Proximity as a journalistic keyword in the digital era:
A study on the 'closeness' of amateur news images

Abstract

Proximity is an ambiguous journalistic notion for which there is no single definition. This article re-evaluates the relevance and use of the concept in digital news environment. Based on the qualitative analysis of journalist interviews in Finland and focus group interviews in Finland and the UK, it asks how new forms of visual amateur production incorporated into professional news journalism have transformed the concept. The concept of proximity has evolved from being a criterion of news selection into a central imperative of news production aiming to engage audiences. In the work on how professional journalists respond to user-generated content and amateur visuals in particular, amateur images have been defined as potent new instruments through which journalists craft the experience of closeness into news stories.

Introduction

Proximity is a journalistic notion for which no explanation is needed. At the same time, it is a complex theoretical construct for explaining the selection, formation and presentation of news stories and, at the same time, predicting and explaining audience expectations and interpretations of journalism. Previous studies, however, have rarely paid attention to the ambiguity of the concept, or discussed how it is defined or experienced in the era of digital media. In journalism, proximity, like 'objectivity' (see Maras, 2013), is a value, procedure, language (designed to give an impression of proximity), and increasingly, a strategy aimed at managing relationships with audiences.

The most common use of proximity in journalism studies refers to news values that deal with a fundamental question of newsworthiness, or 'what is included, what is excluded and why' (O'Neill & Harcup, 2008, p162). More recent scholarship on media ethics has employed the concepts of proximity and distance to discuss the moral relationship between the Western viewer and the distant sufferer. In this body of research, the key question is whether and how the media fulfil the function of creating an appropriate level of proximity in our dealings with each other (Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2003). Advances in digital technology have prompted new questions: does the Internet, by reconstructing the mediated time-space experiences and social relationships (Ling & Campbell, 2009), change the conceptions and experiences of proximity?

We will unpack the ambiguous notion of proximity in conditions of xxx through the prism of user-generated news visuals. We believe that a narrow focus and form a detailed picture of how the notion of proximity is related to novel news practices such as the use of user-generated content. Journalists typically justify the use of non-professional visuals by their potential to bring the news closer to the people (Pantti, 2013) – but what does 'being close' mean to audiences in the new media environment? In the following, we will, first, identify five common conceptions of proximity in journalism research. Second, we discuss the ways in which this imagery impacts journalists' notions and definitions of proximity. Third, we examine audience perceptions and experiences of proximity with regard to user-generated visuals. Fourth, we set out to build an empirically based model of proximity in the digital era of journalism.

Proximity as a multi-layered keyword in journalism

The concept of proximity is applied in the literature to a range of phenomena from journalistic work practices to ethics and audience reception. Depending on the phenomenon under analysis, proximity can refer to the relationships between journalists and events/coverage, audiences and events/coverage, or news organizations and their audiences. Moreover, different and often overlapping dimensions of 'being close to something' have been identified, including 'geographical proximity' (or spatial, physical), 'cultural proximity' (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hanusch, 2008), as well as 'social proximity' (Gans, 1979), 'emotional proximity' (Mencher, 1977; Schultz, 2005), 'moral proximity' (Silverstone, 2003), and 'virtual proximity' (Huxford, 2007).

The conceptual complexity of proximity is magnified by the role of proximity as both an analytical concept and a normative notion. At the outset, proximity has a positive valence: it is linked to constructs such as relevance, locality, familiarity, commitment, involvement, and empathy. However, it is not necessarily construed in opposition to distance but in relation to it: in studies of journalistic practice (e.g. eyewitnessing) and mediated morality, it is considered that journalists and audiences should be close 'enough' to the events – but not 'too' close. Next we will discuss the main approaches to the study of proximity in journalism. Such conceptual 'condensing' is needed, we argue, in order to rehabilitate the analytical potential of the dispersed concept (see figure 1).

Proximity as a news value. News values are referred to as the criteria for deciding which event or issue is relevant enough to the intended audience to be considered newsworthy (Schlesinger, 1978, p117). Proximity as a news criterion mainly focuses on the relationship between news events and audiences consuming the news, and derives from the 'implicit assumption' about what the audience holds important (Golding & Elliot, 1979, p633). However, as noted by several scholars, news criteria go beyond the assumed significance of the event, because routines, resources, access, competition, niche audiences, and wider ideological factors influence news selection (Allern, 2002; Tuchman, 1978).

As a news value, proximity typically refers to 'physical proximities,' including geographical proximity (how 'close to home' an event is, and thus relevant to audience) and temporal proximity (how recent the event is), and to perceived or 'felt' proximities, including cultural proximity and emotional proximity. In Galtung and Ruge's (1965) classical typology, cultural proximity refers to the general factor of 'meaningfulness', suggesting that an event is more likely to become news if it is considered understandable within the cultural framework of the audience (pp66–67). Emotional proximity, according to Schultz (2005), refers to stories that touch 'a common emotional cord, regardless of where it takes place' (p40), and is related to constructs such as 'human interest' or 'dramatic appeal' (e.g. Sheridan Burns, 2002, p118). The power of proximity as a news criterion has become explicit in studies of foreign news, disaster coverage in particular, as they have revealed 'rules' and patterns for evaluating the newsworthiness of disasters according to their geographical and cultural proximity (Schlesinger, 1978; Hanusch, 2008).
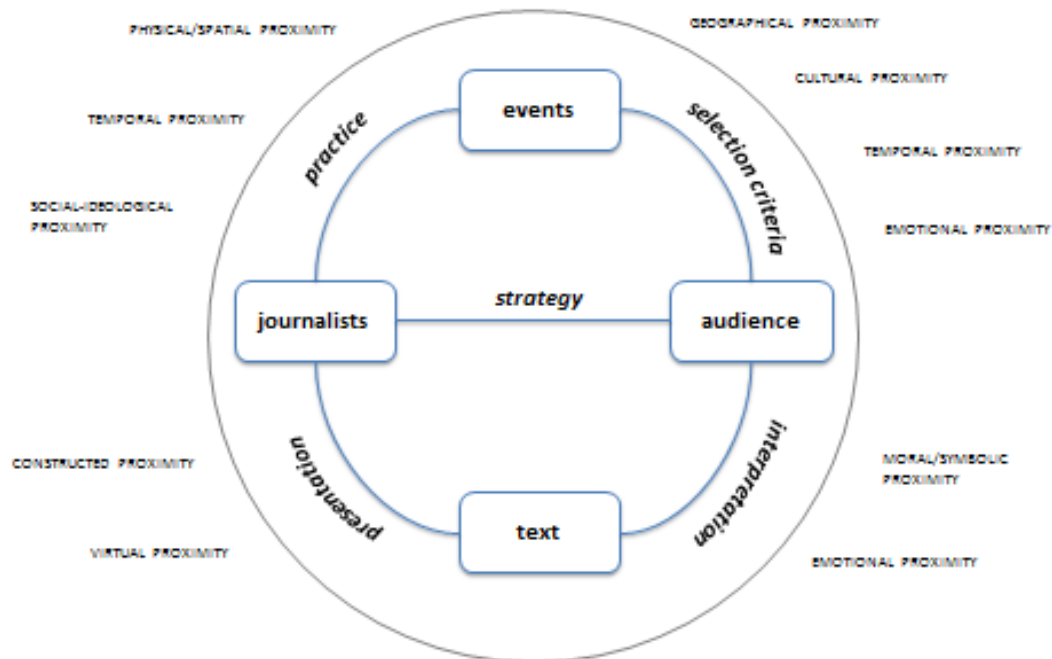
Figure 1: Relations and dimensions of proximity

Proximity as a work practice. The second approach to studying proximity refers to everyday news work, focusing on the relationship between journalists and events or sources. Simply put, proximity as a journalistic work practice refers to the necessity of closeness to the covered stories both physically and temporally. Zelizer (1990, p38) argues that journalism's authority emerges from 'being proximate to the events', that is, reporting 'what they see'. Hence, questions of location and access – and the practice of eyewitnessing – remain important in journalism, especially since the journalist's traditional role as an eyewitness has been affected by the development of digital recording technologies. In her more recent work, Zelizer (2007) argues that eyewitnessing is increasingly driven by proximity and immediacy provided by on-site individuals' fragments of visual and verbal information.

Apart from the requirement of 'being there' as an eyewitness, proximity as work practice refers to social-ideological proximity between journalists and their sources. Gans (1979, 124–128) noted that sources with similar social backgrounds as journalists were more likely to make contacts with newsrooms than those of different status. Digital media have increased the number and kinds of sources available to journalism, making relevant the question of balance between socially 'close' and 'distant' sources (Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Kristensen & Mortensen, 2013).

Proximity as presentation. The third conception of proximity refers to the narrative means of 'constructing a sense of closeness and familiarity between the viewers and event' (Clausen, 2003, p47). A range of 'dramaturgic tools' can be used to craft a sense of proximity to a story, including local story angles, emotional discourse and dramatized narrative structures (Hjarvard 2000, 67–73). Digitalization and new technologies have brought new tools for the construction of proximity in news coverage. It is claimed that spatial and temporal proximity of live reporting have been replaced by virtual proximity, that is, creating an illusion of on-the-site presence by digital means (Huxford, 2007, 661).

Proximity as interpretation. The studies of proximity as presentation and proximity as interpretation, in which the focus is on the relationship between news texts and audiences, are closely linked. Silverstone (2006, p65) notes that, even if the media has the potential to transform the relationship between distance and proximity, individuals act selectively and creatively in negotiating a comfortable relationship between themselves and the world around them. Recently there has been increasing discussion of emotional proximity, or the ability of news journalism to evoke affective interpretations and a sense of closeness to the covered events using emotional appeals or personal identifications (e.g. Qureshi, 2007). In addition, studies on media ethics refer to moral or symbolic proximity as a relationship that the news representations invite audiences to develop to others (Chouliaraki, 2012; Silverstone, 2003).

Proximity as strategy. Proximity refers also to a broad organizational strategy to connect with the audience. This approach ties together the four aspects already discussed, but the main relationship is that between media organisations and their audiences as citizens or customers. Proximity AS STRATEGY? can be seen as an antidote to the notion that audiences often perceive journalists in proximity to social power, and not to the public (Coleman et al., 2012: 39).

Hjarvard (2000) argues that proximity has become a keyword that allows newsrooms to develop a closer relationship with their viewers. As a strategy, proximity shapes the ways in which news are selected, sourced, framed and narrated, ALL THIS aiming to 'cultivate the perspective of the common man' (ibid.). In the last two decades this strategy has become a central imperative of news production. For instance in Finland, newsroom leaders have employed a 'proximity discourse', voicing the need of the news industry to get closer to the audience (Hujanen, 2009, 112). In the current digital landscape, the proximity strategy has embraced collaboration with the public, and user-generated content has emerged as a crucial resource for audience engagement (Pantti & Bakker, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010).

Methods and material

The study is based on interviews with professional journalists in Finland, and focus group interviews with audiences in Finland and the UK. 20 journalists who represent major Finnish news organizations in print, online and broadcast were interviewed in 2011–2012. The sample featured foreign news reporters, foreign news editors, editors-in-chief, and picture editors. Audience focus groups were conducted in Finland in 2012: 41 people in 9 different groups participated in the interviews. The groups were organised according to age segments (18–34; 35–55 and 56+) and gender (male, female, and mixed groups). The UK audience data, graciously provided by Andrew Williams, Cardiff University, consists of twelve focus groups (100 participants) with BBC audience members, conducted in 2008 (about the larger study see e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2010). The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Journalists' strive for proximity

In the interviews with Finnish journalists, amateur images generally appear as 'vehicles of proximity' but two tensions appear in this idea. First, the concept of proximity is used to refer to the desired closeness between media and their audiences, and to the sense of proximity between audiences and events accessed through the media (cf. Couldry & Markham, 2008). This means that, on the one hand, amateur news visuals are discussed through a proximity strategy: amateur visuals enable new forms of activities and news experiences, which may bind customers to a media outlet.

In other words, user-generated visuals are assessed as resources for strengthening brand loyalty, and to some degree, democratizing journalism. On the other hand, proximity is discussed by journalists through the textual qualities (such as immediacy and emotional proximity) that citizen images provide for the news presentation. The second tension in the proximity discourse of journalists relates to the origin of amateur visuals: the distinction between' near' (produced by their 'own' audiences) and 'far' (nonprofessional visuals usually received through international news agencies), plays a significant role in assessing the value of this imagery.

Proximity as a strategy. Use of amateur imagery becomes, in tabloid newspapers and public broadcasts alike, a market-oriented strategy branding news organizations as 'close to the people', as the following quote from the managing editor of the Finnish public service broadcaster somewhat dishearteningly tells:

> It [use of amateur imagery] takes us closer to those end-users or customers. When successful, it will improve our brand insanely, because we can sometimes be seen as a tad arrogant, existing in the ivory tower of Pasila [the site of the broadcaster]. I think it would be great if we could show ourselves to the people, well, in a way that 'what you send me is valuable to us'.

As audiences become increasingly fluid in their news-consuming habits and as competitiveness increases, creating close relationships with audiences becomes important for news organizations. User-generated images serve to create experiences for the reader, especially in Finnish tabloids and on their websites (cf. Örnebring, 2008), which have branded themselves as media with peer-like connections to audiences.

The proximity strategy goes beyond encouraging people to become 'citizen journalists' or providing online photogalleries for sharing audiences' pictures. Journalists believe that both submitting photos and videos to news organizations, and seeing 'peer photos' solidifies users' emotional relationships with the media. 'It brings it [the news] closer to an individual, because an individual may think that "I could have taken that image too if I had been there"', remarked a foreign news editor from a tabloid newspaper. Because amateur images provided by their 'own' audiences function better in the double role of providing emotionally appealing material and allowing the national audience to become co-producers, they receive more prestige than 'far' amateur imagery.

Proximity as news value, practice and presentation. Amateur images in journalists' discourse are deemed newsworthy primarily due to their temporal proximity – they are immediate – but journalists' views on their newsworthiness is ambivalent. They stress that if both professional and amateur visuals are available from the same event, they prefer professional images (for reasons of aesthetic quality and reliability). Only if amateur images 'show more, if the amateur has got closer, then the image has news value'. Amateur images may set an agenda only when it comes to 'small news', but in the future they may play a more significant role in the selection of news:

> If we have received really good-looking [amateur] images from an event, then we easily cover it. But when it comes to big, important news, they don't dictate. -- But very possibly in future, if we receive good and up-close visual material from some event, it may mean that we will make news about it. (Foreign reporter, public service broadcasting company)

To a certain degree, amateur visuals have transformed the practice of on-site reporting, thus, journalists no longer have to 'chase fire trucks' since amateurs are already near, or in the middle of the events.

> Well that, that amazing kind of wow-effect. It's just that, that people are out there so much that they would be sort of our eyes... all this journalistic work is more and more indoors and real life happens out there where we are not...(Online editor, commercial broadcasting company)

However, while the value of citizen eyewitness visuals is recognized when events are sudden or journalists' access is restricted, journalists believe that amateur eyewitnessing is of secondary importance to the presence of professional journalists (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). Moreover, geographic or social proximity of amateur sources matters for journalists concerning reliability and verification. Journalists are keen on obtaining their 'own' audiences' images and contact Finnish citizens abroad for 'primary source' visuals (as opposed to amateur visuals distributed by news agencies) in case of breaking news.

Journalists are even more hesitant regarding the moral PROXIMITY of amateur images. While they share the idea that, on an aesthetic level, amateur images have an inherent emotional closeness – a sense that 'now we are there, close to the event, the people, and the person who has taken that image, who is also most likely part of that event' (foreign reporter, public broadcasting company) – they believe that only professionally crafted narratives offer an 'appropriately close' picture that invites audiences to connect to distant contexts and people. The journalists referred to a mobile phone video footage of the brutal treatment of Muammar Gaddafi after his capture as a telling example of how such eyewitnessing may provide crude up-close scenes of horror, but lack the reflection needed to produce morally proximate stories.

Audiences on amateur images: interpretations of proximity and distance

Journalists' view of the potential of amateur visuals to make the audience feel closer to the media and the events represented, can be enriched by listening to how the audiences interpreted questions of proximity related to amateur visuals. In the Finnish interviews, the participants were shown photos and video clips from stories of national and local (a chain-reaction crash, a hotel fire) and international importance (Arab Spring, Japanese tsunami), in the UK interviews of regional importance (floods, a fire). The setting allowed us to compare how geographical proximity of events affected audience interpretations.

Our general finding is that Finnish and British audiences viewed and experienced the domestic amateur visuals strikingly similarly: proximity is the keyword that summarizes audience interpretations of amateur images. The imagery is generally perceived to be an authentic and realistic outlook, close to the audiences' ordinary experiences through their personal perspectives (Williams et al. 2011). Another key finding is that, in the reflections on foreign videos, there are more expressions of distance. While the participants similarly reported a compelling sense of proximity in the case of foreign imagery, this interpretation was rarely accompanied by empathetic understanding of – or moral proximity to – the distant others.

Interpretations of proximity. Amateur visuals' ability to evoke a sensation of proximity for audiences seems to lie in their emotional appeal. Many of the sample images depicted crises or accidents, instances with human interest appeal, and the participants reported strong emotional reactions to them, varying from positive to negative.

> I couldn't watch this indifferently even if I've seen this Gaddafi video many times before. Usually you can just watch the news and note that OK: this has happened and people have been killed. It's that kind of normal, clinical stuff. It's not often that the news comes so close to you, it sort of gets under your skin. (Finland)

Emotional proximity is further facilitated by the experience of presence that was often articulated through physical sensations, such as: 'I could smell the smoke myself'. The sense of 'being there', then, evoked strong corporeal emotions and sensations such as fear, panic, shock, and dizziness:

> I was totally horrified when I … [laughing] watched that [the road with cars piling up]: they are coming at me! I was able to identify with the situation: I'm there myself watching how cars keep crashing into each other, and so it did came very close to me. (Finland)

This felt sense of presence became explicit in the way participants often switched to the present tense when interpreting images, and especially videos. In addition, focus group participants constantly explicated that amateur images can create a feeling of being there as events unfold. Here a participant describes her feelings evoked by the photo of a hotel fire in her hometown:

> In this amateur photo of the Love Hotel, one can really imagine how some guy has been making tea in the evening and then looking out: 'hey, what's happening there', and then he goes to the balcony and takes the photo, or takes it from a window, and it could be anyone of us. I can even imagine the house where he is and how he has taken that picture. (Finland)

A key factor contributing to the sense of proximity for both audiences and journalists seems to involve seeing an event through the eyes of 'ordinary people' involved in the events, as opposed to the detached accounts of professional journalists (Williams et al. 2011, 207). Both journalists and audience explained that amateur images provide closeness by showing events 'through the viewer's own eyes'. The audience participants expressed the same sentiment: 'It's like seeing it through our eyes because that is what we would see if we were there…'(UK), suggesting that the audience members may develop feelings of solidarity. However, affinity towards the amateur photographers or people in the imagery – an empathetic understanding of their feelings, perspectives and the situations they face – is more apparent in domestic than foreign imagery. 'Like with the flooding, when you see the after effects of what's happened, like, you get sympathetic.' (UK). With foreign imagery, Finnish audiences did at times feel concerned about the situation of citizens in Syria or Libya, but emotionally they viewed the situations from their own perspective, thus occupying a self-oriented rather than other-oriented position (Seu, 2010: 454).

Interpretations of distance. In audiences' reflections on foreign visuals, also a sense of distance was articulated, suggesting that their interpretations of proximity to amateur images remains strongly linked to geographic proximity/distance. Emotional appeals of the imagery do not seem to bridge this gap, therefore, foreign imagery does not produce a particular increase in cultural proximity: stereotypes were even amplified, and at times discussions devolved towards humor with racist undertones.

The sense of distance regarding foreign imagery was also related to the audio tracks of the videos, pointing to the importance of language as a factor in cultural proximity. Here a Finnish participant describes his reactions to the audio of the local chain-reaction crash video, compared to the foreign amateur videos featuring cries in Arabic:

We can hear loud shouts with a distressed male voice saying 'move further on, a truck may come', or something like that – so a Finnish person can well understand this kind of Finnish tone of voice, and can understand the emotional moods there. But from those nonsensical cries you can't quite understand if they are happy, angry or sad, only quiet or loud. (Finland)

Further distancing was caused by criticism that amateur images sometimes go too far in their realism and proximity, and fail to add to the understanding of the situation. Blurriness of the photos ceased to evoke authenticity and started to generate reservations and rejection among audiences: 'One couldn't see anything of it [the Gaddafi capture]. Perhaps it had a feeling that someone had been on the spot. But one couldn't really see anything.' (Finland)

A sense of distance was also enhanced by the overload of negative emotional reactions, as the debates regarding 'compassion fatigue' suggest. One of the Finnish participants expressed that amateur images are 'more real, but on the other hand, they are also distressing, you might get too involved in the situation'. The feeling of wanting to shut one's eyes was expressed when emotional experiences reached anxiety. If amateur visuals come too close, they seem to block empathy (cf. Seu, 2010).

Critically distant from the media. As a proximity strategy, audiences perceive amateur imagery in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, amateur imagery is conceived as a welcomed supplement to professionally produced materials with its diversity of voices, experiences and personal viewpoints. In this sense, the use of amateur imagery in the news is recognized and accepted by the audience as a proximity strategy.

On the other hand, both the UK and Finnish groups were highly critical of news organizations' use of amateur visuals in a calculated and often sensationalist manner to attract audiences. The clearest expression of critical distance was directed toward the organizations' blunt ways of constructing emotional proximity with the imagery.

Participants also distanced themselves from the proximity-as-participation strategy, referring to the amateur photographer as an anonymous 'anyone' and not actively including themselves in this category. Furthermore, audiences emphasized that the strategy is more about coping with media competition than democratic participation: 'It adds the illusion of participation. Which is what I think they're really after. They really want people to feel… They are trying to create, very forcefully and aggressively lately, this illusion that everyone is making the news and that we can all participate.' (UK)

Finally, participants accused journalists of laziness, remarking that 'one of the problems that I have got with television these days is that the public seemed to be working harder than the professionals' (UK). A clear message to journalists, both in Finnish and UK interviews, is that the audience does not want amateur visuals served 'raw' but 'well-done' with journalists' contextualizations and research.

Conclusion

We have offered a brief analysis of how amateur news visuals are discussed by journalists and audiences regarding their perceived proximity/distance. The ARTICLE was inspired by the pervasive use of the concept of proximity in both journalist interviews and audience focus groups in Finland. We suggest that the conceptual condensing of the key relations and dimensions of proximity offered here, helps us assess the current meaning of proximity in journalism in the digital

era. It guides us back to a set of basic questions: who is considered to be close to what, in what ways and to what consequences?

Whose proximity?	To what?	How?	What consequences?
News organisations	Audience expectations (assumptions)	Strategically	Clash between journalists' and audiences' interpretations. Turns into distance.
Journalists	Events ('real world')	Spatially, temporally	Increased use of crowd sourced photo services, invitations to participate to augment on-the-spot coverage.
Audiences	Events	Spatially, temporally, emotionally	Sense of presence, 'nowness', some sympathy, especially to domestic events.
Audiences	Texts	Emotionally	Images as such evoke strong affects, but they are not translated into intercultural understanding. Overload may turn into distance.

Table 1: Amateur news visuals and proximity

In the journalists' discourse, proximity emerged as a requirement in the journalism-audience relationship: user-generated visuals were seen as means of getting – or rather appearing to be – close to the audience, and 'being close', in turn, was seen as a precondition for audience engagement. Paradoxically, this proximity strategy created more distance than closeness between journalists and audience. While audiences appreciated amateur visuals as an enhancement of professional journalism, containing inspiring and true-to-life voices and experiences, their view of the calculating use of amateur images in professional journalism was highly critical.

There is more understanding between journalists and audiences when it comes to the IDEA THAT amateur visuals' distinct textual qualities WORK TO STRENGTHEN A sense of proximity. Here, proximity becomes encapsulated in the catchterms and phrases such as 'wow-effect' and 'seeing through one's own eyes'. However, there are ambiguities and tensions at the heart of this idea. Audience experiences of amateur visuals, both from near and far events, were characterized by emotional proximity and a strong sense of 'being there', however, this did not lead to 'moral proximity' (cf. Silverstone, 2003 p8). In the amateur visuals of distant events (Arab Spring), the lack of cognitive and cultural proximity, resulting partly from the lack of 'cultural translation' from the part of journalists, and an overload of intense feelings seemed to effectively block an empathetic understanding of the people and situations mediated through visuals. Thus our paper also points out to a more general need of taking into account the aspect of audience interpretation when scrutinizing any journalistic keyword, as these interpretations may help crystallize the keyword's core relations or re-assess certain professional assumptions of journalistic news values, practices, texts or strategies.

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