In search of visual expertise : examining skilled vision in the work of news photo professionals

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ABSTRACT

Photojournalism professionals play a key role in producing and choosing the visual coverage that we see in the daily news media. This article focuses on photo editors and other photojournalism professionals behind the news images, and explores how they see and look at pictures professionally in order to decide what is newsworthy. The actual work practices of photojournalism professionals were scrutinized by using methods of newsroom observation and interviews at three media organizations. The theoretical framework applies ethnographic studies of vision in professional practices that consider vision as a socially situated activity and education of attention. The findings suggest that the education of the professional eye of photojournalism practitioners involves informal and everyday work practices that include characteristics of an apprenticeship. Finally, four areas where the professional knowledge accumulates were found: (1) constant following of news; (2) the use of reference images; (3) the use of specific software; and (4) social interaction among the professionals. In conclusion, it is argued that photojournalism professionals' visual expertise is poorly understood. The shared vision is constitutive for the social organization of the profession while it concurrently narrows the visual coverage published in the media.

KEYWORDS

journalistic work • news photographs • photo editors • photojournalism • professional vision • skilled vision

INTRODUCTION

Photo editors working for the news media go through thousands of images every day. They have to develop work practices and routines that enable them to make quick and ethical decisions on what to select and publish. During my fieldwork,

I observed that the professionals were highly attuned to noticing certain features and details in the images that I, as a photojournalism researcher, was not able to immediately see as being worthwhile. Thus, the work of photojournalism professionals is significantly connected to their ability to see journalistic images in a professional manner. Charles Goodwin first introduced the concept of professional vision in the mid-1990s. He studied it in different contexts, such as archaeological field excavations and legal practice in courtrooms. He concluded that the ability to shape events 'into the phenomenal objects around which the discourse of the profession is organized' is central to the social and cognitive organization of the profession (Goodwin, 1994: 626). In the case of photojournalism, this could apply to professionals' ability to produce and select journalistically relevant photographs and videos for different editorial contexts.

Understanding the ways in which photojournalism professionals see images enables us to further investigate why visual news coverage appears as it does and how it is able to shape public perceptions. The question of professional image-making is important because news photographs, among other mediated images, are an essential part of our visual culture and the media shape our understanding of the world. The repetitive news imagery creates mental images of places and populations and 'affects what one can imagine happening in that place or to that people, hence shaping the sphere of political possibility' (Gürsel, 2016: 11–13).

Photojournalism professionals play a key role in creating this sphere of political possibility when they produce and select news images for publication. Hence, the aim of this research is to shed light on the practices of news image production by focusing on photojournalism professionals, who act as gatekeepers for news imagery (Schwalbe et al., 2015). The emphasis is on photo editors who broker, select, validate and make publication decisions about news photographs. These professionals carry out the societal role of news media as a fair and accurate information provider for the public (e.g. Deuze, 2005; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Journalism's watchdog role and its attempt to provide well-informed citizens are considered cornerstones for democratic societies (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 13–20). Furthermore, news images convey messages on both affective and cognitive levels, and people usually judge how they will react to a news story after looking at the image (Domke et al., 2002: 148).

To explore the professionals' perspective, I present an empirical example based on interviews at the global picture agency *Thomson Reuters* (hereafter Reuters), newsroom observations and interviews at the Finnish picture agency *STT-Lehtikuva* (hereafter LK) and the Finnish news magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* (hereafter SK). I refer to ethnographic studies of vision and cognition in professional practices. The focus of these studies is on how individuals learn to see in differing social contexts. Thus, the conception of vision that I focus on is how vision is culturally formed, rather than the neuronal processes in the brain that undoubtedly form the basis of visual perception.

Building on the notion of vision as a culturally-formed practice (e.g. Goodwin, 1994), ethnographer and visual anthropologist Cristina Grasseni (2004) has introduced the concept of 'skilled vision', suggesting that vision should be considered as an embodied, skilled and trained sense. It is 'a capacity of looking in a certain way as a result of training' (p. 41). In various professional contexts, this means that the professionals educate their eye for the relevant aspects of their work. Finally, the practitioners' professional knowledge becomes partly embodied, while it also connects with their professional self-understanding.

Here, I contribute to the discussions about vision in professional practices by exploring the concept of skilled vision in relation to the practical work of photojournalism professionals. Even though the importance of visuality has been recognized in news work, photojournalism professionals' expertise is poorly understood and the standing of the professionals has become ever more precarious in the hardening image market (Gürsel, 2016: 281). Through a focus on skilled vision, this study fills a gap in the literature on editorial processes that focuses on image production and visual studies more broadly by emphasizing the notion of visual expertise in news work.

I approach the concept of practice via a theoretical framework that explores the themes involved in acquiring expert skills. Here, I use Styhre's (2011: 109) definition of practices as 'social actions anchored in collectively enacted standards' that 'include a number of cognitive and embodied capacities and skills on the part of the agent'. Thus, I consider skilled vision as a manifestation of professional knowledge that involves a variety of practical skills. On this foundation, this study asks the following questions:

RQ1: What are the practical areas of photojournalistic work where the notion of skilled vision becomes manifested?

RQ2: How does the skilled vision of the professionals influence the visual news coverage?

FROM PERCEPTION TO SUBJECTIVE SKILL

In a time of modernization and rationalization, a new school of thought in cultural studies suggested that vision had a strong relation to subjective competences and trained skills (Crary, 1990). Crary was one of the first theorists to link vision with the observing subject; he suggested that an observer, and thus vision, was always tied to a system of conventions and the limitations of any given period of time (pp. 1–24; for a critique of Crary's argumentation, see Batchen, 1993).

These developments offered a fertile ground for ideas such as those of Crary because a larger reshaping of cultural theory was taking place. The shift in visual cultural studies often referred to as the 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell, 1994: 11–14) led to growing scholarly interest and emphasis on vision as culturally formed. Academics begun asking 'how particular ways of

seeing have been formed and why' (Becker, 2004: 153). Furthermore, these ideas also faced challenges at the time since the centrality of vision as a foundation of knowledge was criticized for being too dominant and unproblematized (e.g. Jay, 1993).

As a response to similar knowledge struggles, Grasseni (2004) proposed the concept of skilled vision. It was aimed towards a critique of vision as being overly highlighted, resulting in an ocular-centric bias in anthropology (p. 41). After observing cattle breeders in Italy from 1997 to 1999, she was convinced that vision, especially in a professional sense, was embodied, skilled and multisensory and, thus, more than just a gaze or a detached observation. 'Vision, like the other senses, needs educating and training in a relationship of apprenticeship and within an ecology of practice' (p. 41). In addition, she emphasized vision as a shared and formalized practice among professionals (pp. 50–52).

One of the theoretical inspirations for Grasseni's work was Charles Goodwin's writings about professional vision. As an anthropological linguist, Goodwin (1994) analysed professionals' discourses, gestures and artefacts. One of his most enlightening examples concerns legal argumentation, in which he explored the Rodney King case concerning police violence in the United States in 1992. He analysed the professional discourse of the lawyers, who argued for and against police actions whilst watching a videotape of the incident involving Rodney King, an African-American motorist who had been beaten by the police. He noticed that the opposing sides saw a completely different chain of events in the same videotape. After examining this and other professional fields, he concluded that the ability to see meaningful events was a socially-situated activity, where all vision was perspectival and woven into the prevailing practices and actions of a given professional context (p. 606).

In addition to Grasseni's (2004) study of cattle breeders, the concept of skilled vision has been studied in various areas, such as medicine (Roepstorff, 2009), design and architecture (Turnbull, 2009). Also, the related concept of professional vision has been developed in Goodwin's studies of legal argumentation, archaeological excavations (Goodwin, 1994) and oceanographers (Goodwin, 1995) and later applied to a number of other professions, including science journalists (Samuel et al., 2017), maritime pilots (Hontvedt, 2015), architects (Styhre, 2010) and teachers (Sherin and Van Es, 2009).

All these studies highlight that vision is situational and particular in each field. Further, it is central to determining the practitioners' capacity to adhere to the professional standards of the field. To varying degrees, the studies also share the idea of vision as an active education of attention. According to James Gibson's (1986[1979]) ecological approach from the late 1970s, the education of attention is 'the improvement of perceiving with practice, where the state of the perceptual system is altered when it is attuned to information of a certain sort' (p. 254).

VALUES AND CONSTRAINTS OF PROFESSIONAL PHOTOJOURNALISM

Especially in daily news organizations, the professionals work under a great time pressure. News picture agencies have refined their processes to the extreme in the competition for news. Today, urgent photos may fly in seconds from the photographer's camera through the agency's picture desk to the client (see Ilan, 2019: 85–87). Meantime, the standards in the field of photojournalism are intertwined in professionals' ability to define a 'good' news image. For this, the professionals need knowledge that involves an understanding of many aspects of the work, such as news value, aesthetics, business logic and professional ethics.

In its simplest formulation, news value entails a professional understanding about what is relevant. Traditional news values such as impact, proximity, novelty and negativity may be realized in photography similarly as in textual stories (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). As for news photography, an often-argued criterion is a photograph's capacity to tell the news. The information value 'prevails over aesthetics but it is preferably combined with aesthetic values' (De Smaele et al., 2017: 67–68). Aesthetic values or how news images convey their message are, however, increasingly important in news work (Nilsson, 2017; Veneti, 2017). Langton (2009: 106) sums up characteristics for a 'good' journalistic image including 'a good composition, quality light, strong moment, and meaningful content'. Meanwhile, news values are constructions that are accomplished through different visual strategies in news work (Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 108–124). Thus, the professionals' expertise connects with their ability to evaluate newsworthiness, photographic genres, technical aspects of photography and the personal styles of different photographers.

In addition, as Bednarek and Caple point out, it is important to distinguish news values from news selection factors. Professional decisions about what to cover and how often have to do with commercial values such as meeting deadlines, client analytics and availability of images or photographers. Photojournalism professionals' expertise consists of a balance between ideals and practical constraints.

For professional ethics, a long-lasting focus has been in preserving the credibility of news images. Photojournalism professionals are committed to the professional ethical guidelines that oblige them to produce images that are trustworthy (Carlson, 2009; Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010; Warburton, 2002), which means that they are 'objective' according to journalistic standards (Maras, 2013). For example, photojournalism professionals consider part of their expertise to be able to detect and prevent photo manipulations. However, an empirical work (Lehmuskallio et al., 2018) shows that the professionals cannot distinguish photorealistic computer-generated images from photographs when looking at them one after another.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study is part of a larger research project in which material has been collected at three newsrooms: (1) Reuters, (2) the Finnish picture agency LK and (3) the Finnish news magazine SK. For this study, I have decided to treat the three research sites as one empirical data set since my analysis shows that the practices of skilled vision are shared among the organizations. Meanwhile, I acknowledge that there are differences in the work of photo editors between the organizations. At picture agencies, the photo editors' job is to monitor and prepare imagery for a market, whereas their colleagues at newspapers and magazines make publication decisions on the images.

First, I selected the picture agency Reuters as a research site since it is one of the leading news picture agencies in the world. The company has two global offices, in Poland and in Singapore, and it is out of these offices that most of the photo editors work. Reuters' global pictures editor is based in London. The material for this research was gathered at the Reuters' London bureau and at the global office in Poland. Second, the national agency LK is the biggest news photo agency in Finland; it co-operates at some level with almost all the Finnish daily news organizations. LK is one of the customers of Reuters Pictures. Third, the news magazine *SK* – ever since its establishment – has invested considerably in photography and it was among the first magazines that started publishing photographs in Finland.

Ethnography as a research orientation was a practical solution since my aim was to understand how photojournalism professionals see images and how the knowledge involved in seeing appeared in actual work practices. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews at each research site that allowed me to focus on clarifying questions about what I had observed in the newsrooms. In the case of Reuters, the choice of interviews, instead of observations, was a matter of access. Thus, I reflected my observations from the Finnish newsrooms while analysing the interview data from Reuters. The interviews were ethnographic in nature, allowing the informants to talk at length about their work and experiences in the organizations. Thus, the focus of this study is not in the news images as such but, instead, I am interested in the role of the images 'in the production of meaningful action' in the photo-journalistic work (see Goodwin, 2001: 157).

The data consists of 30 interviews of photojournalism professionals from the three organizations in addition to field notes of the participant observations from the newsrooms of LK and SK. I spent 58 hours at LK and 52 hours at SK (seven consecutive days at each site) during the spring of 2017. During the fieldwork, I attended the photo department's daily morning meetings at LK and weekly meetings at SK, and I usually spent the rest of the day observing one or two photo editors at a time. Depending on how busy the participants were, I posed questions during the observation or asked them to explain what they were doing. For example, I often asked them to explain why they decided to select a certain image. By actively taking part and interjecting

during the observation, I was a participant rather than a detached observer of these social situations (Green, 2003: 135–136).

The interviews at LK and SK were conducted during and immediately after the observation periods. The interviews at Reuters were conducted in spring 2018 in London and in autumn 2018 in Poland. At Reuters, I interviewed three managers, including the global pictures editor. The rest of the interviewees at Reuters were photo editors. At LK, the interviewees included the editorial manager and the assistant editorial manager of news photography, five photo editors and three photographers. At SK, the interviewees included the editor-in-chief, the head of the visual team, the art director, the photographer–photo editor, a graphic designer, an infographic designer and an in-house photographer. With regard to the entire study, there were 19 male and 11 female participants. Their work experience ranged from less than 5 years to over 30 years in the field. At LK and SK, the participants were all Finnish nationals and at Reuters they represented many different but mainly European nationalities.

The interviews lasted from 33–90 minutes each and they were recorded and transcribed. The interview respondents were numbered consecutively (R1, R2, etc.). The pre-defined themes of the interviews were: daily workflows and routines, rewarding and challenging characteristics of the work, image selection practices, and criteria and professional ethics. Here, I focus on the interview and observation material that concerns image selection and image quality. I approached these topics with questions such as 'What kind of criteria do you use in selecting the news images?', 'How do you find the right images from the continuous stream of images?' and 'How would you characterize a good news image?'

After data gathering, the material was analysed qualitatively. I coded the interviews with the help of the Atlas.ti software, conducted close readings of the interviews in parallel with the field notes and then organized the data into thematic clusters. First, I analysed the material, noting where the participants described images in terms of quality or where they characterized a good image more explicitly. Second, I focused on the material concerning the actual image selection practices by applying the characteristics of skilled vision described by Grasseni (2004). Finally, I identified four areas of practice where the professionals educate their vision from day to day. These were: (1) constant following of news, (2) the use of reference images, (3) the use of specific software, and (4) social interaction among the professionals.

THE SKILLED VISION OF PHOTOJOURNALISM PROFESSIONALS

In the following sections, I will introduce the four areas in which the professional knowledge of photojournalism professionals is manifested in their everyday practices. I argue that, after repeating these practices throughout an

extensive career, the professional knowledge becomes partly embodied and intertwined with the practitioners' professional identities.

News monitoring in accumulating professional knowledge

The interviews with the professionals revealed that their ability to quickly select images is largely based on expectations that they gain by constantly following the news (R2, R4, R9 and R20). Photojournalism professionals live and work in the world of news, and they know most of the routine daily news events days or weeks beforehand. With the exception of breaking news, they know what kinds of images are expected to be needed. For example, a photo editor from LK explained that reading the lead news stories from the main dailies of the country is part of her morning rituals as she travels to work by train. When she gets to work at 7 am, her first task is to review the image feed to see which images her colleagues have sent to the clients during the previous evening shift and overnight. Furthermore, the constant news monitoring continues at work by following television news, radio, online newspapers and social media. In particular, the news agency photo editors considered it crucial to their work to keep themselves constantly updated about the news.

At news picture agencies, the photo editors' days begin with morning meetings, where the main goal is to map and build a shared understanding about the most important news of the day. A concrete structure for the photo editors' daily work is a plan that lists all the topics that should be visually covered during the day. The work will be done according to the plan if there is no breaking news that will overtake the planned events. The plan, together with the knowledge about the newsworthy topics, directs the professionals' attention toward certain topics and helps them ignore others.

News expectations also involve the notion of news value, which is an important criterion for image selection in news work (Bednarek and Caple, 2017; Nilsson, 2017; Schwalbe et al., 2015). In the context of news photography, the people or the place mentioned in the story should be recognizable if the image is to be chosen for a specific news story. Further, a news image must have been taken at the actual event on the actual day unless it is an archival image. In addition, journalists simultaneously evaluate images in terms of politics, aesthetics and business strategy (Gürsel, 2016: 166–167). Many of the interviewees mentioned these different aspects of image selection (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R9, R13, R16, R21, R23, R24 and R26).

One news agency photo editor provided an example of image selection from a series of images of European politics saying that, since she knew there was news about Emmanuel Macron that day, she had to make sure that he was in the pictures. She knew that it was the kind of news that their clients would definitely report that day. This knowledge about the current news and its news value for the clients was essential in her ability to find and select the right images.

In conversation about up-to-date knowledge, one news agency editor described an example where he had to ask advice from his manager. He was unable to make a decision about sending in pictures about a familicide from a previous day because he had been out of the office for three weeks and did not know the case well enough. In this particular example, there were images from outside the house where the tragedy had occurred as well as images that were more unidentifiable as they only showed the area roped off with police tape against a blurred background. The photo editor did not know what kind of images had been sent earlier and what his colleagues had discussed about the identifiable pictures. In view of this, the photo editors' vision is not just about what is seen in the picture, but it also involves knowledge about the wider context, including information of each particular situation.

Defining a 'good' image with reference images

Recognizing what is newsworthy and finding a series of images of an important news event is, however, just the beginning of photo editors' work. They must then define what qualifies as a 'good' news image. The assessment of a 'good' image comes from both inside and outside the professional practice. The photo editors are a link between the photographers and the clients. Therefore, they must understand how the photographers see images and, on the other hand, how their clients – whether they are news media organizations or ordinary citizens – see images (see Langton, 2009: 99). Many interviewees mentioned that they must consider what kinds of images are appreciated by their clients or by the news media as a whole (R1, R3, R4, R6, R9, R16, R17, R18, R19, R20, R23, R25 and R26). Photo editors learn this from the daily discussions with colleagues and by following what kinds of images their clients and the news media in general download and publish. According to one Reuters' photo editor, reviewing published images is an important way of gaining knowledge that she needs in her work:

> . . . you also try to follow what other newspapers have chosen. They always have daily picture selections and our editor's choice. So, you sort of start to get a feeling for it, and sort of just your subjective, likes or dislikes get a layer of this sort of more informed approach and you start to sort of understand what is it that, yeah also, following newspapers, what they usually put on the front page. (R26)

In the above quote, the interviewee describes how a novice photo editor starts to build an understanding about the kind of photos that are appreciated in the field. The accumulated knowledge about the published images serves as a reference bank for photo editors in their daily work. This is important since the news agency photo editors try to provide pictures that they believe their clients will appreciate but, on the other hand, they want to avoid pictures that they would expect would not be used. Sometimes the preferences of clients may even have a direct influence on future processes of production (Ilan, 2019: 41).

The same applies to the practitioners working in publishing. At SK, the visual team spent a considerable amount of time and effort in thinking of each picture's style and message in relation to their readers' expectations. They wanted to make sure that the published photographs represented the values shared by the magazine and its expected readers. In the magazine work, pictures of other publications served as a reference and as sources of inspiration when the visual team wanted to convey a certain style or atmosphere with images.

As for the assessment of a 'good' image inside the practice, photo editors have a special relationship with photographers. Depending on the photographer's time pressure and nature of the assignment, news images are sometimes handled and edited by the photo editors and sometimes by the photographers themselves (see Langton, 2009: 107–108). Photojournalism is about teamwork, and I got the impression that the photo editors tried to do their best to preserve the photographers' vision in their editing. For the best possible outcome, the photo editors use the photographers' earlier work as a reference for trying to understand their styles and adjust the work accordingly when editing. For example, as one Reuters' photo editor described, she uses similar cropping and lighting to the photographer's earlier work:

> . . . you have to know what a photographer wants because they are all different, all totally different. I have my way of working with them. Every time I work with someone new I go through his [sic] pictures before, I go through selection and okay, this one does it like this and I have to try to adjust. (R25)

These examples reveal two types of standards applied as part of the photojournalism professionals' expertise to understand what kinds of images are valued both in and outside the business. This knowledge is gained through learned experiences and socialization into the field.

Seeing details and wholes with the help of software

Photojournalism professionals are attuned to identify associations or small nuances that make some images more interesting than others. When I asked the informants to explicate their ideas of 'good' images, many of them talked about good light, richness of colour and interesting or balanced composition (R1, R3, R11, R12, R16, R18, R22 and R23). A few interviewees mentioned that it catches their eye if there is something exceptional in the image. This exceptionality could mean an unusual facial expression, composition, camera angle, and so on; it could also mean that the pictured event is somehow unforeseen or rare.

In all three organizations, for the practical task of comparing two or more images, the practitioners used software that allowed them to make a selection from a series of images for further examination. In regular mode, they saw many pictures at once on the screen in a thumbnail size. If needed, they could zoom in and look at the selected images in parallel in a bigger size.

The editors used this tool regularly when they had a couple of very similar images and they were trying to determine which one to choose. Furthermore, seeing the details was important, for example, when they suspected that the image might contain some graphic elements. I noticed this when I was observing a photo editor from SK who was examining photographs from a war zone in Iraq. The images showed destroyed buildings and city surroundings, and a few of them depicted covered corpses. The editor told me that she was zooming in to see if there were dead bodies or body parts in the middle of the ruins, in which case she would not choose the image.

In addition, detecting a photo manipulation or a false caption also requires examination of details. For example, on one day at LK, the responsible photo editor was following the image feed of their international partner news agency because she was waiting for a picture from a bombing in Damascus from that morning. When the picture finally arrived, the photo editors gathered around her desk to discuss the zoomed-in image because they felt that there was something incorrect in it. The picture looked like a sunrise with the city silhouetted in the background and the caption read that there were flames rising above the city. A few editors had doubts that the image depicted the bombing. They said that, if it was related to the bombing, a scene might look like the one in the image for only a few milliseconds and, for that reason, they considered it unlikely that the image was what the caption claimed. They assumed that the caption was incorrect instead of thinking that the image was a manipulation. In this case, the photo editors' prior knowledge about images of bombings was crucial and the software played a role in allowing them to zoom in and focus on the details.

In addition to details, seeing wholes is equally important in photojournalistic work, for example, when trying to assess the relevance of a single image. Here again, the software allows the professionals to see a large number of pictures at a single glance, which helps them to get an overall view of the event and all the available images. The software also has a feature that enables them to search the images from the same or similar events that have been used earlier. This is important, for example, when they have to decide the level of violence depicted in the images they provide. One general rule of thumb in the work is that the level of violent content has to be in line with the overall violence and significance of the news event. This means that violent images are shown if the depicted event is violent and if the professionals evaluate that it has enough societal significance. Therefore, making a decision on graphic or violent images presupposes a large amount of professional knowledge on cultural and legislative aspects in addition to the news values of the clients.

Building a shared vision through social practices

Photojournalistic work contains social aspects that enable collegial learning. For example, the shared understanding of 'good' photography is built into the conversations among the professionals on a daily basis. It is a way to exchange

views about which images to choose and to solve ethical problems such as the one in the image of the bombing in Damascus. Furthermore, professional discussions with colleagues help to build a team spirit and sense of solidarity among peers, for example, when they all get together to praise stunning images. The teamwork around images was emphasized especially among the interviewees at Reuters (R16, R20, R23, R25 and R26):

> I think just the fact of looking at so many pictures every day teaches you a lot. And also working with very experienced and talented photographers and editors, and constantly having conversations about pictures. We'll be sitting on the desk and we'll show each other edits that we've done and then discuss. (R16)

In this quote, the interviewee describes how the more experienced professionals share their knowledge with the others. According to my observations, the professionals discuss images on a very case-specific basis and in a nuanced way instead of listing characteristics of a 'good' image on a more general level. For example, at Reuters, a new photo editor was consulting her manager about pictures that they received from a local picture agency of a recent earthquake in Indonesia. The problem was that, even though the pictures were interesting with a high news value, the technical quality of the images was questionable since they contained some spots of sensor dust. The conversation between the photo editor and her manager went something like this: 'What do you think about these spots? Should I try to clean these?' asked the photo editor. 'No, I think there are too many. I do not think we can fix these. I would rather not use these', replied the manager. During this conversation, the newly arrived photo editor learned the level of sensor dust that is unacceptable or considered not worthwhile in news work. This is an example of an apprenticeship relationship in the photo editors' work that, in contrast to a large extent of the work, is quite individual and silent with each photo editor sitting at his or her individual computer screen.

Furthermore, the practitioners' learning from colleagues is not limited to face-to-face discussions but is also performed in the monitoring and comparing of one's own image choices to the pictures selected or published by colleagues. The photo editors at LK regularly compared their image choices to the so-called 'top shots' or 'top pics' that the other photo agencies published every day (R2, R3). Top shots are a series of images thought to be the most compelling that day as chosen by the photo editors at the global picture agencies. The photo editors I observed felt satisfied if they had happened to select the same image that had been selected as a top shot. One photo editor told me that when she notices that she has picked the same image that the AFP (Agence France-Presse) put in the top shots, she thinks she has succeeded. She feels that she knows what she is doing and that she has mastered the field after extensive experience.

Another example concerns the use of archival images in news work. One photo editor from LK explained that she and her colleagues tend to use the same archival images, even though the archive contains many variants on the same topic. She could not really explain what differentiates these images from the others as she stated, 'each one of us always picks the same image, and it just has something in it.' Thus, the comparison of the image choices and the use of the same archival images are examples of practices where collegial learning takes place. The result of this learning is that the professionals tend to select the same or similar images when they make decisions independently. One interviewee from SK described the phenomenon and the options they have in practice once they have recognized the repeating imagery:

> Since we know that the same images keep repeating every year, we can play with it. We may use the typical image because it is a cliché kind of repetition and turn it into a victory. Or we may expressly avoid the typical image, because if we want to build a surprise or an experience, we are usually looking for the atypical image that doesn't feel familiar or that has something special in it. (R11)

Being able to evaluate the different image choices requires experience and a nuanced understanding of different genres and conventions. To achieve this ability takes many years of experience, including collegial discussions on a daily basis in addition to seeing and evaluating thousands of images.

Vision as the embodied result of learning

My findings indicate that the vision of photojournalism professionals is embodied in a way that they have the skill to look at images with a professional eye, but they are not able to fully explain it. When I asked the professionals how they distinguished a 'good' image from the continuous stream of images or why they selected a certain image, they often referred to intuition or different bodily sensations (R1, R2, R3, R5, R11, R12, R14, R16, R19, R21, R22 and R24). They used expressions such as, 'the image selection is a gut reaction' or that they 'make the selection by the seat of their pants'.

In other words, after journalistic criteria, the professionals select images mainly by their instincts and experience instead of relying on a conscious systematic analysis. Earlier journalism research has also recognized the idea of a 'gut feeling' among journalists (Schultz, 2007). This embodied knowledge is something that Schön (1983: 49–51) called 'reflection-in-action'. Professional work depends largely on tacit and implicit patterns of action. Therefore, a portion of professional knowledge lies in the action.

Schön's ideas can be linked to theories of expertise-based intuition (Raami, 2015; Styhre, 2011). Raami (2015) considers it important to differentiate between the everyday intuition that all humans use routinely and the expertise-based intuition that is the result of continuous learning and

usually requires at least 10 years of active practice, during which a subconscious database of work-related knowledge is formed (pp. 62–63). The benefit of this subconscious decision-making is speed. Social psychologists have calculated that, without subconscious processing, activities such as buying a house would require years of conscious reasoning in order to take all the different aspects into account (Raami, 2015: 42). Photojournalism professionals' reliance on intuition is a practical solution in news work, where the increased need for speed simply does not allow for time-consuming reasoning. For example, in news agency work, the editors have to be able to make the decision about a single image within a few seconds. One interviewee from Reuters had noticed the learning in practice:

> What you experience is intuition, it's actually the result of many years of learning, and many years of thinking about it. So it might only take a second to press the button or choose the picture, but actually what has gone into that is 15 years of working on and thinking about it, conversations about it. (R16)

In the citation, the practices of collegial discussion and looking at and thinking about images are linked with learning that finally develops into an embodied professional knowledge. Being able to see and evaluate images in a professional manner is part of the practitioners' professional self-understanding. I noticed that those professionals who had a long career, strong opinions and a large vocabulary in describing images were often the ones who were consulted by the others. Their vision was valued in the newsroom. In the interviews, some also separated themselves as visual professionals:

> I am from a visual family . . . it is exciting to notice how differently people really think about images. I notice that I don't really have a clue about how [other] people experience images. (R13)

Skilled vision is valued in photojournalism practitioners' professional discourse which, in turn, reflects their professional identity. Prior research suggests that Western journalists' professional identity relies on occupational ideological values, such as public service, autonomy, immediacy, objectivity and ethics (Deuze, 2005; Soloski, 1990; Zelizer, 2004). These are normative ideals that justify the journalistic occupation to the public outside the profession, whereas I propose that skilled vision is a building block of photojournalism practitioners' professional identity at a more personal and everyday level.

DISCUSSION

This research examined how the skilled vision of photojournalism professionals – mainly photo editors – is constituted in their work practices of news image production and how it influences the news media's visual coverage. The

findings suggest that the education of photojournalism practitioners' professional eye is manifested in various work practices that involve the constant following of news, use of published news pictures as reference images, use of software that allows one to compare and select images and, finally, collegial sharing and discussions, where collective understanding and peer support are built. Within these practices, the professionals learn to direct their attention to relevant aspects of the work. The skilled vision of photojournalism professionals includes an embodied level that closely relates to the practitioner's reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) and expertise-based intuition (Raami, 2015; Styhre, 2011). Therefore, part of their professional knowledge is inherent in the actual practice.

Since visual expertise is in part tacit and the professionals find it difficult to articulate it, this study aims at shedding light on some of the nuances of the practice. The research shows that visual expertise involves various kinds of professional knowledge from technical aspects of photography to the broader understanding of journalistic norms and conventions. Photojournalism professionals' skilled vision is not limited to what is seen in the pictures. Rather, it is a result of an extensive career where the practitioners educate their eye by constantly living the world of news, learning from the published imagery and having collegial conversations about images.

In order to become a full member of the professional community, an individual must adopt the shared vision practised in the field. This adoption often involves a relationship of apprenticeship. For photojournalism professionals, a skilled vision is a precondition for their ability to make quick and ethical image selection decisions and, thus, it is a constitutive element of their work.

Meanwhile, the shared vision among professionals entails a reach of uniformity that may manifest itself, for example, in repetitious news imagery. Furthermore, an excessive uniformity in news imagery may contradict journalism's central goal of providing a variety of viewpoints on which the audience can make well-informed judgments. My impression was that there is a margin for individual choice but the professionals seem to share a common understanding about 'good' images in a general sense. Similarly, Langton (2009: 110) describes how photographers must meet 'certain expectations in terms of technical proficiency, aesthetics, content, and style' in order to make a living, and this also tends to homogenize the types of images produced for the market.

These findings enrich Grasseni's (2004) conception of skilled vision by suggesting that photojournalism professionals' skilled vision is both constitutive and limiting: it is central to the social organization of the profession; meanwhile, it streamlines and narrows the visual coverage produced, selected and finally published in the news media. While this holds true, I argue that the more news images are brokered by news workers who are not professionals of visual journalism, the more homogenized the published imagery will be. That is because replaying stereotypical images – instead of searching for the

ideal image for a particular story – takes less time and work and is, thus, more cost-efficient (see Gürsel, 2016: 286). In view of my findings about the importance of visual expertise, in addition to the centrality of visuals in the current media environment, it is paradoxical that photojournalism professionals find it increasingly difficult to earn a living through editorial work (pp. 281–310).

Unlike in Grasseni's (2004) study of cattle breeding where there are codified materials that the breeders draw on to evaluate an animal, one cannot speak of a similar standardization of the encoded practice in photojournalism. The photojournalistic standards for a 'good' image are looser and leave space for subjective evaluation and a more informal but shared understanding of ideal practice. The field of photojournalism, however, has a number of established institutions where the community reinforces and manifests its ideals and standards. These include formal education, ethical guidelines of the key photojournalism organizations, international news photo contests, festivals and professional workshops. The formalized structures participate in building common criteria for 'good' photojournalism. These structures are outside the focus of the present study but they offer an important prospect for future research on photojournalists' skilled vision.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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