations are taking initiatives to incorporate non-professional imagery into professional journalistic content. This is done, first, by calling for viewers and readers to submit photographs and video material to the newsroom, particularly in the context of breaking news. Second, many news organizations also regularly monitor the web, trying to anticipate tomorrow's news, and pull free and 'raw' amateur images and video clips into the professional media system (Becker, 2008). Henry Jenkins (2001: 93) writes in the following terms about the cultural convergence between ordinary people's creative culture and mass media industry: 'Shrewd companies tap this culture to foster consumer loyalty and generate low-cost content'. For news organizations there is, however, more at stake in the expansion of amateur

images than low-costs. As alternative news sources they may provide immediate updates of news stories and get news organizations closer to events, 'to be and go where they normally cannot, due to geography or cost' (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 55). Especially in the contexts of war and conflict, vernacular imagery has become an important aspect in providing otherwise unobtainable evidence, sometimes also presenting a challenge for professional journalism by contradicting the mainstream news representations (see Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008).

In journalism studies, an increasing body of literature is examining how the new forms of audience participation have indeed affected the professional culture of traditional journalism. Traditionally, professional journalists have seen themselves as gatekeepers. They have been responsible for the entire news process, from deciding what is newsworthy to reporting and disseminating news. Ordinary citizens have not played a significant role in the news world, except as eyewitnesses and less significant sources (compared to the elite) from which journalists gather information and opinions (e.g. Gans, 1980). Advocates of participatory journalism have had great expectations of user-generated content as a potentially democratizing development, giving the voice to 'ordinary people' and balancing the power between journalists and citizens. Crucial in this respect is the question about professional identity: journalists' identity should not be built only on being a gatekeeper and top-down storyteller but also on being a gate-opener and a resource for participation (e.g. Domingo, 2008). There are different views about how journalists themselves react to the consumer-created content. The positive view emphasizes audience participation as an enrichment of and corrective to the professional journalism (e.g. Plasser, 2005: 54–5). Other scholars have, on the contrary, argued that journalists perceive the amateur material as a threat, which explains, together with the required resources and investments in creating participatory practices of journalism, the reluctance to collaborate with the audience (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). As Deuze (2007: 40) has argued, the rapid pace of media convergence, including amateurs turning into collaborators, can lead to anxiety and the feeling of loss of authority for many journalists.

How traditional newsrooms make use of amateur images

For media executives, 'participatory journalism' is not only a journalistic endeavour but also a business model. In general, corporate executives have high expectations for Web 2.0 features (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007). Traditional news media around the world have witnessed more competition and decreasing audiences, and as a consequence also lower revenues. In the Netherlands, the number of Dutch language TV channels has increased from three to more than a dozen since the 1990s, and almost every household can access several foreign language channels through cable, satellite or digital

box. At the same time, newspapers saw their circulation drop with almost a million copies (Bakker and Scholten, 2007). The causes for the decreasing importance of traditional news media might be diverse but the emerging digital media, together with increased public scepticism regarding the performance of professional news, have played an important role (Deuze, 2004). Consequently, news media are investing in interactive news content in order to find new audiences and to strengthen the relation with existing ones; given that mainstream news media are struggling with high costs, perhaps they are also motivated by the promise of obtaining material at a low cost in an easy way. All the news organizations in our study invited their audiences to send in pictures and videos. Amateur images were used in the traditional television and print news, and in most cases also in online news. However, while all journalists noted the growing amount and importance of non-professional content, including images, there seemed to be an almost total lack of standardization and agreement on how to facilitate, use and evaluate non-professional images. One reason for this uncertainty certainly involves the rapid pace of change occurring in the media industry and the lack of clarity about the direction in which it is moving.

The two broadcast news programmes, NOS News and RTL News, both position themselves as quality news programmes with similar formats, presentation styles and news selection. However, their attitudes about participation and using amateur visuals are quite different. At NOS News, there is a clear plan to expand the use of amateurs' material in the future. Following the example of the BBC, NOS founded a special 'digidesk' in April 2008 to handle digital news and users' contributions. Commercial broadcaster RTL has been more careful in its approach, partly because of the uncertain business model of user-generated content: costs may be substantial, while revenues at the moment are low or even non-existent. Both broadcasters solicit people to send in images, which in turn can be published on their websites or in the newscast. As RTL states, 'Maybe we use your photo for the website or the newscast'. Almost every day a weather picture from the website is selected to be used on the regular weather forecast.

Similarly, the two local TV stations had a very different approach to amateur images. The Amsterdam based TV station AT5 actively encourages users to submit news pictures and video material to its 'gespot' ('spotted') webpage. It is a source of disappointment for the editor-in-chief when people do not collaborate: 'I hate it when people send stuff on Amsterdam to YouTube instead of AT5'. Apart from being used in AT5's daily news programme on a regular basis, the amateur images are also available online, accompanied by a short description from the author. Other users can further expand the story or comment on it. AT5, however, also demonstrates that those citizens who actively contribute to creating content may be few in number. On the AT5 website, many pictures and videos are attributed to a small group of users who use their contacts with the police and other sources in order to be the first to arrive at crime and accident scenes. Similarly, all

the celebrity news images (film stars shopping in Amsterdam, etc.) seemed to be submitted by a single person. The user-generated content model in this case seems to have led to an active participation of a small group of semi-professional 'ambulance chasers' that provides the network with a substantial part of its 'amateur' content. While AT5 represents the most advanced pro-am collaboration in our study, the regional TV station L1 in Limburg has been hesitant in adopting amateur visuals. It only offers a basic upload facility; apart from a gallery of weather photos, no amateur news photographs or videos are available on the webpage. Compared to AT5, the view of the editor-in-chief about the value of amateur images is significantly different: 'We used to say, "Phone in your news tip". Now we say, "Call or send in your own movie or picture". In my opinion, the value for journalism is the same, a tip which you either can or cannot use'.

Two of the three national broadsheets in our study, *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, target more or less the same demographic group with a similar news selection and style of reporting. However, their efforts to offer readers an opportunity to participate are very different. *De Volkskrant* publishes readers' photographs on a regular basis in the print newspaper and receives thousands of pictures every week; amateur pictures appear mostly on the Saturday feature pages and the weekend magazine. *NRC Handelsblad*, in contrast, has hardly any room for amateur images. Its user-generated content is very much text-based, with forums, discussions, blogs by reporters and experts, comments and a writing-corner. The paper has asked readers to submit pictures only on special issues, such as the enlargement of the European Union. Popular newspaper, *De Telegraaf* uses readers' pictures occasionally in the print version and on the website. The most advanced participatory feature of *De Telegraaf*'s online newspaper is the letter to the editor spin-off 'Wat U Zegt' ('What You Say'), to which users can submit stories, photos and videos. The website is organized in locally based communities and functions as a collection of blogs. According to the website, 'Wat U Zegt' is the place 'where you immediately publish your local news in words and images'.

Free paper, *DAG*, launched in 2007, branded itself as a multimedia platform where users' contributions were very much welcome. Every day a reader's picture was published in the paper, and on the website users were invited to send in pictures and videos on the 'Meedoen' ('Collaborate') section. When looking at the amount of the uploaded material, the results of this invitation seem to be rather modest. Similarly, *De Telegraaf*-owned *Spits* provides a daily readers' picture. The online presence of *Spits* changed at the beginning of 2008 when the paper merged its online version with the popular *NieuwNieuws* ('New News') website, also owned by *De Telegraaf*. The new website, now called *SpitsNieuws*, does not offer users the chance to submit visual material. *SpitsNieuws*, however, is often looking for amateur images from social networking sites and video upload sites like YouTube and LiveLeak in order to illustrate its stories.

The three regional papers again have different ways of handling readers' visual contributions. Amsterdam paper, *Het Parool*, uses some readers' pictures for the print feature section, but none on the online newspaper, because, it was claimed, its online system was 'still from the 90s' and could not support users' contributions, such as uploading movies. *Noordhollands Dagblad* channels readers' pictures mostly into so-called 'albums' for special occasions: sporting events, festivals, Queen's Day, etc. These albums are online for a limited period of time but attract many active users. For instance, an album devoted to a thousand year old dyke protecting the province in which the paper is published received more than 600 photos within 2 weeks. Readers sent photos they made for this special occasion and from their photo albums but also uploaded historical archive material. In some cases, a page in the print newspaper is devoted to the best photos from these 'albums'. The third local paper, *Dagblad van het Noorden*, created two local community blogs where readers can upload their pictures and videos.

Misfortunes, memories and sunsets

When looking at what kind of non-professional images are distributed in Dutch mainstream media, we can distinguish between three main categories based on the topics that are covered and their journalistic value. Only the first category, which we call *misfortunes*, is oriented towards 'hard' news and information. The second category, *memories*, concerns either 'soft' news or non-news stories, and is focused on personal and everyday life oriented content. The third category, *sunsets*, concerns weather and nature photography, which news media offers either as part of its weather news or as entertainment.

The category of 'misfortunes' is dominated by images of disasters, accidents and crimes. These images enter the mainstream news because of their newsworthiness. As the editor-in-chief of the NOS News states, 'It is better to have the footage of the crash than of clearing up the mess afterwards'. Thus, the most important characteristic of amateur video footage and photography is that they provide content that journalists cannot produce themselves. 'Citizen journalists' equipped with digital technological devices offer journalists visual access to news events within minutes, placing news organizations at the forefront of a competition often defined in terms of immediacy (Bridge and Sjøvaag, 2008). The editor-in-chief of RTL4 News gave an example of a massive fire that destroyed the Armando museum in Amersfoort: 'It happened at an impossible time, in a rush-hour. Before we got there, we had already received a video from people who filmed it, 15 minutes after the fire broke out'. Even when professional journalists are present at the scene, amateur videos and pictures may provide closer proximity to the event. This was the case when the former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was brought to the UN war criminal detention centre and journalists were waiting outside the prison walls:

> We could only film the helicopter landing. Someone who lived nearby had a view of the prison courtyard from his balcony and filmed Milosevic when he was taken out of the helicopter, handcuffed and blindfolded. Ten minutes later he showed up at our satellite car. (NOS News)

The journalists, however, were clear about the fact that the number of non-professional news images is limited. Furthermore, they stressed that the content of amateur images is rarely newsworthy in the traditional sense. The great majority of amateur photography that is offered to the newsrooms is characterized as 'boring': 'Not many interesting things happen. People always send in videos about accidents, fires, these sorts of things' (RTL News). Local Amsterdam station, AT5, uses amateur photography regularly. Some events make news only because there are amateur images available; sometimes the amateur production even makes the subject of the news. The editor-in-chief explained this in terms of the 'low threshold' of their news programme: amateur contributions are often 'small news', yet, 'good enough for the lunch news'.

The amateur images in the second category, 'memories', are very different from the typically negative and gruesome news images. They consist in pictures of personal lives, experiences and memories. National quality newspaper *de Volkskrant* has most successfully exploited the opportunities of the everyday life oriented amateur content. The newspaper solicits readers to submit their photographs on personal subjects, such as holidays and birthdays, and the sports pages contain a weekly amateur picture in which readers are posing with famous sports stars. Sometimes amateur images are connected to current issues: for instance, when the smoking ban was introduced in the Netherlands in July 2008, *de Volkskrant* published two pages of photos that depicted people enjoying their cigars and cigarettes. The editor-in-chief argued that the audience participation is more suitable in the domain of 'human interest' than in the 'hard' news:

> We made a special section on the 60th year anniversary of the end of World War II. We asked people to send in their liberation pictures. Our readers submitted such interesting material, also pictures with very good quality. We used 50 to 60 pictures for the supplement. And that's where the impact of the readers is felt most keenly, when you address readers about their specific areas of knowledge.

The third and most popular category of amateur images depicts different weather phenomena, such as sunsets, storms and clouds. These images are characterized as 'innocent' and 'romantic'. Dutch news organizations receive hundreds or even thousands of weather pictures every day. The editor of the online news of *Noordhollands Dagblad* discussed the rise of weather-involved amateur photojournalists: 'Last year, when we had a heavy storm we opened a so-called photo album. Within three hours we had 700 photos'. To satisfy their audiences' interest in sharing their weather experiences, most

of the news organizations offer online platforms that are solely devoted to weather photos. Some of the images are also published in print or in national weather forecasts, which probably further promotes the interest of amateurs to participate. For RTL News, using amateur weather photographs to illustrate the daily weather report has become an insignia. Public broadcaster NOS has taken the challenge and devoted a gallery webpage to weather pictures, in which the users can also rate pictures.

How amateur photography is moderated

Traditionally, the news media authenticates its images and other journalistic products by using official sources, or by relying on the established legitimacy of the news provider itself. News organizations carry editorial responsibility for its content. Amateur images, which are produced outside the ethical standards and institutional control of professional journalism, may present problems of veracity. The threat that fake or manipulated images may pose to the reputation of a news organization was a dominant concern among the journalists: 'It only has to go wrong once and the reliability of your program is at stake' (RTL4 News).

Consequently, amateur images are treated differently than text-based contributions from audiences. They are, in principle, edited and checked like professional journalistic material, which also has to do with the traditional journalistic understanding of news images as merely recordings of facts (Bock, 2008). Whereas textual production is often only lightly moderated, the perceived 'factualness' of images requires that they be not published without an editor or moderator checking and approving them first. The view of the editor-in-chief of NOS News, 'It will never go on air without checking', was shared by all news organizations, pointing to the need to keep the standards high (cf. Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 38). Moreover, anonymity, which is characteristic of user-generated textual production, is not accepted. Amateur photojournalists have to submit their real names and a valid email address as well as details about where and when the picture was taken. However, despite the prominence of the risk discourse, only two actual incidents of deception were presented by journalists, both of them belonging to the 'innocent' category of weather photography: 'We had a picture of a twister at the Lake Ijssel. Two days later we got an e-mail from a viewer: "Beautiful picture, only made half a year ago in Portugal"' (RTL4 News).

As we have shown, the types of non-professional images used by news organizations are very different, and this discrepancy has an effect on the level of the control in the newsrooms. The issue of reliability, together with ethical issues, such as privacy and good taste, is paramount in terms of 'hard' news images. However, there are differences regarding the criteria journalists employ when assessing amateur images: differences, first, between the news organizations; second, between traditional news outlets and online

news sites; and, third, between domestic and foreign news images. For instance, local television station AT5 uses 'traditional' ways of dealing with crime suspects, without distinguishing between broadcast and online versions: 'We always wipe out the faces of people that get arrested, we don't show license plates. What we do to our own TV material, we also do to the amateur material'. On the other hand, SpitsNieuws, born in an online environment, has no problems with identifying people accused of crimes. The rationale behind this was that that information 'can be found everywhere on the Internet'.

The fact that there is so much material available 'out there' has apparently led to difficult discussions in the newsrooms. One NOS journalist, for instance, argued that 'We shall never use the argument "we will do it because you can also find it on the Internet"'. The journalists stressed that there are things on the Internet that respectable news organizations should never broadcast. Often this concerns images that are considered to be too graphic to show to a general public. Images that show brutal violence are available on other websites, but even an online news site draws ethical lines:

> We had a shooting incident in Rotterdam. In the end we didn't publish the picture because it was too awful. It was a domestic quarrel that got out of hand, people ended up firing shots at each other in a parking lot. This guy was lying on the ground with a hole in his head. The picture was taken close-up from above. I can take a lot but even I had problems with this picture. (SpitsNieuws)

The standards, however, seem to be different for domestic news and foreign news. For instance, the editor-in-chief of SpitsNieuws who rejected the Rotterdam 'headshot' published a similarly gory picture from Pakistan. Graphic images are often 'tamed' with a warning or only by linking to a picture, which is one of the ways in which news organizations are able to avoid taking responsibility for the image, while at the same gaining the benefits of presenting such a shocking image. As John Bridge and Helle Sjøvaag (2008: 3) argue, 'the amateur, willing to point his or her camera at anything, shoulders the ethical responsibility of producing such footage'.

Using visual material that is publicly available online – for instance, images from YouTube or from personal profile websites – can also create difficult ethical issues. The editor-in-chief of *DAG* discussed the accusations of invading privacy that arose when the newspaper took a picture of a Dutch soldier that was killed in Afghanistan from his social network website Hyves. Following the dispute, the Ministry of Defence made an agreement with Hyves that they will immediately take down the profiles of the deceased. Moreover, the ministry is now offering official photos of all Dutch soldiers.

To a certain extent different rules and standards of responsibility seem to apply to print or broadcast news and news websites. This is partly because the impact of the traditional media and online news on audiences is considered to be different:

> We had a photo of a fatal accident. It showed the body in a bag. On the Internet we published the picture without any problems. But when we wanted to publish it in the newspaper, there were a lot of discussions. The Internet is different. It has a different impact. It is valued differently. (*Noordhollands Dagblad*)

Obviously, the websites of the mainstream news organizations confront a dilemma regarding the use of non-professional images when they transfer visual material from the 'wild' web environment to the established news brand. Newspaper and television news websites can be seen as hybrid forms where the 'anything goes' philosophy of the Internet is combined with the stricter ethics and quality standards of the traditional media.

Defining the value of amateur images

It is clear that professional journalism has an ambivalent attitude regarding amateur images. For some journalists, non-professional images represent a necessary 'evil' in order to avoid being 'left behind', while others regarded amateur photography as providing a valuable source material and, above all, to be important for making the audience feel part of the media community. This ambivalence can partly be traced to the current overabundance of professional news photography. The chief of the photo department of *de Volkskrant*, for instance, explained that one journalist is fully occupied in checking thousands of wire photos the newspaper receives every day and subsequently wonders what they should do with the 'enormous amount of trash from amateurs'. On the other hand, the hopes and doubts regarding amateur images could be related to the ongoing changes in photojournalism, such as decreasing budgets and the rapid convergence process, which means that many newspapers and television stations have done away with staff photographers and rely mainly on gigantic photo agencies, such as Corbis and Getty (Becker, 2008). This trend can partly explain why mainstream news organizations seek 'untamed' images with 'absolute realism' (see Barthes, 1980: 119) from the members of the public or from the Internet.

As our study reveals, amateur photography is interesting for news institutions most of all because of its perceived 'authenticity'. The journalists used the term to refer, first, to the intrinsic aesthetic quality of amateur images and, second, to their immediacy and intimacy. Compared to professional images, the technical quality of amateur videos and pictures is often poor; however, this is not seen as a problem since the lack of professional elegance is evidence of authenticity: 'Non-professional pictures have their own quality. They're more intimate. They're direct. It's the charm of the amateur. These pictures can have a quality that can never be matched by professionals' (*De Volkskrant*). In some news organizations, such as local television station AT5 and free newspapers, the strong reality-effect of grainy and unfocussed amateur images was offered

as a reason to prefer them over professional photography: '[T]he news gets more attractive, it looks good, even if it's badly filmed, with a moving camera, shaking images. It offers a lot of authenticity. Even when users' material is inferior to our own material, I prefer user-generated content; also to inspire others to submit it' (AT5). Free newspaper *Spits*' website, SpitsNieuws, is regularly searching for amateur images on the Internet, which are seen as more authentic than professional images: 'I used news photos from blogs in Burma. It's definitely more authentic; it brings the news closer to you. It takes you to the people themselves'. These arguments coincide with Jon Dovey's (2004: 557) claim that in contemporary culture the low-grade image has become a mode of expression that signifies authenticity and 'indexical reproduction of reality'. He discusses the shift in the 'regime of truth' in relation to mainstream television but emphasizes that this search for new representations as the guarantor of truth concerns a range of media, including the Web and print journalism. What is characteristic of the new regime of truth is the yearning for the authentic, for the intimate and the subjective (Dovey, 2004: 558).

Traditionally, journalism has authenticated its news reports by means of camera images and eyewitness testimonies that offer evidence of 'having been there' (Zelizer, 2007). Thus, news images have been used by journalists as authoritative evidence (Becker, 2003; Bock, 2008). Recent disasters have highlighted that in today's digital culture, as Barbie Zelizer (2007: 422) states, the eye witnessing has been 'outsourced' and private citizens increasingly fill in this role with their digital cameras. Dutch editors and journalists acknowledged that when something happens, the first person on the scene is not going to be a professional journalist or photographer: 'When there is news, there is always someone earlier there than we. There is always someone in the audience who knows more about the story than we do. If we connect to those people it can only have advantages' (NOS News). Private citizens are not only providing access to journalists to events anywhere, but the citizen journalist is also helping to establish journalism's claim to authority since, as Zelizer (2007: 425) puts it, this figure 'has allowed the news media to claim that they "have been there" as witnesses of events that they have not witnessed'.

Yet another dimension of the perceived authenticity of amateur images is their 'intimacy', understood in terms of heightened emotional impact. Amateur images are seen to draw us in more closely and more emotionally, because they are authenticated by personal experiences, feelings or by an access behind the scenes. In the context of breaking news, this usually means shocking images and uncontrolled emotions. A RTL4 journalist took an example of the footage of Madrid train bombings, which confronts the viewer with a shock-effect of witnessing horrific events in real-time: 'You hear this girl talking very fast in Spanish, telling what is happening. At that moment another bomb explodes. It's gruesome, it's horrible, but at the same time thrilling. I think there are very few who would say "don't put it on air"'. This example crystallizes the value of non-professional images in

providing a closer proximity to events for both news organizations and audiences. At the same time, it reminds us of the ethical dilemmas involved in non-conventional visuals. From that point of view, the value of these images lies exactly in the fact that they come from outside the institutional boundaries of journalism, and, as we discussed earlier, therefore obscure the responsibility of established news organization.

Collaborating with the audience?

In today's news world, as Mark Deuze (2007: 245) notes, it is expected that the audience will be given an opportunity to participate. Most journalists in our study adhered to this ideal; for instance, the editor-in-chief of *Dagblad van het Noorden* pictured journalists' role as facilitators of public conversation: 'I think it is important that journalism, more than before, should be a dialogue, a conversation in which you try to engage readers'. The participatory practices of audiences have been typified by the level of participation; in the literature on participatory journalism, at least implicitly, the forms in which citizens are invited to participate in the production of news content in the input and output stages are valued more highly than those in which they can merely respond after the story has been published (e.g. Bruns, 2005: 11–12). From the point of view of the level of participation, non-professional images are exceptional among citizen contributions. Within the established media, the most common features that let citizens produce content are invitations to submit photos and audio-visual material (Domingo et al., 2008).

The norm or ideal of participation generates an important question: why is audience participation desired? In the public journalism reform movement, born in the late 1980s, the aim was to connect the media more closely with its audiences and, furthermore, citizens with public life, encouraging them to discuss and act on common problems and issues (Kunelius and Ruusunoksa, 2008). Our study shows that audience-created-content or 'participation' is understood in terms of community-forming, rather than in terms of supporting civic engagement. The journalists typically framed audiences' visual contributions for the purpose of committing audience members to the media: 'We use [amateur] photography to communicate with the readers ... And it works well if you want to create a community feeling, and that's the purpose of our website' (*de Volkskrant*).

The idea of changing the professional culture of journalism has been central in the discussion about participatory journalism. The change has been framed primarily in terms of increased collaboration between audience and producers (e.g. Deuze, 2008). The editors and journalists in our study were very sceptical regarding the change journalism was supposed to go through and the idea of 'collaboration': 'In books like "We the Media" it is suggested that everything will merge, but actually I don't see that happening' (*DAG*). In their view, the role audience members are increasingly taking on – or which

is given to them – is that of a source, not of 'collaborator'. This is because they do not have a say in key journalistic processes like news-selection, fact-checking and editing, which define the profession: 'Checking facts, something citizen journalists don't do, is a pre-condition to call it journalism. And fact checking is a profession' (L1).

The scepticism can be partly explained by the discrepancy between expectations and reality: the amateur contributions did not warrant a new attitude towards the idea of collaboration. Most editors and journalists expressed their disappointment about the journalistic quality of amateur material. For instance, *De Volkskrant*, which expressed a genuine interest in collaborating with the audience, expected the readers' blogs to promote the dialogue between journalists and the public and to provide topics and content for the news. Instead, they witnessed them developing into a facility for a limited group of readers. Amsterdam TV station AT5 was the only news organization where (low) expectations and the daily practice coincided.

Discussion

Dutch reporters and editors have taken a variety of approaches to amateur images, from fully embracing the pro-am model – inviting citizens to participate and proactively creating platforms for user contributions – to having a cautious attitude towards non-professionals' visuals and for that reason providing little space for citizen contributions. We have focused on amateur images, which have traditionally been valued as visual support to the veracity of information (Zelizer, 1998). In the context of participatory journalism, the role and use of amateur images is much more diverse and, as our study shows, the very phenomenon of the 'amateur image' is not a simple one but entails many variations ranging from breaking-news images to the news organizations' online photo albums with users' pictures of weather. While amateur images have previously been discussed under the umbrella terms of 'user-generated-content' or 'citizen journalism', here we want to suggest that amateur visuals should be an object of study in their own right, given their different professional and ethical implications.

Within the boundaries of mainstream news organizations, there are several characteristics that set amateur images apart from textual citizen contributions. First, amateur images are the only consumer-created content that is occasionally given a similar status (amateur images of breaking events) as professional material. Second, while typically only the 'response stage' of the news process has been opened up for user contributions, amateur images are the primary example of citizen participation in the news making at the input/output stage (Domingo et al., 2008). Therefore, we might be tempted to see the amateur image in the news as a true opening for professionals and amateurs working together. However, the idea of collaboration is questionable because of the third characteristic of amateur photography we have described

in our study; visual content tends to be heavily moderated, which points to the traditional gate-keeping role of journalism. This is motivated by the idea that the amateur image presents a higher risk to journalism's truth-telling mission than other user-generated content; moderating is therefore essential in order to keep the journalistic standards high (cf. Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 38). Moreover, also the discourse of the journalists serves the function of maintaining the boundary between the professional journalism and its public. Our study shows that news organizations see amateur images, on the one hand, as sources the professionals can use for their advantage, and, on the other hand, in terms of bonding with the audience by giving them something 'free' and 'fun' to do.

Previous studies that have looked at consumer-created content in different news contexts have concluded that citizens' contributions are mainly concerned with documenting or commenting on the personal or private domain (e.g. Domingo et al., 2008; Örnebring, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). Moreover, citizen contributions' limited focus on 'soft' news or non-news is typically discussed in terms of power and control, with the implication that traditional news organizations are limiting or discouraging readers and viewers from participating in the production of 'hard' news (e.g. Deuze et al., 2007; Domingo et al., 2008; Örnebring, 2008). The general trend regarding citizen participation applies also to the amateur images; in Dutch news, the great majority of amateur images are about 'soft' news or non-news. This could be interpreted as another attempt to maintain journalists' status as gate-keepers. Alternatively, as Deuze et al. (2007) argue, the production of 'soft' news by citizens may aim 'to correct for mainstream journalism's bias towards "hard" news'. Or it can also indicate that citizen journalists are simply more interested in and better-equipped to cover certain topics than others (Reich, 2008).

Regarding the content of amateur images, however, the focus on 'soft' news is difficult to explain through journalism's gate-keeping function. As we argue, there is a significant difference between amateurs' visual and textual contributions, in that it is in the area of 'hard' news that citizens' images are most sought after and most appreciated. What we observed was more a disappointment with the news-oriented amateur images (very little offered and seldom newsworthy). As we have shown, the assessment of the value of different types of amateur images is based on different premises. Images of breaking news events have an unquestionable value for news organizations; their immediacy and directness is seen as an addition to journalism's 'truth-telling' mission – and as a tool in the competition. In terms of aesthetics, all amateur images are praised as being more 'authentic' than professional photography and, thus, they are believed to offer special value to the audience.

The amateur images in professional news open up many interesting questions for future research. One of these questions that we have briefly indicated in this study would be to examine more systematically how amateur images are framed in professional news – how they are embedded in the news narrative – and how the journalists fascinated by the 'authenticity' of

such images deal with the issues of veracity and ethics. We also think that an audience study is worth pursuing in order to provide evidence on how audiences receive and respond to amateur visuals.

Expectations have been high for consumer-created content, including the democratization of media, increased participation and self-representation, diversification of media content and the growth of knowledge. When thinking about the typical amateur imagery in Dutch mainstream media – images of car accidents, fires, sunsets and 'myself' – the idea of 'participation' hardly connotes public dialogue or civic engagement. However, we also see a potential of amateur photography for civic engagement and participatory growth of knowledge, especially when the audience is solicited to send in images about specific topics. For instance, both local and national newspapers had experimented with special feature stories, such as the liberation from the Nazi occupation or the anniversary of a 1000-year-old dyke, in which they addressed their audiences as citizens rather than consumers. The editors considered these kinds of experiments to be very successful in terms of the interest they generated and the public and journalistic quality of readers' contributions. The first wave of studies on participatory journalism has focused on mapping participatory journalism practises in different national contexts, and generally found the civic potential of user-generated content poor. We suggest that in the future it is important that journalism scholars also take a more micro-level approach and examine successful (and failed) cases of collaboration.

Notes

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2 These interviews were part of a wider research project by the first author of this article, in which editors, reporters and photographers were interviewed about their views on the role of emotion and ordinary citizens in television news.

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