

BEYOND VISUALIZATION: EXPLORING NEW THINKING IN PRODUCTION TEAM DYNAMICS FOR NEWS WEB SITES

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YIYUN ZHA

UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

EVE.YIYUN@GMAIL.COM

ABSTRACT

As part of a larger study aiming at understanding and improving interactive reader experiences through a study of news production team dynamics, as a complex, multi-faceted endeavour, this paper looks at the key factors affecting in-house visual journalists' view of news production and their ability to think aesthetically. A number of impacts influenced by new technologies will be explored, followed by discussion on the rationale and development of news production processes that proposes a range of challenges for creative workers. I intend to show how these movements call for a radical reconsideration of new thinking about news web site visualization.

INTRODUCTION

In a European context, the Scandinavian countries are generally recognized as early adopters of digital media technology, especially in terms of common Internet access and use (Engebretsen 2006). Finland is among the top countries that started online newspapers quite early, in compliance with its pioneer status of online journalism reading, as measured by newspaper circulation compared to number of inhabitants. Yet has the implementation of new media technology led to enhanced journalism – so far? This paper explores the news production team dynamics by focusing on visual journalists' role currently practised in news web sites.

Taking into consideration a number of challenges emerged from new technologies, from reduced time frames to limited creative freedom, it exemplifies fieldwork from working communities in two geographically opposite Finnish newsrooms. I argue that the multi-faceted endeavours in news production team serve to a better understanding of interactive reader experience, from a designer's perspective. The fieldwork is part of the initial research plan that explores the interrelations of four research questions, to clarify how the various objectives fit together in order to reach the main aim.

THE CONTEXT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) Reduced time-frames

Insofar as the current visualization in today's Finnish news web sites, it in general reflects the dominant design paradigm that remains deeply grounded by time-efficiency, gearing mainly with news production time frames and newspaper layout. In this state of flux, the emergence and wide spread of virtual space has challenged traditional journalism, meanwhile it has affected how new media brings a new way of working as a connection with a mass of people to time and space as readers. With the dynamics in mind, the biggest impact in new media, therefore, is the demanding requirements for creative workers. In order to make everyday online newspapers possible, editorial processes are bound to follow highly structured schedule, so that the workflow can be continuous and opportune. Digital journalism is a media profession that has contributed to increasing demands on the efficiency, cost-effectiveness, quality of presses and digital desktop tools. These have supercharged challenging requirements for in-house visual journalists to produce accurate visual information in extremely reduced time frames.

2) Limited creative freedom

In daily work and practices in digital media production, it is not surprising that visual journalists' creativity is limited owing to restricted time in production process. A common concern regarding this issue is the limited and even gradual elimination of creative freedom. On the one hand, this implies that individual work no longer satisfies the creative process of media work in information and communication technologies. On the other, a crucial nature of visual journalists' work is to get accustomed into a converged environment. One instance of the convergence culture (Jenkins 2008) is an increasing dependence on CCI Layout Champ (a desktop publishing software) for in-house layouters, which is a sophisticated layout design package for an efficient content management with convenient use. Despite of some customized services in-house, media formats and visualization is generally standardized to accommodate the fixed system.

3) Confusion regarding professional identity and job positioning

During the media transition, however, communication design covering journalism is likely to face changeable situation: decisions made and practices used in the past can be seldom applicable in today's newsrooms, especially in visual journalism. This challenge faced by visual journalists in the transition from printed newspapers to digital platform have not been well addressed and well disseminated. Thus, online newspaper became a place where few design researchers and theorists have elucidated in the circumstances. This is one reason why, for visual journalists, possibilities of voicing their own opinions within journalistic interventions are very limited. Another reason for visual journalists' taciturnity in newsrooms is the organizational norms that had been in place for decades guiding visual journalists who had been dominated to think of their role as auxiliary of news production. Nonetheless whatever creative process has changed and how visual journalists think of the transition, there has direct consequences on the visualization produced and practiced. When in-house visual journalists' work is integrated into an intertwined process, it affects both their understanding of convergence in workplace and of technology (Deuze, 2007).

Therefore, visualization in news web sites has long relied heavily on a complex, multi-faceted endeavour, which serves as a means for understanding and improving upon interactive reader experience. Meanwhile, the underlying visual lifting also opens up greater possibilities in visual journalism. In the following, four main research questions are tied in well to clarify the direction of the shift (from printed press to digital news publishing) and the levels of visual journalists' involvement in the negotiation of technologies, workflow and aesthetics. The four research questions are:

- a) What are the main principles for in-house visual journalists to apply in web design, and how have these changed in the transition of media dynamics? (Theoretical and practical focus)
- b) How can in-house visual journalists define self-positioning? (Theoretical focus followed by practical studies in Finnish newsrooms)
- c) How are aesthetic inputs involved in visualization of online newspaper's layout design, as an instrumental visual representation for understanding visual information structure in news web sites? (Theoretical focus)
- d) What do in-house visual journalists experience the on-going transition, particularly with regards to how newsroom culture affects daily practices? (Practical focus)

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DISCUSSION

Today the death of printed newspapers is an increasingly common subject of speculation, which is the result of the fact that the general circulation of newspapers is dwindling dramatically. This change has been labelled Journalism 2.0 (Muhammad 2008), meta-medium of digital computers (Manovich 2001), and multimodal characteristics compared to traditional journalism¹ (Thiel 1998; Pulkkinen 2008). The changes of technological development and people's habitual reading have acquired growing importance in interactive reader experience in an era when competition between media houses has increased. In order to foster knowledge of the ignorable trajectory of how visual journalists adapt their skills to the new environment, a shift to their transformative positioning, which is an inevitable but gradual process, is crucial.

Visualization in news web site is the most distinct representation of how visual journalists convey information or pass emotional feelings by means of the information (Brusila 2014). One consequence of convergence of different media and technologies leads to a visual lifting in news web sites. Yet many visions of scholars often take the value of technological possibilities in social media at the expense of visual representation. Therefore, there has emerged a need to look closer at the aesthetic inputs embodied in the visualization, which is currently taken for granted to be constructed by objects, the properties of objects and the information attributed in objects (Bertin 1983; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Engelhardt 2007; Brusila 2014). We not merely keep the aesthetics in daily work, but remarkably, the integral of digital applications also blends with prior experiences, which makes design practices more ample and even sophisticated. It means

¹ From a medium perspective, "the traditional journalism" in this paper refers to printed newspapers, as a comparison of online news websites.

newsrooms in the recent years have grappled with commitment to investing more efforts in visual journalism.

The new requirements of new media in online journalism has stemmed from the idea developed by Bolter and Grusin (1999), who stressed the dimension of remediation² development when referring to what is 'new' in media historiography. It is assumed that digital networked technology for electronic document storage eliminates restrictions on how much space can be used, and simultaneously keeps the door open to unlimited space for archiving news while continually offering the most current information for viewers. In the remediation process, the witness has been seen of how readers look at the huge change (Jensen 2002); how practitioners (designers, programmers, engineers, etc.) apply new ideas into understandings (Manovich 2001); and how we understand news web sites as an event-take-place terrace (Pink 2011). Since news is distributed as the meeting point of 'new' and 'old' media in news web sites, creative workers are required to obtain more knowledge in both printed press and digital platform. Pink (2011) strengthens the abstract concept of 'place' made here for thinking critically about multimodality knowing especially when moving images practiced by professionals are what is epitomized in daily work for visual journalists. In online visual journalism, the attributes of time and space are developed and focused more than ever. Such an idea of event-place very well fits in the discussions on the narratives, cognition and visual journalists positioning.

The above interrelationships between remediation, visual journalist's positioning and design aesthetics for sustainability could be well elucidated in visual journalists' daily routines, although it is currently not common to integrate the link in between. Visualization in news website is working more than an aid to facilitate specific messages by texts, photos, columns and the interplay of these visual materials (Cairo 2013). As a remediation of print press, news web sites provide much more space for visual journalists to strategically take time and space into design practices in improving interactive reader experiences. Yet visual journalists, such as video infographic designers, sometimes have found it difficult to communicate with journalists. The understanding of moving image and animation frame is meaningfully central instead of a bald description of words. In this vein, I believe that the interrelationships are pragmatic enough to be used as a grounded theory in the research for two reasons: 1) to understand visualization as design practice that may support a better communication with journalist's use of text in news production; 2) to investigate how visual journalists envision aesthetic inputs in specific context where newsroom culture plays a vital role.

² Remediation here is adapted to Bolter and Grusin's notes (1999) of the process of mediating something that has already been mediated in the sake of realizing immediacy.

THE METHODOLOGY

My goal in the study is to join the above-mentioned theoretical discussions, fill some gaps in existing research and try to track and outline developments in some Finnish newsrooms cultures. The intended audience of this research is identified as newsrooms, visual journalists and journalists who share an interest in improving reader experiences and visualization in news web sites. I believe that this research, insofar as it considers the blurry job boundaries and team dynamics, will indeed prove valuable to the targeted audiences.

This study outlines two different methods as part of the qualitative enquiry, described as analytical and ethnographic. From a theoretical insight, I have consulted a solid range of literature enabling a clear understanding of the challenges faced in this new media transitions. How new thinking of the media transition affects the visualization in news web sites will be gleaned throughout some interpretive analyses of layout design and infographic designs. Yet before digging deep in this study, it is appropriate to focus on a theoretical understanding of the uncertainties caused by the changing media landscape. Of the ethnographic method, I have narrowed the contextual focus by studying the dynamics in two Finnish newsrooms, in opposite regions of the countries.

Apart from the analysis of theories from previous researchers, ethnographic research has been well planned. It is important to look not only at what visual journalists' daily routines in newsrooms are conducted but also how organizational cultures affect visual journalists in practice. To be more specific, the focus will be emphasized on the exposition of what visual journalists do, how they do it and what they think about their work. This poses a challenge for newsrooms to adapt both infrastructure and ideology in compliance with newsroom cultures.

My ethnographic research was designed on the basis of designer's role in Design Department of Helsingin Sanomat and Lapin Kansa, respectively one newsroom in the South and the other in the North. Helsingin Sanomat is the biggest subscription newspaper in Finland and Nordic countries, and Lapin Kansa is also the biggest newsroom in the Northern Finland. For a general picture of Finnish newsroom culture, I suppose the research results from these two newsrooms are valuable and emblematic.

As early adopters of new media in Finland, and relatively small working communities, the groups I have chosen (visual journalists) are somewhat atypical newsroom environments. Yet through interviewing visual journalists and observing their practices and routines there come interesting and valuable insights in such 'extreme' cases. Given that Finnish newsrooms are generally small operations, I think the selected communities in newsrooms are moderately representative of the industry in general in Finland and such insights can in turn be fruitful for the next stage of

the project. The ethnographic observations are aiming to be a grounded work for orientating a tendency of this industry in a Finnish national level.

INITIAL FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The initial findings based entirely on the visual journalist's point of view evidently identify four emerging characteristics of the new media for the sake of an interactive reader experience in news web sites. The theoretical analysis and ethnographic observations reveal that visualization in news web sites tends to integrate 'space' and 'time', coupled with the other three characteristics, respectively hierarchy, consistency and sequence. This amplifies traditional principles of dealing with text-image relationships (for instance, Golden mean philosophy) in visual communication design.

On the one hand, with the emergence of the fourth characteristic, the embodied aesthetic inputs in visualization of news web sites have been reviewed as reliance of visual representation. On the other, a rethink of visual production in news web sites needs investigated from analysing contributions of remediation developments in online media. A reconsideration of online news visualization affirms visual journalists' common ground and reveals a strong affiliation by locating themselves in the movement from a traditional to a digital platform.

The remediation from printed press to digital news prompts visual journalists to make substantial considerations of how practices should work and change for an interactive reader experience. Jenkins (2008) uses the concept of convergence culture to describe the new era of media use where new and old media, media producers and consumers collide unpredictably in their request for control and power. The number of players in the field has increased and their relations, referenced as influencing the respective visualization, have become increasingly complicated to define and observe. The visual production of online journalism is a collective platform with series of intertwined processes. Not only are different aesthetic inputs simultaneously collaborating in online news, but also they acquire co-involvement through visual journalists' efforts into a particular production process.

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