

Photojournalism in Central Europe

Editorial and Working Practices

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Abstract

The adoption of digital technologies, along with current economic realities, has affected the entire process of visual news production. It has also influenced the traditional concept of photojournalism. As a result, news photographers face multiple new challenges. Although visual news material is becoming ever more important, news organizations have cut back on employment, leaving those few who remain employed with additional workload and responsibilities. Based on interviews with photojournalists and photo editors, this article examines the current state of photojournalism and editorial processes in three Central European countries – the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. Findings indicate that photojournalists and photo editors face ongoing developments in the photographic medium that significantly affect their working practices and routines. At the same time, they must deal with increasing workload, new responsibilities, competition and the challenges of maintaining quality in the digital age.

Keywords: digitization, editorial processes, visual gatekeeping, visual journalism, cinematic way of shooting

Introduction

The development of the Internet and digital technology at the end of the twentieth century affected news organizations on different levels. Digitization, in particular, may be seen as a source of immense changes within the world's media industry, causing disruption in the media economy (Campbell 2013).

At this time, many news organizations quickly expanded to the World Wide Web, adopted new technologies for their benefit, and started to distribute news content via both print and online channels. Furthermore, new fully-online newspapers emerged. These developments caused a reconstruction of the media market.

While news organizations dealt with this ongoing transformation, the changes affected photojournalists' working practices and routines as well, probably more so than that of any of their colleagues. Digitization has impacted the entire field of photojournalism, including technical, production and editorial processes, as well as weakened quality

demands (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014). Photojournalists report (Hadland et al. 2015) fewer commissions and falling revenue as news organizations reduce the size of their photo departments. Rising demand for multimedia content challenges their skills, influences the quality of visual news production, and increases workloads (Bock 2008).

A news organization that relies on Internet advertising may now favour quantity over the quality of its visual news production. With a majority of the world's population having access to digital technology and the Internet, readers and consumers of mass media can easily become news producers. The reduction in the number of professional photojournalists employed full-time, and their replacement by other sources of visual material, might also be seen as a consequence of the democratization of photography (Allan 2013b).

This article follows up on various studies of the transition of the photojournalistic profession. A majority of recent research reflects the situation in a North American, specifically U.S. context. However, we consider the Central European case particularly interesting because photography and photojournalism have a long tradition here. In earlier studies, we have focused on the transition to digital photography (Štefaniková & Láb 2016), photojournalists' working conditions in print and online media (Láb & Štefaniková 2016), and photojournalism ethics (Láb & Štefaniková & Topinková 2016).

Taking a rather descriptive approach, this article examines the current state of photojournalism, editorial processes and the challenges faced by photojournalists in three countries of Central Europe (the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia). For the purpose of this article, we use previously unanalysed empirical materials and data of our research project 'Changes of Structure and Content of Photojournalistic Practice in the Era of Social Media'.

Based on the theoretical framework, our first research question will deal with the demographics of today's photojournalists and photo editors in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. Our aim is to investigate who today's photojournalists and photo editors 'are' (including sex, age, education and training, the type of contracts under which they are employed, wages, etc). The second research question addresses routines and practices of news photo production. It explores workload, the equipment used, working patterns, genres, and topics. The third research question is about gatekeeping, decision-making responsibilities, photo selection, editing, who assigns work and holds responsibility for the work published. Finally, our fourth research question asks about sources of images, competition with other photographers, and citizen journalism.

Theoretical framework

Professional identity and working conditions

In an extensive survey among 1,549 photojournalists from more than 100 countries, Hadland et al. (2015) found that the average photojournalist in 2015 was self-employed, well-educated, between 30-50 years of age, and someone who relied on media companies to earn a living. Photojournalists usually worked alone, and they occasionally also shot video and wrote articles.

Research dealing with the photojournalistic demography and identity is otherwise relatively rare. Studies dedicated specifically to photojournalists often look at specific

issues, e.g. digitization (Fahmy & Smith 2003, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014, Láb & Štefaniková 2016), multimedia skills and workload (Bock 2008, Campbell 2013, Yaschur 2012a), and citizen photographers (Patrick & Allan 2013). Such research includes national studies, such as Mäenpää's (2014) research dedicated to the professional values and ethics of Finnish photographers. A few researchers incorporate photojournalists among a cluster of media workers in their broader studies of journalists, including the Worlds of Journalism Study examining conditions and the state of journalism and media in 67 countries (Thurman et al. 2016, Tejkalová & Láb 2016a, 2016b).

Workload, photo production – routines and practices

In the past 20 years, photojournalism has undergone a dramatic transformation. The advent of digital technology and the Internet has brought a new dynamic to the media market. Technological factors play an important role in how images are taken, selected, edited and distributed.

Although traditional media organizations have adopted the Internet in their daily practice, a number of studies analyse how online journalism differs from traditional print journalism (Allan 2006, Cacciatore et al. 2012, Pavlik 2000, Láb & Štefaniková 2016, Lynch 2014). In other studies, Deuze (2003, 2004) discuss the convergence between print and online media; in these studies, the causes, dynamics and consequences of online journalism are described.

Klein-Avraham & Reich (2014) point out that the adoption of digital technologies, along with current economic realities, has affected the entire process of production of photojournalistic material, including the way photographs are captured, edited, chosen, archived and accessed. With basically zero limitations on materials, high-speed continuous shooting, instant review and the possibility of retaking photographs, photojournalists have adopted new working practices (Fahmy & Smith 2003). Therefore, the ideal concept of the 'decisive moment', defined by Henri Cartier-Bresson (1952) as the core of photojournalistic work, might be reconsidered.

According to Cartier-Bresson, the concept of the 'decisive moment' concerns the second the photographer sees the best composition and must intuitively know when exactly to click the shutter (Bernstein 2004). However, as proposed by Klein-Avraham and Reich (2014) and Štefaniková and Láb (2016), photojournalists working with digital photo equipment and continuous shooting can avoid the decisive moment altogether.

With continuous technical innovation, the expansion of online journalism, and the tighter budgets of news organizations, photojournalists are expected to master new technology, learn multimedia skills, produce unique content, and shoulder additional responsibilities. Russia's (2000) early study of digital imaging and its impact on photojournalism found that it increased the workload of photo departments. As increased production became a higher priority, it resulted in added burdens. More recent studies (Greenwood & Reinardy 2011, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014, Russia 2009, Santana & Russia 2013) have found that even though the majority of photojournalists and photo editors are doing multimedia work, news organizations rarely provide them with the necessary training in multimedia skills. While pressure to multitask may be economically enticing for a news organization (Bock 2008), it can affect the quality of news production negatively. As the amount of visual news production increases while at the same time

photo staff is being reduced, photojournalists are quite simply expected to produce more for less. There is an extensive loss of discussions, meetings, and personal contact in newsrooms (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014, Tejkalova & Lab 2016a, Zaremska 2016).

Gatekeeping, decision making, and responsibility

Past studies have highlighted that the decision-making gatekeeping process by which information is filtered has shifted with the advent of digital technology (Shoemaker & Vos 2009). Zavoina & Reichert (2000) examine how instant control over images and the possibility of deleting photographs on location put photojournalists into the role of photo editors. Similarly, Klein-Avraham & Reich (2014) explain how the selection of frames – the initial gatekeeping – has been delegated to photojournalists.

With this delegation of photo editors' duties to photographers, photojournalism is facing several issues. Photographers may have greater control over what photographs are published, but combining the tasks of photographer and photo editor into a single role might suggest that photo editors are unnecessary (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014). The absence of guidance and oversight may also result in lower quality standards (Newton 2009a, 2009b), and journalists may be forced to spend more time on handling technology and dealing with their additional duties than on producing quality content (Bock 2008).

In addition to a certain level of gatekeeping in photo selection, most photographers are also expected to take part in post-production. Thus, the majority perform at least basic editing (Hadland et al. 2015) and write captions (such as metadata, keywords, etc.) for both publishing and archiving purposes. In our recent study (Štefaniková & Láb 2016), Czech photojournalists claimed they spend almost the same amount of time handling these additional tasks as they used to spend working in the darkroom in the analog era. At least two other studies (Bock 2008, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014) show similar results.

Given these findings, we may also question where the responsibility for published material now lies. The answer may be quite troubling when the possibilities of digital alteration are considered. Thanks to digital technology, any element of a photograph can easily be improved, added upon, or modified. Thus, the almost undetectable manipulation of digital images raises the issues of reliability and ethics in photojournalism (Kobré 2006, Langton 2009, Láb et al. 2016).

Increased competition and financial pressures

The relative ease of use of digital cameras might give the impression that anybody holding a camera-equipped smartphone, a simple compact camera or a digital single-lens reflex camera (DSLR), can produce pictures as good as those produced by any professional.

According to Patrick and Allan (2013), the democratization of image media and intense financial pressures force many newsrooms to undervalue having a full-time professional photo department. As found during the data collection for our study, the majority of Czech, Polish, and Slovak local newspapers with smaller circulations do not have a regular photo department at all. In such cases, newsrooms must rely on photographs from photo agencies, image banks, freelancers, and their staff reporters. As news organizations cut back on staff and budgets, it is not rare that a multimedia

reporter equipped with a simple DSLR camera, or even just a smartphone, is forced to manage it all – gather information, take photographs, write articles, and shoot and edit video (Bock 2008).

Research also show that the phenomenon of citizen journalism – or as Allan (2013a) calls it, ‘citizen witnessing’ – challenges professional photojournalism (Allan 2007, 2013b). Scholars also question the quality of content and the working practices involved in obtaining eyewitness imagery (Kobré 2006, Mortensen 2011). For example, Mortensen (2014) investigates the ethical dilemmas and the lack of editorial control when citizen photojournalism is used as a unique news source.

Methodology and study design

Between 2014 and 2015 we conducted extensive research on digitization and the state of photojournalism in Central Europe. The dataset analysed in this article focused on working conditions, working and editorial processes and competition. The main source of data is a survey of photojournalists and photo editors from selected Central and East European (CEE) countries – the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. Data collected in the survey is supported by responses from in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Interviewees

For the purpose of our study, we define photojournalists and photo editors as news professionals (journalists) with at least 5 years of experience as photojournalists or photo editors and whose main source of income is from the production of visual news content. Adopting the definition by Johnstone et al. (1976), journalists are media professionals that have some level of editorial responsibility for the content they produce.

As presented in Table 1, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and a survey of 63 photojournalists and 15 photo editors from 28 different Czech, Polish and Slovak national print daily newspapers, online daily newspapers, and weekly news and current affairs magazines. A maximum of three journalists from one newsroom were sampled. The significantly higher number of photographers than photo editors surveyed resulted from a low number of photo editors located in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Notably, no photo editors at all are included in the case of Slovakia.

Table 1. *Number of interviewees and respondents*

	Photojournalists	Photo editors
Czech Republic	40	8
Poland	8	7
Slovakia	15	–
Total	63	15

Media outlet selection

Certain news organizations were selected to represent the leading photojournalistic standards in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. We also distinguished among different types of media (dailies, weeklies, opinion, etc.). The selection of leading print

media was based on their circulation. Interviews dealing with practices in print media were conducted at outlets ranging in circulation from 33,000 to 320,000, half of them with a circulation of at least 100,000.

In-depth interviews and survey

The field research was divided into two periods: (1) from February to June 2014 and (2) from September 2014 to May 2015. The interviews and the survey were conducted face to face or by Skype and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Interviewees were notified that they could refrain from answering any question; they were also assured that participation was voluntary and that responses would remain anonymous.

The semi-structured interviews contained open-ended questions covering all stages of photojournalistic production, ethics, credibility, and the transition from analog to digital media. The survey consisted of 86 questions regarding personal information, the size and condition of photo departments, photo and editorial process, equipment, photographic material, ethics, authenticity, photo captions and accompanying texts, job satisfaction and international experience. Survey questions are available upon request.

Data analysis

Mixed techniques were used to analyse the collected data. Open-ended responses were recorded and transcribed to allow in-depth content analysis (Gaskell 2000, Saldaña 2013) and to provide valuable contextual information. Survey data was analysed using statistical software (SPSS 23).

Findings

In our research, we interviewed photographers as well as photo editors. In selected cases, we distinguish between these two groups; answers are then marked with a capital letter 'P' for photographer and 'E' for photo editor. All the values in per cent are valid percentages (%). In some cases, we also present mean values and standard deviations (s).

Identity and conditions (RQ1)

Visual journalists in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland were usually male (P= 91%, E= 67%), with an average age of 44 years (P s= 7.5, E s= 10). Compared to other research (Tejkalová & Láb 2016a, 2016b), the visual journalists interviewed were older and less gender balanced than the average journalist. According to Tejkalová and Láb (2016b), journalists in the Czech Republic were on average 35.7 years old and 56 per cent of them were male.

The gender disparity we found among photojournalists corresponds to the findings of Hadland et. al (2015), where photojournalists were overwhelmingly male (85%). This fundamental gender imbalance might be explained by the archaic assumption that the physical demands of the profession prevent more females from pursuing careers as photojournalists. According to our findings, there were significantly more women among photo editors (E= 33%), whose work took place in newsrooms.

Another factor that may significantly reduce the number of female photojournalists could be the notion that photojournalism is an adventurous and dangerous job, with photojournalists reporting from demonstrations, wars, crises, and remote places of the world. For example, Hadland, et al. (2015) reported that more than 90 per cent of the photojournalists felt vulnerable to the risk of physical injury at some point during their normal duties. Despite this, photojournalists from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland hardly ever covered the above-mentioned topics. Our findings show that about 30 per cent of the photographers never worked abroad, about 21 per cent were sent abroad just once a year, and 20 per cent of them worked abroad twice a year. Furthermore, when they did travel, they usually reported on sports or politics connected to their country.

Concerning education, less than half of our respondents (P= 33%, E= 40%) held a university degree. Of the ones who did, about a third (P= 27%, E= 36%) had studied photography or a similar subject.

On average 2.8 photographers and 2.3 photo editors worked in one photo department, and less than half of our respondents (P= 33%, E=43%) found this to be sufficient. Concerning their employments, a clear majority of the photo editors (E= 93%) were on full-time contracts whereas more than a quarter of the photojournalists (P= 27%) were freelancers, paid for single assignments or individual published photographs. The higher proportion of photojournalists without full-time contracts corresponds to the results of earlier studies (Anderson 2013, Hadland et al. 2015, Mortensen 2014). According to Zarembka (2016), a majority of Polish photojournalists work without a full-time contract and are paid only for their published photographs (around 3-4 Euro for each).

Findings also showed that it was common for visual journalists to work for two or more media outlets (P= 44%, E= 27%), as big news organizations often have only one photo department for their whole operation. Moreover, a quarter of the photojournalists and a third of the photo editors performed other jobs in addition to photojournalism (P= 25%, E= 33%).

Respondents reported that their annual net wages (including all jobs they perform) were mostly above the national average in their country. Our respondents' annual incomes broke down as follows: in the Czech Republic €6,600-8,880, in Slovakia €8,881-13,332, in Poland €13,333-17,772, while overall average annual net earnings in the Czech Republic are €8,711 Euro, in Slovakia €7,977, and in Poland €7,614¹. Notably, the majority of visual journalists live and work in bigger cities, where average monthly net wages tend to be higher than in the rest of the country.

Few of the respondents were members of professional organizations (P= 23%, E= 13%), a finding that is in line with findings from other research. For example, only 15 per cent of the Polish (Dobek-Ostrowska 2012) and 7.3 per cent of the Czech journalists (Tejkalová & Láb 2016a) declared a membership in a journalistic association². Unfortunately, no empirical studies have focused on the Central European journalists' unwillingness to be members of professional organizations. In the Czech Republic, membership is not mandatory and the only professional organization, Syndicate of Journalism, is not as active as comparable organizations in Western Europe. Therefore, we might question the role of these organizations in improving the quality of journalism and raising ethical standards, as proposed by Yaschur (2012b). The fact that there are no active professional organizations aimed at visual journalists in Central Europe may imply that the photojournalists tend to set their own standards, in correspondence with the needs of their newsroom.

Some of the main findings discussed above are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. *Identity and conditions of visual journalists*

	Photographers	Photo editors
Male (%)	91	67
Average age (years)	44	44
University degree (%)	27	36
Assignments for at least two media outlets (%)	44	27
Membership in professional organization (%)	23	13

Comments: The numbers of respondents are 63 (photographers) and 15 (photo editors).

Workload, photo production – routines and practices (RQ2)

Corresponding to the conclusions described in previous research (Hadland et al. 2015, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014), all photojournalists used exclusively digital technology (100%), and nearly all used digital single-lens reflex cameras (P= 98%). Additionally, they sometimes worked with mobile devices, such as mobile phones (P= 18%). A photo editor from a Polish opinion weekly commented on the advantages of digital technology this way:

I think that digital photography gives us great possibilities regarding quality and comfort of work. We do not have to carry heavy equipment with us today. If needed, you can take a really good picture with a compact camera or even a mobile phone.

The average number of photo assignments finished per week was 4.9. While this may seem as a quite low figure, the number of weekly assignments depends on the type of media outlets: given the publishing logic of the news media, photographers from dailies reported a heavier workload than their colleagues from weekly and monthly magazines, of whom only 33 per cent performed more than five assignments per week. Over half of the photojournalists working for dailies (P= 57%) finished more than five assignments per week. A greater number of assignments increases the photojournalists' workload, which might affect the quality of news production negatively (Bock 2008). A photographer from a Polish daily newspaper addressed the issue in the following terms:

The number of stories covered has increased over time, not only due to the decreasing number of photojournalists working in the newsroom but also due to bigger needs. Today I work for both print and online editions, and the amount of published material is higher. I remember that in the analog times I had maybe 1-2 topics in each issue, with 1-2 pictures each. Today I shoot 3-4 stories per day, and for every topic there are a couple of pictures published in all of our titles.

When asked about cooperation, most of the visual journalists (P=79%, E= 93%) responded that they usually collaborate with the head of the photo department and reporters. On the other hand, respondents felt that they had a certain level of autonomy when choosing a story. They usually proposed and finished at least two of their own stories a week.

According to several respondents, the traditional photojournalistic genres such as photo essays and documentaries were replaced by 'softer' stories emphasizing speed and entertainment. Respondents also ascribed an increasing role to illustrations and

feature photographs that could be used repeatedly. A photo editor from a Czech business daily explained:

Press photography has always been expensive, so with the growing economic pressure, media has cut those costs and press photography was the first to be hit hard. One can notice that easily by looking at any daily – photos are small, there are no photo documentaries, essays or even reporting, only illustrative photos or single pictures from different events. Press photography is dying. There are more pictures but worse content quality.

How common different photojournalistic genres were perceived to be is illustrated in Figure 1.

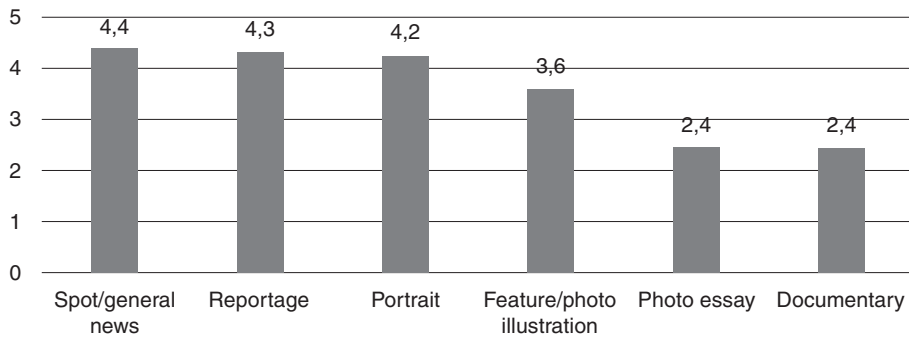


Figure 1. Frequency of different photojournalistic genres

Comments: Measured on a scale where 1 = ‘never’ and 5 = ‘always’. The number of respondents is 78 (both photographers and photo editors are included).

Our respondents took approximately 250-500 photos for a single assignment depending on the topic. The combination of unlimited amounts of pictures and high-speed continuous shooting leads to different working habits. Among the working habits propelled by modern technology is the ‘cinematic way of shooting’, as proposed by Štefaníková and Láb (2016), when a photographer may take several pictures per second of the same scene, and select the best single image from among hundreds during post production.

This cinematic way of shooting – a combination of still and moving images – may contribute to the democratization of the media, giving the impression that anybody could end up with at least one publishable photograph. At the same time, it is a significant departure from traditional photography and the concept of the so-called ‘decisive moment’. Considering the adoption of digital technology, Klein-Avraham & Reich (2014) refer to the number of frames per decisive moment.

Notably, the cinematic way of shooting can make the selection of the best photographs challenging and thus increase the workload. The majority of photojournalists (P= 81%) reported that they made a pre-selection on the camera and deleted poor images. At a later stage, all the photographers made a selection on the computer before submitting their photographs. Only 38 per cent of them collaborated with other colleagues on this task, with a photo editor (55%), reporter (48%), or editor (33%)³. More than half of the photographers (P= 56%) considered the selection of best images time consuming, as most of them spent at least 20 minutes doing so (Figure 2).

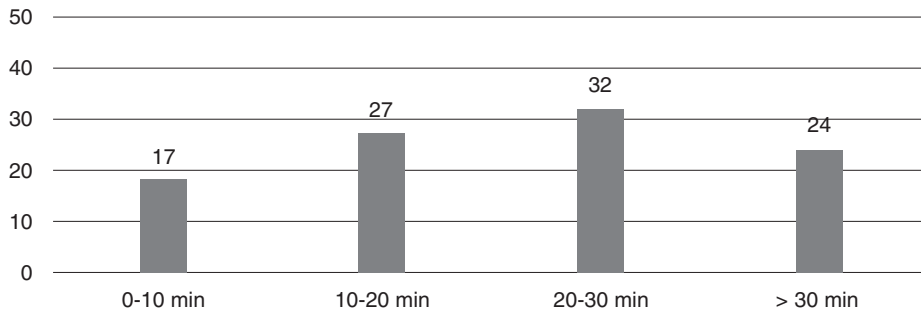


Figure 2. Time that the photojournalists spent on selecting the best images (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents is 63 (only photographers are included).

Post-production also contributes to an increasing workload. Nearly all photojournalists (P= 94%) performed at least simple editing (tone and colour adjustments, as well as brightness, contrast, levels, saturation, cropping, and sharpening – most of them used Adobe Photoshop software) before submitting their photographs. Over half of them spent at least a few minutes editing a single photograph (Figure 3), adding to the time photojournalists spent working on one assignment.

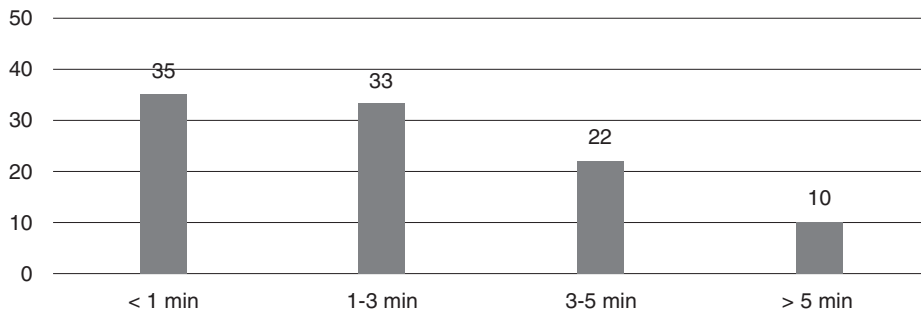


Figure 3. Time that the photojournalists spent on simple editing of one photograph (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents is 63 (only photographers are included).

The increasing number of assignments and images produced, together with the added burdens of post-production, raises questions about the long-proclaimed acceleration enabled by digital technology. While all respondents reported that the time needed for camerawork and transfer of photographs from the camera to the newsroom had decreased significantly during the last decade, the demands of selection and post-production delayed the whole process. Several photojournalists claimed that in the analog era they had never been in charge of developing the film or printing and choosing the photographs. Consequently, they complained that they now spent almost equal time shooting, selecting and editing digital images as they had spent waiting for their negatives to be developed in the past.

Furthermore, we might question to what extent visual journalists actually use all possibilities of the new media that are often seen as one of the sources of digital ac-

celeration. The photojournalists claimed that the possibilities of digital technology and connection to the Internet made the photojournalistic process much faster. However, 63 per cent of them still preferred to bring their images to the newsroom personally rather than using an Internet connection and transmitting photographs from the field.

Gatekeeping, decision making, and responsibility (RQ3)

Photojournalists have always enjoyed a certain level of gatekeeping competences and the simple process of shooting, where the photographer chooses a single frame of reality, can be considered one level of gatekeeping. However, digital technology expands gatekeeping competences and enables a photojournalist to make a first selection of captured images. In their answers, the respondents identified instant feedback and real-time control over their pictures as one of the core features of using digital cameras.

As previously mentioned, 81 per cent of the photojournalists in this study used the screen of their digital camera to make a pre-selection and all photographers made a selection on the computer. Consequently, the photo editors receive what is already a selection of the best photographs. Some photographers, however, claimed that there are not enough of experienced photo editors who can evaluate their pictures, and these photographers therefore wanted to maintain an oversight role.

A similar problem arose during the collection of data for this article: compared to the number of photojournalists, the number of photo editors is markedly lower. These findings correspond to previous studies (Fahmy & Smith 2003, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014). Similar to Newton's research (Newton 2009a, 2009b), our respondents felt that the lack of photo editors result in a heavier workload and, possibly, lower quality standards. A news editor of an Internet daily said:

Newspapers need somebody who can search out the good ones among the photo jungle. However, I would not consider myself a photo editor in the traditional sense. Photographers make the selection and give me only the best shots based on their judgment. I appreciate their cooperation in the publishing process, although I know such a practice might lower the quality of published photographs. In fact, I do not have time to supervise our photojournalists. My job is to search image banks and news agencies and find the photos as quickly as possible, as cheaply as possible, and as attractively as possible.

Image selection was not the only additional responsibility photojournalists must deal with; nearly all of them also performed simple editing (94%) and wrote captions (62%). They claimed that their task was simply to submit the photographs, whereas the final decision to publish them or not was their supervisors' choice. Thus, the responsibility for published visual content was perceived to be shared among several newsroom members (Figure 4).

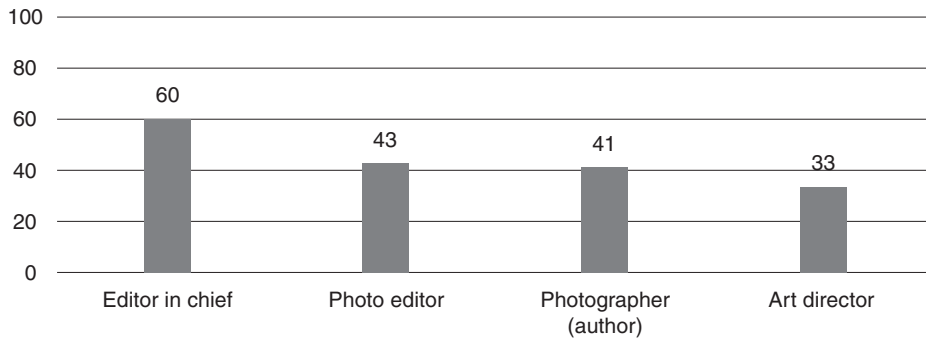


Figure 4. Perceived responsibility for published visual material (per cent)

Comments: Multiple choice question, i.e. the figures do not sum up to 100. The number of respondents is 78 (both photographers and photo editors are included).

Increased competition on the field (RQ4)

The majority of respondents claimed that the prestige and financial situation of photo-journalists has been lowered during the past decade, and in many cases, they also expressed a certain nostalgia for ‘the good old days’. Similar to Yaschur’s (2011) findings, they reported feeling unappreciated, undervalued, submissive and ignored. When asked about the sources of their dissatisfaction, the respondents stressed that the adoption of digital technology should not be viewed as the single explanation behind, for example, cuts in employment, the lowering of standards and the loss of prestige. Instead, they pointed out that the economic situation of the media market also played an important role. A photo editor from a Polish opinion weekly magazine remarked:

There are many press agencies that sell good content cheaply, so it does not make economic sense for news organizations to keep big photo departments – they can buy good photos for less money online.

This claim seems understandable, considering that only about 50 per cent of the visual material published was original newsroom production. The rest of the images were taken from news agencies, image banks and freelancers (Figure 5).

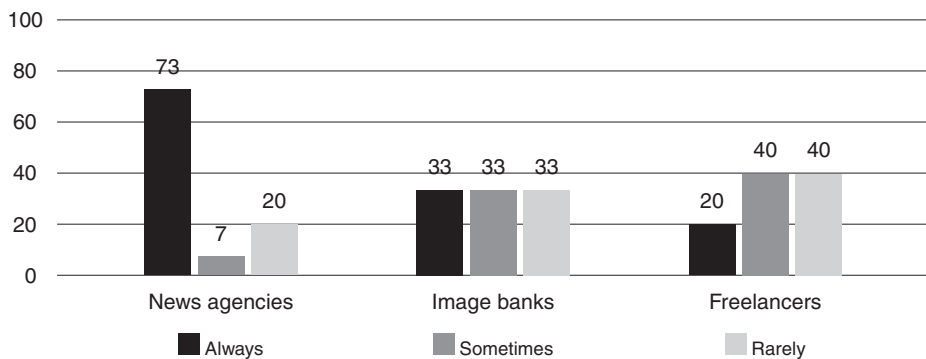


Figure 5. External sources of visual news material used by photo editors (per cent)

Comments: The number of respondents is 15 (only photo editors are included).

On the other hand, since the digital market has become more competitive, the respondents admitted that the economic situation of photo departments is closely connected to digitization. Adoption of digital technology, and more broadly, the Internet, make visual material easily and instantly available.

Moreover, with the democratization of photography, the increasing technical quality of widely accessible, cheap photo equipment and the rising number of online news agencies and image banks that depend on freelancers and stringers willing both to take risks and to sell their photographs cheap, many newsrooms logically end up cutting the expenses of maintaining an in-house photo department and reducing their photo staff (Hadland et al. 2015). While only a few newsrooms have decided to follow the examples of the Chicago Sun-Times and Sports Illustrated and dismantle their photo department altogether, photojournalists in many different countries report similar trends: cuts in photo staff and finances, decreasing value of visual material, and increasing workload (Hadland et al. 2015, Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014, Mortensen 2014, Russial 2009)

Similar opinions were also held by a majority of our respondents. A photographer from a Slovak print and online daily newspaper declared that with ‘photo agencies, image banks, [and] bigger competition in the market due to the rising number of “professional” photo reporters, the price of photographs have dropped by 300-400% in the past decade, and the number of employees has decreased’.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, respondents reported that in their view the increasing competition did not lead to better quality. On the contrary, they felt that it has decreased both the content/visual quality and prices at the same time.

External competition is often accompanied by pressure from the inner circle of the newsrooms. Several respondents said that a great deal of competition came from their colleagues in the form of reporters equipped with a simple, compact camera or smartphone (P= 72%, E= 89%).

On the other hand, they did not feel much competition from citizen journalists. Although three-quarters of photo editors (E= 73%) had used visual material produced by citizen photojournalists at least once, only 20 per cent used it often. Photo editors claimed that citizen journalism raises issues of objectivity and ethical standards. Thus, they prefer to use photographs produced by their own photographers or reliable news agencies.

Conclusion

Visual information has never been as important and widespread as it is now, with so many people producing, consuming and distributing such a high number of photographs in various methods and forms. Consequently, a combination of several factors, including the adoption of digital technology and globalization, is fundamentally transforming the character of photography and photojournalism. Photojournalists, photo editors and the news media are dealing with ongoing developments in the photographic medium that, as one catchy Asian proverb says, is ‘same-same but different’.

In other words, while the basic technical principles of the camera as a glorified black box remain the same, the form and function of photography have been significantly transformed over the past two decades. Photography faces an unceasing process of change and the challenges of social networks, media convergence and new business models. Newsrooms struggle to keep pace with this fundamental transformation and often fail to

adopt appropriate measures. The visual journalists from three Central European countries who are the subjects of this study are no exceptions; they, too, face major challenges brought about by technology, economy and business models.

Photojournalism in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland is still an overwhelmingly male profession. Although the majority of photographers and photo editors still work under full-time employment contracts, newsrooms have been reducing their photo departments. At a time when digital images are overflowing, news organizations are experiencing a significant deficit of photo editors. Thus, photographers often take over editors' responsibilities and become curators of their own work.

This delegation of the editors' former gatekeeping role may negatively affect photographers' work in several ways. On the one hand, without the necessary distance from their own work, the photographer's selection of photographs may be injudicious; on the other, the transfer of more and more competencies to photographers may easily overwhelm the beneficial impact of digital imagery on workflow. With digital photographers involved in basically all stages of visual news production (camerawork, selection, editing, archiving, writing captions), the acclaimed acceleration of output frequently applies to only certain parts of the overall process. Thus, the less time photographers spend on actual photographing (and transferring of photographs to the newsroom), the more time they spend on selecting, editing, describing, keywording, and captioning.

Photojournalism today is exclusively digital. The possibilities offered by digital photography invite different kinds of working habits. Photography is converging with videography as photographers prefer continuous shooting and choose the best images even before post-production. The cinematic way of shooting has not only transformed the concept of the decisive moment, it has also affected the form and quality of photographs. Increasing workloads, uniformity, simplification and weak images might be only a few of the negative results of this practice. According to our findings, the most traditional photojournalistic genres, such as photo essays and documentaries, have to some degree been replaced by rather simplistic genres of single-picture news shots and illustration/feature photographs suitable to the entertainment role of modern, accelerated news media. Technology now offers the possibility of publishing virtually unlimited numbers of images without extra cost, and this has altered the economic logic of online news media, whose advertising success depends on the number of clicks and time spent on each page. Some of the respondents also pointed out that online picture galleries with an interminable succession of frames served as 'click farms' gathering the clicks desired by the advertising department. Thus, strong, iconic photographs might easily disappear among a vast number of omnipresent images.

Despite their slightly above-average incomes, photojournalists claim that the prestige of their profession is declining. Now that photography is more democratic, and image-taking devices are literally in every pocket, the prestigious, elite, artistic public image of the photographer is wearing off. All these factors are contributing to increasing job dissatisfaction among visual journalists.

However, our study faces some limitations. First, it involves a rather small sample of the photojournalism community. Since our research originates in the Czech Republic – Poland and Slovakia were added in the second phase of data collection – the number of respondents from Poland and Slovakia is lower. While this the case, it should be stressed that a majority of the respondents reported similar concerns and issues.

A second aspect to bear in mind is that our research examines the impact of the adoption of digital technology. Respondents were chosen with that in mind, leaving those photojournalists who lack sufficient experience out of the research.

Finally, this article offers a rather descriptive approach and addresses a wide range of issues. Whereas a narrower focus would have enabled more detailed analyses, we nevertheless believe that descriptive statistics is valuable – especially in the case of demographic factors, where little research has previously been conducted.

Findings of this study also raise important topics for further research, such as the approximation of still and moving images and the cinematic way of shooting, the delegation of gatekeeping responsibilities, increasing workloads, acceleration, content quality of photo news production and many others.

Specifically, future research following our recent study should further focus on detailed aspects of the cinematic way of shooting on the side of image content production. Are there any differences between images produced in the cinematic way of shooting and during the era of the decisive moment? The same attention that we paid to changes in the uses of photographic genres should be paid to changes in topics of news photo production. For example, how did the new abilities of photographic technologies (high sensitivity, large resolution, fast burst speed, etc.) influence the content of photographic images? Did there appear any new topics because of the new possibilities of technology?

Last but not least also the matter of so-called ‘iconic images’ should be examined. A pertinent question is whether it is still possible in the current flood of images to create such visual icons, which were typical for the 20th-century photojournalism?

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Notes

1. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Wages_and_labour_costs
2. Data for Slovakia are not available.
3. More than one answer was possible.

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