



The rules of a middle-brow art: Digital production and cultural consecration in the global field of professional photojournalism



Marco Solaroli

Department of Philosophy and Communication, University of Bologna, Via Azzo Gardino 23, 40122 Bologna, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2016

Received in revised form 31 August 2016

Accepted 6 September 2016

Available online 18 October 2016

Keywords:

Bourdieu

Global field

Photojournalism

Photography

Consecration

Magnum photos

ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's work on photography, field-theory, and recent research on global journalism and digital photography, this paper advances the framework of the "global photojournalistic field", and empirically focuses on the consecration of a transnational elite of professional photojournalists over the last two decades. It investigates such a process as a prism through which to understand major changes that have been investing the field of professional photojournalism and the wider field of photography since the early 2000s, e.g. the increasingly blurring boundaries between professional and citizen photojournalism, and between news photography and fine-art photography. The paper draws on archive analysis of major international newsmagazines and qualitative interviews with internationally renowned photojournalists, photo-editors, and directors of global news photo agencies. It examines specific news photographs by tracing their aesthetic shapes back to field-dynamics, thus unveiling the "rules of the field" that govern the practices of production and the symbolic struggles for distinction, authorship, boundary-making, and power within global photojournalism. Finally, it advances the thesis of an externally favoured process of reciprocal influence between the consecration of a group of professional photojournalists in the global field and the increasing position of news photography in the hierarchy of cultural legitimacies of late-modern society.

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1. Introduction: shifting professional practices, symbolic boundaries and cultural hierarchies

Is it possible and necessary for the practice of photography and the meaning of the photographic image to provide material for sociology? (Bourdieu, 1990, 1)

As an increasing, yet fragmented, literature has shown, the cultural field of professional photojournalism is one of the least codified and least capable of completely defining its internal social actors, practices, rules, and hierarchies, as well as its external relationships with other close fields such as journalism, photography, arts, and technology (Barnhurst, 1994; Becker, 1995; Boltanski, 1965; Bourdieu, 1965; Brennen, 2010; Hall, 1973; Hariman & Lucaites, 2016; Rosenblum, 1978; Schwartz, 1990; Solaroli, 2015; Webster, 1980; Zelizer, 2005). Moreover, professional photojournalism is undergoing huge mutations, caused by interweaving technological, social, and economic processes, such as the digitalization of visual news flows, the diffusion of non-professional practices of photographic production, as well as the global financial crisis – which has

E-mail address: marco.solaroli@unibo.it (M. Solaroli).

exacerbated the structural deficiencies, further reducing the editorial market for professional photojournalists. Scholars increasingly argue that the diffusion of new digital technologies and new practices of news production (e.g. the so-called phenomena of “digital revolution” and “citizen photojournalism”) poses a deep challenge to the already scarcely institutionalized and legitimated field of professional photojournalism (Allan, 2013; Allan & Patrick, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011; Ritchin, 2013).

However, notwithstanding the frequency with which the refrain of the decline of professional photojournalism is usually heard, over the last fifteen years a restricted but increasingly influential elite of mainly European photojournalists has acquired impressive international consecration, by entering the most famous authorial photo agencies, covering major news events on assignment for mainstream international newsmagazines, repeatedly winning the most prestigious professional awards, and producing images that eventually turn out to play a key role in contemporary global visual culture.

How was that possible? In other words, how did such a striking process of consecration of a group of historically de-legitimated and marginal cultural producers take place, in a moment of overall professional decline? How and why did this peculiar transnational configuration of the photojournalistic field emerge? How does it shape the visual-representational forms of world news stories? And what might it comparatively reveal of different national professional traditions of the photojournalistic practice within the rapidly shifting and increasingly global-digital ecology of competition?

This paper investigates the historical formation as well as the struggle for distinction and symbolic power – that is, for authorship and consecration – of such a transnational elite in the global field of professional photojournalism. It looks at such a process as a prism through which to understand a variety of innovations and tensions that have been investing the field of professional photojournalism as well as the wider field of photography over the last two decades – e.g. the increasingly blurring boundaries between professional and citizen photojournalism, as well as between news photography and fine art photography.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first one, after a review of the literature on news photography, the paper develops the analytical-conceptual framework of the “global field” of photojournalism. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1965) classic analysis of photography as a middle-brow art, and more recent neo-Bourdieuian research on the sociology of journalism (Benson, 1999, 2004, 2013; Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 1994, 2005), it creatively applies the model of the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1983, 1985, 1993, 1996) to the case of photojournalism and, in so doing, it re-scales field-theory within the “global/transnational” focus of contemporary media and journalism research (Berglez, 2013; Cottle, 2009). In the second section, the paper offers a field analysis of the recently consecrated transnational elite of photojournalists, empirically focusing on a few news photographs produced by actors differently positioned in the global field, and tracing their aesthetic shapes back to field dynamics – in particular, to their producers’ symbolic struggles for distinction and power. Finally, in the last section, the paper advances the thesis of an externally favoured process of reciprocal influence between the internal consecration of a specific group of photojournalists as cultural producers in the global professional field and the consecration of photography as a genre in the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy. It shows how, in a productive circle of field effects, photojournalists struggling for power adjusted the existing standards of practice to the ongoing changes by producing innovative photojournalistic styles that could affirm their distinctive status of photojournalistic authors, with a strategy of field position-taking that led them increasingly closer to the field of fine art. In conclusion, the paper suggests that such a process was partly determined by – and closely intertwined with – the emergence of non-professional producers in the field, and it shows that in turn it eventually strengthened the symbolic boundaries not only among different professional producers in the field but also, relevantly, between the professional and the non-professional (citizen) producers of news photography.

2. Research data and methods

This paper is based on an archive analysis of the photojournalistic coverage of major news events on nine mainstream international newsmagazines over the last twenty-five years (1990–2015),¹ as well as on forty in-depth interviews with internationally renowned photojournalists, photo-editors working for major newsmagazines, jurors of global press photo prizes, and directors of global photo agencies.²

Every news story of international relevance that was photo-journalistically covered by at least two of the nine newsmagazines was included in the research set. The collected visual content for each news story was then analyzed qualitatively and comparatively, across the different newsmagazines, by focusing in particular on the identification of mainstream and dominant visual-representational forms vis-à-vis emerging trends of innovative photo-journalistic styles. The comparative archive analysis also allowed a first but only partial reconstruction of the main social networks and the wider structure of the professional field (in terms of names, roles, and positions of key actors and organizations).

The sample of interviewees was subsequently constructed by contacting most photojournalists whose photographs had been included in the research set, and – when their names were publicly available – the photo-editors who had assigned the photojournalists and then selected and published their photographs. The photojournalists and photo-editors were either

¹ Time; Newsweek; The New York Times Magazine; US News and World Report; National Geographic (US); Paris Match (France); Stern (Germany); L’Espresso; Panorama (Italy).

² The 2–6-h long interviews were carried out by the author between 2010 and 2016 in New York, Milan and Rome. They were conducted also through photo-elicitation techniques.

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