

# Expendable or valuable?

## Photojournalism in five Swedish newspapers affected by organizational changes

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### Abstract

This study explores the impact of organizational changes on newspaper photo departments, an area of newsrooms that has arguably been particularly affected by structural changes in the field of journalism. Through qualitative interviews with editors responsible for photojournalism at five Swedish newspapers that have experienced recent changes to photo staffing and routines for the sourcing of images, the study explores the following questions: Which routines do the newspapers have for sourcing images, in terms of in-house staff and external sources? How do notions of visual quality and external factors, such as audiences and competition, contribute to shaping the newspapers' visual strategies? Findings indicate that newspapers rely on staff photojournalists for unique and in-depth coverage, but less for routine and breaking news. A certain expansion of photojournalism was found in some newsrooms where it is seen as a competitive edge; which, in part, challenges a "discourse of doom." An uncertainty about the support for visual strategies in newsrooms lacking visual leadership was also found. (163 words).

### KEYWORDS

photojournalism, visual journalism, photo editors, newspapers, de-professionalization, journalists, digital news, competition, audiences

## Introduction

The short documentary “The last photographer,” (Johnsson & Nesser, 2018), chronicling the final year of a staff photographer at *Upsala Nya Tidning*, was received by some commentators and members of the Swedish photo community as yet another sign of photojournalism’s demise (ibid). With the retirement of this photographer, the regional newspaper would no longer have a photo department, a development mirroring an international trend in recent years. Perhaps most famously, in 2013, *The Chicago Sun-Times* eliminated its entire photo staff, including a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer (Memmott, 2013). The Chicago newspaper’s stated reasons included a shift to video, freelance contracting, and contributions from the public.

Paradoxically, reductions of in-house resources for photojournalism coincide with an increased demand for images (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017; Vobic & Tomanić Trivundža, 2015). Newsroom staff cuts are frequently addressed in industry media as strategies aiming to reduce financial losses in the face of competition and loss of advertising revenue. However, research has shown that compelling images draw readers to news platforms, potentially offering a way to increase revenue (Khan & Mazhar, 2017; NPPA, 2015). Furthermore, predictions of increased contributions from members of the public have not been conclusively borne out by research. For instance, while eyewitness footage contributes to global crisis coverage, research has shown that the public does not appear to contribute widely to routine news coverage (e.g. Nilsson & Wadbring, 2015; Pantti & Bakker, 2009).

In Sweden, the downsizing of newspaper photo departments has been widespread in recent years. According to the trade publication *Journalisten*, there were about 60 staff photography positions at Swedish newspapers in 2018, down from hundreds a few years earlier (Johnsson & Nesser, 2018). Some newspapers have implemented a form of “multi-journalism” where reporters take on the additional tasks of photographing, capturing video and sound (Wadbring & Nilsson, 2016). Others, primarily larger newsrooms, have reduced their photo staff while continuing to produce visual content (Nilsson, 2017). While news organizations have reduced staff across the board, the redundancy in photojournalism has been especially noticeable

since it is not uncommon that the entire area is removed from the newsroom. However, there are some signs of shifting strategies or at least reassessment. Returning to the international example: a year after letting go of its photo staff, the *Sun-Times* re-hired four of its former photographers (Kirkland, 2014). A similar shift can be seen in some Swedish news organizations, among those *Upsala Nya Tidning* (Journalisten, 2020) and *Göteborgs-Posten* (Fröderberg, 2018). According to the literature on the de-professionalization of journalism, organizational changes that create uncertainty about roles and skills, such as those described above, may produce an identity crisis among journalists (e.g. Nygren, 2014; Wiik, 2009).

The empirical material of the study is drawn from interviews with editors believed to be in a position to address professional roles and skills, as well as what constitutes photojournalism in light of organizational changes. The editors interviewed currently hold positions at five Swedish newspapers, including the three leading-circulation broadsheets, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Göteborgs-Posten*, and two regional newspapers, *Upsala Nya Tidning* and *Västerbottens-Kuriren*.

The aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. Which routines do the newspapers have for sourcing images, in terms of in-house staff and external sources?
2. How do notions of visual quality as well as external factors, such as audiences and competition, contribute to shaping the newspapers' visual strategies?

The larger aim is to learn how photojournalism in Sweden is adapting to organizational changes and competition from digital media. Beyond the Swedish context, the study aims to contribute knowledge about how journalism navigates change. Furthermore, the impact of changes resulting in what Caple (2019) has labeled "photojournalism disrupted," has so far received comparatively little attention, an additional motivation for the study.

## Literature review

### Photojournalism and digitalization

Long-standing professional definitions of visual genres, ideals, and norms define visual quality in news photographs. An established view among visual editors is that a good news photograph should refer to an actual event and portray a significant moment and that it should communicate visually, through composition, framing, and technical aspects (Langton, 2009). Yet there are signs that this ideal, frequently referred to as “the decisive moment,” is giving way to a new digital aesthetic. For instance, a “cinematographic” way of seeing and photographing has emerged with the use of rapid capture DSLR cameras and with the increased focus on video in the production of news (Láb & Štefaniková, 2017).

There are also changes in image sourcing, in part as a result of competition and increased demand for images for digital editions. For instance, a study focusing on the Australian context found that news organizations relied on photo agencies at the cost of their own, unique content for local breaking-news coverage (Caple, 2019). Other scholars have taken a similarly critical view of increased reliance on archival images and photo agencies, including in international breaking-news coverage (e.g. Gynnild, 2017; Machin & Niblock, 2008). One possible effect, according to this literature, is that news coverage across the board risks becoming standardized (Gürsel, 2012). Furthermore, generic images drawn from agencies, archives, or social media, may shift the focus from the specific to a general realm where the image does not refer to the actual news event, in turn eliding the expected eyewitness function of the news photograph (Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016). Generic stock or archival images are not new to journalism. Yet they have become ubiquitous in digital editions where each story is accompanied by a photograph, and where the continuous uploading of stories increases the need for visual content as “clickbait,” that is images meant to motivate readers to click and open the story rather than contemplate the image (Vobic & Tomanić Trivundža, 2015).

Yet digital affordances also offer new opportunities for photojournalism, for instance, in the digital presentation of images in online

picture galleries (Caple & Knox, 2012). According to some scholars, photojournalism is currently an untapped resource, including in genres that were prominent in newspapers before digitalization, such as the photo reportage (Hardt, 2001; Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016), but also in newer (for newspapers) visual forms, such as video and multimedia (Caple & Knox, 2012; Patrick & Allan, 2013).

Some scholars are quite critical of news organizations' lack of commitment to photojournalism in light of increased competition from other digital sites (Newton, 2009; Ritchin, 2013). A lack of support for visual storytelling has been attributed to a move towards a pre-planned "packaging" of news where images function as "complementary illustrations" (Lowrey, 1999, p. 13). Furthermore, with less time allotted to covering stories, editors have to choose which stories to assign photographers (Nilsson, 2017). Another challenge identified is a lacking strategy for disseminating photojournalism in new forms and venues where it may reach a wider audience (Newton, 2009; Ritchin, 2013). Meanwhile, research has found that audiences are drawn to complex news images that tell a story (NPPA, 2015) and that photographs may increase reader retention and interest in reading the articles (Khan & Mazhar, 2017).

These findings point to an apparent tension, between on the one hand an increasingly visual media culture and new technology providing opportunities as well as competitive challenges for photojournalism, and on the other hand an uncertainty about the place of photographs in the news due to a lack of commitment amongst news organizations.

### **Professional roles and perceptions of skills**

Newsroom ethnographies conducted around the turn of the millennium found professional roles for photojournalism and visual expertise to be quite prevalent (Bock, 2008; Hansen, Neuzil & Ward, 1998; Lowrey, 1999, 2002), a contrast to some current newsrooms. For instance, visual editors were found to contribute expertise by "making visual sense" of images (Seelig, 2005, p. 10). However, scholars have also pointed to a history of marginalization and ambivalence about photography as a form of journalism (Zelizer, 1995). Photojournalists have historically had a lower status than reporters, in part a reflection of a prevailing view of photography as art (Lowrey,

1999, 2002), and in part of a later professionalization of press photographers compared to reporters (Wadbring & Nilsson, 2016). Even visual editors in leading positions have been found to lament a text-biased approach to news, according to a study on visual gatekeeping (Schwalbe, et al, 2015). There may also be relative invisibility associated with visual competence in newsrooms, as digital technology enables reporters to photograph and capture video, and web editors to select and upload imagery to digital editions (Nilsson, 2017). Furthermore, in some newsrooms, the job description of reporters has changed with the advancement of digital camera technology, including improved quality for image capture with smartphone camera technology. Some newspapers have adopted a form of “multi-journalism,” where reporters interview, photograph, and capture video and sound while on assignment (Wadbring & Nilsson, 2016). However, according to some editors, smartphone image resolution is still inferior to the more advanced professional DSLR digital cameras, resulting in variations in technical quality (Nilsson, 2017).

Organizational changes affecting newspaper photo departments mirror staff reductions in journalism more broadly. However, cuts to photo departments may be more noticeable since, in some cases, an entire area is removed from the newsroom. At the same time, there is an increased demand for more and multiple visual skills (Láb & Štefaniková, 2017). In order to be hired today, photojournalists are frequently expected to have photography as well as video skills. Specifically, a study drawing on organizational psychology found newsroom culture and up-to-date skills decisive for how photo departments respond to change (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017). According to these authors, photo departments that were proactive and articulated a visual strategy were in a better position to remain relevant.

Members of the public have been expected to increasingly supply news organizations with imagery, according to scholarship and the media industry discourse (e.g. Caple, 2014; Patrick & Allan, 2013). The by now extensive literature on citizen photojournalism has focused especially on citizen videographers capturing protest (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011; Mortensen 2011), and eyewitness capture of crises (e.g. Allan, 2014; Brennen & Brennen, 2015; Mortensen, 2015; Nilsson, 2019). However, research has also found a low rate of such contributions, due to issues of low quality (Niekamp, 2011), ethical considerations

and challenges to authentication (Nilsson, 2019; Sjøvaag, 2011) and regional factors, such as a lack of interest among a local readership to submit content (Nilsson & Wadbring, 2015; Pantti & Bakker, 2009). Nevertheless, a discourse challenging the power of journalism, in scholarship and the industry, may have resulted in uncertainty about the value of professional skills at a time of contraction on the job market.

These processes may be understood through the lens of professionalization and de-professionalization of journalism (e.g. Nygren, 2014). Splichal and Dahlgren (2015) trace the emergence of de-professionalization to early journalism and connect it, in part, to technology which, they argue, circumscribes the autonomy of journalists. Nygren (2014), writing about the professional role in a contemporary Swedish context as well as in comparative contexts, refers to an identity crisis among journalists, caused, in part, by organizational changes resulting in a more heterogeneous professional role.

While de-professionalization helps explain a loss of status and changing working conditions in commercially-driven news production, a recent growth of some photo departments, such as those discussed in this study, might also be understood as a negotiation and adaptation of roles. For instance, a survey among Swedish journalists addressed changing perceptions and, “the meaning of professional ideals in journalists’ struggle for legitimacy during a time when professions as collective fundamentals are declining” (Wiik, 2009, p. 351). Based on the findings, the author suggests that a de-professionalization has in fact not occurred on an ideological level, but rather that journalists’ professional identity is going through a re-formation (p. 362).

The climate of uncertainty identified in the literature might also apply to the role of photojournalists and the function of the photograph in today’s news coverage. The notions of de-professionalization and re-formation, in turn, evoke the apparent contractions and expansions of photojournalism in the newspapers included in this study. In particular, it appears that processes of de-professionalization and re-formation appear simultaneously.

## Method and study design

The selected method was the qualitative semi-structured interview, suitable when the aim is to capture perceptions, opinions, and discourses about a topic. Respondents were selected strategically based on their expertise and experience, as well as their centrality, that is their proximity to the topic at hand (Esaïsson et al, 2007, p. 291). The study aimed to ascertain the views of editors in each specific newsroom, but also to gain knowledge about the perspective of editors more broadly.

A total of five newspapers were selected, including national and regional dailies. The aim was to ascertain how editors tasked with photojournalism perceive current strategies for the procurement of images, visual skills, and the professional role. However, the position or function suitable for interviews varied between the newspapers. For instance, only three of the papers currently have picture editors or picture editor in chief as staff functions. Two respondents from each newspaper were interviewed, to allow for different perspectives, functions, and experiences to come forth. As the interviews progressed, various common themes emerged. Methodologically, this was interpreted as saturation, as respondents echoed each other in certain comments, indicating a shared discourse about photojournalism (ibid., p. 292-293).

Broadly outlined questions/areas of interest were sent to the respondents who had previously been contacted via e-mail and agreed to participate. The interviews took place between December 2020 and March 2021, with a duration between 42 minutes and an hour. All interviews were conducted digitally on Zoom or an equivalent digital meeting platform, with video and audio functions activated and recorded with the permission of the participants. The researcher transcribed the interviews, analyzed them guided by the research questions, and translated the quotations inserted into the findings section.

The following newspapers and editors were selected.

- *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), the leading-circulation national morning newspaper owned by Bonnier AB, the biggest newspaper group in Sweden.



**DN editors interviewed:** Picture Editor in Chief, Picture Editor.

- *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*, a broadsheet-quality Stockholm-based national newspaper owned by Schibstedt of Norway, the second-largest newspaper group on the Swedish market.

**SvD editors interviewed:** Chief of the Visual Area, Assistant Chief of the Visual Area.

- *Göteborgs-Posten (G-P)*, a broadsheet-quality daily located in Gothenburg and owned by Stampen (owned by the NTM consortium), the fifth-largest newspaper group in Sweden.

**G-P editors interviewed:** TV Editor in Chief, Picture Editor.

- *Uppsala Nya Tidning (UNT)*, a regional newspaper located in Uppsala north of Stockholm and owned by Norrköpings Tidningar (NTM), the country's seventh largest newspaper group.

**UNT editors interviewed:** Managing Editor, News Editor.

- *Västerbottens-Kuriren (V-K)*, a regional daily located in Umeå, Västerbotten region in northern Sweden, and owned by VK Media, the ninth-largest newspaper group in Sweden.

**V-K editors interviewed:** Managing Editor, Photojournalist (in capacity as Picture Editor).

### Limitations of method

The qualitative interview as method has various limitations. A respondent may be hesitant to express criticism towards the organization and may wish to appear in a positive light (Esaiaasson et al, 2007, p. 291-293). Another challenge is that, as an extended conversation, there are inter-personal aspects that may affect the answers. As a result, the interview is not neutral, and the interviewee may, in effect “construct an identity” during the course of the conversation (Caple, 2019, p. 26). The researcher sought to address these challenges by asking open-ended questions that invited reflection, and by including the respondents' own words in the presentation of findings in order to achieve transparency. Furthermore, at the stage of analysis, the transcripts from all interviews were drawn upon to shed light on certain issues and common themes identified in the inter-

views. The presentation of opinions and perspectives, in particular in the second part of the findings section, aims to illuminate a discourse among editors working with photojournalism, rather than a detailed analysis of each newsroom. These shared perspectives and viewpoints found on various issues may lend credibility to the results.

Furthermore, it is difficult to determine cause and effect in processes of change. While strategies for photojournalism are considered in this study to be part of long-term processes in the field of journalism, the purpose of the study was to approach a context—a certain moment—with signs of a shifting discourse or approach. Furthermore, there is a difference between a discourse of change and actual change. These limitations were addressed in the section analyzing the findings. Furthermore, it should be noted that some strategies discussed by respondents are underway, while others were interrupted by the circumstances of the ongoing pandemic.

The circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic may also have had an impact on the results. The newspapers included in the study produced less unique content during 2020, because of the spread of the virus and due to restrictions, including travel restrictions. Furthermore, the newspapers relied more on agency photographs than previous years, according to respondents. These circumstances were addressed in interviews and are included in the presentation of findings in the following section.

## **Contractions and expansions: The view from five newspapers**

The following section opens with results related to the first research question, concerning staffing and routines for visual coverage, beginning with the photo staffing of each newsroom followed by routines for image sourcing. The concluding part of this section presents findings related to the second question, that is factors affecting visual strategies.

## Photojournalism staffing and routines

### In-house photo sources

*Dagens Nyheter* currently has the largest photo department among Swedish newspapers with full-time 14 photojournalist positions and two picture editors that are part of a larger visual area with additional staffers, including in the areas of graphics, video, and social media. The entire visual area, which is led by the picture editor in chief, has experienced some cuts in the past decade. Yet, it has also expanded, including through recent hires of staff photojournalists to the paper's new Göteborg and Malmö bureaus. *Dagens Nyheter* has an acknowledged leading position in Swedish photojournalism, a status mentioned by respondents at the other newspapers. The comparable expansion notwithstanding, *Dagens Nyheter* no longer covers all news visually, much like the other newspapers. According to the picture editor in chief:

We want to focus on what is unique and where our skills and strengths show and leave an impression. Of course, if there's a breaking story we always go out and deliver quickly. But our focus should not be to only deliver fresh daily pictures, but rather we should also focus on in-depth photojournalistic storytelling.

*Svenska Dagbladet*, known for its quality photojournalism, has reduced the number of staff photographers by half since 2013 to the current 2,5 full-time positions. The paper's current three picture editors are also photographers, reflecting a dual role and competence also seen in other newsrooms. The visual area, which also includes graphics and video and other functions, has gone through a reorganization in the past three years, with the position of chief of the visual area replacing the chief of photography position. The chief of the visual area stresses that the area is broadly visual, rather than specializing in photography or graphics: "We no longer work in silos. We need to work together to find the best visual solutions."

While *Svenska Dagbladet* does its own unique coverage, there are fewer in-house stories, a concerted strategy also described by respondents in the other newsrooms. For instance, the paper no longer covers press conferences visually. Referring to the paper's own visual coverage as "projects," rather than stories, which empha-

sizes their collaborative nature, the assistant chief of the visual area estimates that they do 10-15 such projects a week. These range from news and financial news to culture and reportage and may include photography, video, or other forms. This respondent attributes the shift to a different kind of coverage:

We do fewer stories than we used to, and that's also a reflection of journalism that is changing, moving away from covering breaking news to explanatory and in-depth stories.

*Göteborgs-Posten* has gone through both a contraction and an expansion of its photo area in recent years. Around 2014, all but one of 13 photojournalism positions were eliminated and the newspaper turned to “quick jobs” contracted to freelancers. An improved financial situation at the paper led to a renewed focus on in-house journalism, according to both respondents (Fröderberg, 2018). This included photojournalism, and especially television journalism, according to the newspaper's TV editor in chief who was hired three years ago. Four recent photojournalism hires, bringing the number of staff photographers to five, are described as skilled image-makers proficient with video, a requirement also placed on new hires at the other papers. Though *Göteborgs-Posten* has increased its photojournalism staff, it is not returning to covering all news, echoing editors at the other newspapers. However, according to the TV editor in chief:

We have a significant focus on breaking news, or rather our strategy is to be best at breaking news, but we shall also work in-depth. This is the chosen direction for the type of photojournalism we do.

A decade ago, *Uppsala Nya Tidning* employed nine staff photographers. When the last photographer retired, in 2018, the vacancy was not filled. The paper had already implemented a strategy of tasking reporters with photographing and capturing video, also put in place in other, mostly smaller newspapers in Sweden, including those owned by the Uppsala-paper's parent company, NTM. According to the *Uppsala Nya Tidning* managing editor:

It is practically possible for everyone to photograph. That's why photography was the area deemed possible to de-prioritize in order to make it financially.

The creation of three new photojournalist positions at *Uppsala Nya Tidning* in 2019 was part of a strategy to improve quality. While one position was filled, the others are currently on hold as a result of the pandemic. The managing editor contrasts the multi-skilled new hire with a narrower skill-set required of photographers previously.

In contrast to some other regional newspapers, *Västerbottens-Kuriren* has not eliminated its photo department, though there has been some reduction through attrition. The four staff photojournalists all have several years of experience at the newspaper. Says the managing editor:

We have always felt that we have good photographers who have been forward-thinking and taking their job seriously. And throughout the time when everyone (else) was making cuts, the management always protected the photo area and felt that it was important. The photographers are good resources. They are out a lot in the area, they meet people and often come up with story ideas.

When the picture editor in chief retired, in 2017, the position was eliminated, a part of cuts affecting the whole newsroom, according to the managing editor. Now the photographers rotate as picture editors on a weekly schedule, a solution the photojournalist interviewed calls a "less-than-perfect solution," since it doesn't allow for developing a long-term commitment or strategy. The other impact of the chief's retirement has been the loss of a voice for the visual area on the management level, according to this respondent.

### **Reporters as photographers**

*Uppsala Nya Tidning* routinely relies on reporters to provide its in-house visual coverage. Currently, all reporters are expected to also photograph and shoot video, and most use smartphone cameras. As noted in the literature, a version of "multi-journalism" has been implemented in many newsrooms in recent years (Cagle, 2019). The strategy has been held up by news organizations eliminating photo

areas as a way to secure coverage at a low cost (e.g. Memmott, 2013). Assessing the outcome of the multi-journalism strategy, the *Upsala Nya Tidning* managing editor, who was formerly picture editor in chief, says:

It didn't turn out that well initially. The image quality was clearly lower, without a doubt. But over time I think we have raised the quality again. But we have also adapted our journalism. It is not as visually driven as before.

*Västerbottens-Kuriren* reporters are expected to photograph and capture video, and they all photograph sometimes, such as when photographers are not available or when a reporter is first on the scene of a breaking news story. However, editors' first choice is to assign photojournalists to do photo jobs, according to the managing editor:

The staffers that are best at something should do the task, that's how we see it. But you also need the skills, which means everyone has to have training to be able to do this, learning how to photograph with the mobile camera, capture live and transmit.

While *Göteborgs-Posten* reporters are not expected to photograph, they may provide visuals from the site of a breaking-news story, which is valuable for its high news value rather than for visual quality, according to the TV editor in chief. *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* are both newsrooms with highly specialized functions where it is not part of the job description of reporters to provide visuals. Nor is it expected for photojournalists to write, according to respondents.

### **Sourcing from the outside: Agencies, freelancers, generic imagery, and the public**

A large part of breaking-news imagery for all newspapers is supplied by the TT news agency, Sweden's largest news agency, and by international agencies for global news. An increased use of agency imagery by the national-circulation papers is a continuation of a shift to digital editions at the turn of the last millennium, as major international image brokers consolidate their position and increase their reach globally (e.g. Gürsel, 2012; Gynnild, 2017). Like the other

papers, *Göteborgs-Posten* relies on agencies for national and international news and its digital site. All papers turn to agencies for sports, although all, except *Svenska Dagbladet*, cover sports to varying degrees. *Uppsala Nya Tidning* has contracted its visual sports coverage to Bildbyrån agency that specializes in sports and supplies content to other newspapers in the study. In contrast, *Västerbottens-Kuriren* photographers cover local sports, an important topic in this northern region.

All newspapers use freelance photographers but in different ways. *Svenska Dagbladet* currently has an increased freelance budget parallel to a reduction of in-house staff. *Göteborgs-Posten* turned to freelancers when the photo area was reduced a few years ago, and editors still contract freelancers, though less than previously. As previously noted, a turn to a freelance economy has been part of a discourse motivating reductions of photo departments more broadly. However, according to respondents in Göteborg and at *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, freelancers are not necessarily lowering the cost.

All five newspapers use generic and archival pictures for their digital news sites. This is similar to international developments when it comes to digital news sites (Solaroli, 2015; Vobic & Tomanic Trivundža, 2015). For instance, *Dagens Nyheter* respondents explain that they used considerably more archival and generic images as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic has affected coverage in the other newsrooms as well. After a *Svenska Dagbladet* staff photographer passed away from Covid, the paper adopted a cautious posture and has covered fewer stories this past year, according to respondents. Respondents at other papers describe similar strategies during the pandemic.

However, agency and generic pictures, which also were widely used prior to the pandemic, can pose a challenge in local news, according to the Uppsala news editor:

We can't really visualize our local news with TT pictures. They don't fit our local context. So especially during the pandemic, we have used our own archive pictures perhaps more, and it's unfortunate when you have to run the same picture more than once.

Visual contributions from the public are not actively solicited by the three largest newspapers. For instance, the *Dagens Nyheter* pic-

ture editor expresses little interest in visual contributions from readers, citing problems of verification as one reason. This finding was expected since research has indicated that visual contributions from the public are more common in tabloid newspapers focusing on breaking news (Nilsson & Wadbring 2015; Nilsson, 2019).

*Uppsala Nya Tidning* relies more on readers for visuals than previously, according to respondents, a contrast to the other newsrooms. Local newspapers turned to their readers for visual content prior to digitization, a possible explanation for the difference (Nilsson & Wadbring, 2015). Furthermore, the Uppsala paper regularly uses a local photographer specializing in spot news. *Västerbottens-Kuriren* publishes imagery contributed by readers, mostly what the managing editor refers to as “comfortable and fun” topics, such as weather phenomena where readers are encouraged to send in pictures and video that the paper may build a story around. Such use of readers’ pictures, as non-journalistic content, has been found to be quite prevalent (Brennen & Brennen, 2015).

### **Does it matter who takes the picture? Visual strategies in a competitive digital landscape**

Several respondents believe that photojournalism is becoming more important. Some assert that a rock bottom has been reached and perhaps passed, specifically a point where it may not be possible to cut more in the area. While rejecting a discourse of nostalgia that “Everything was better in the past,” the *Svenska Dagbladet* chief of the visual area believes that there has been a change in perspective in the industry: “The change is that photojournalism and the visual are now seen as a competitive edge, from (in the past) being something that cost a lot of money.”

Digital subscribers are a driving force of this change, according to several respondents. Subscriptions have gone up for at least four of the papers preceding the pandemic, but also as a result of the pandemic. Subscribers have high expectations, several respondents note, an assertion echoing findings in previous research (NPPA, 2015). According to the chief of the visual area at *Svenska Dagbladet*:



Readers are now expecting a high level in the visual material. If we do a reportage, they expect unique pictures, but also good editing, a variation in image selection, and no generic pictures. I think it has switched from not really caring that much a few years ago, to now looking for an experience that is 100%. Especially if you pay for a subscription. So that's why we need specialists who can deliver. Because everyone can photograph with their mobile, or they can google pictures. But that's not what they are looking for in our newspaper. They are looking for a selection of images that they pay for.

From the perspective of this respondent, the change is driven by a sophisticated visual media culture where newspapers compete with Netflix and other venues of visual storytelling. Other respondents, such as the *Dagens Nyheter* picture editor in chief, point to in-house knowledge and research showing that visual content leads to increased reader engagement with stories (e.g. Khan & Mazhar, 2017). In turn, this knowledge determines the *Dagens Nyheter* focus, according to this respondent:

I know that visual journalism gives results. It gives reading, appreciation, and positive response. So of course we are going to work with it. I have never felt that this is a silent target group. People jump at it, and so of course that is what we focus on.

Respondents also express criticism of visual strategies as their newspapers turned to digital publication a few years ago. Says the *Göteborgs-Posten* picture editor: "The reduction of our photo area coincided with the chase for clicks online. There had to be pictures with every story. It didn't matter what kind of picture." Similarly, the paper's TV editor in chief draws a contrast between current practices and the early application of video where any type of moving image would suffice. Now, the stories need to be edited, and of high quality, according to this respondent. This comment echoes research on online picture galleries that found limitations in visual storytelling formats due to poor editing (Caple & Knox, 2012).

Reflecting on a lack of long-term visual strategy in general among newspapers, the *Upsala Nya Tidning* news editor states:

We have known for a long time that the younger generation consumes information through visuals, but I don't think we (in the newsroom) have really understood how they consume news. And whether this is something we will have to adapt to, apart from producing more moving images... It will be interesting to see whether there will be completely new demands placed on us. And one has to hope that the press has not fallen behind, since we didn't invest in photojournalism for quite a long time. It worries me a bit, that we have fallen behind. But at least now we're back on track.

Another issue raised is that the nurturing of visual skills and creativity may be left to the individual due to a lack of resources, rather than being part of a concerted visual strategy. *Västerbottens-Kuriren* respondents note that this newspaper has yet to find an interesting way to present visual stories digitally—an assertion addressing a need for innovation cited in the literature on digital photojournalism (Newton, 2009; Patrick & Allan, 2013; Ritchin, 2013). A lack of focus on areas that might be developed, such as video storytelling, is attributed to reader interest. Says the *Västerbottens-Kuriren* managing editor: “If we make videos and very few people watch, the question is if it's worth it. Then we would be better off placing our resources on something else.”

An increased openness to photojournalism is also ascribed to economics. Says the managing editor of *Uppsala Nya Tidning*:

To put it bluntly, it's possible to publish a newspaper with only generic pictures, without your own unique visual content. But it would be a very poor newspaper. In the beginning, when we closed the photo department, we had so many generic and agency pictures, images that were not connected to the story. That was not good. You need photojournalism to get that edge.

Yet, the resources do not always match the rhetoric, according to other respondents. Says the *Västerbottens-Kuriren* photographer/picture editor, in a comment touching on the question of visual leadership and strategy (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017), and the risk of photojournalism losing its edge when relying on old forms (Newton, 2009; Ritchin, 2013):

You almost get applauded when you do a photo reportage. But somehow, when you mention an idea to develop the visual area, people get excited but there is always something else that is more important.

All five newspapers rely on imagery that is not unique to the event of a story, including agency photos and generic and archival pictures. Research has found an increase in generic imagery to be part of a tabloidization and standardization of journalism (Machin & Niblock, 2008). Some respondents describe these images as a necessary part of the digital flow where each story has to be visualized. Furthermore, this type of imagery may function as visualizations of stories where editors choose not to assign photographers, such as in hospitals difficult to gain access to during the pandemic. However, the Uppsala news editor refers to generic and archival pictures as an issue of credibility at times, such as when readers complain of a recycled archival picture or inaccuracies: “Readers will interpret this as sloppiness, which hurts our image as professionals.” Although this type of visualization is moving away from photography as “witnessing” (Zelizer, 2007), it is not new. Furthermore, archival imagery may challenge journalism’s claim to report actual events. Several respondents lament the high use of archival material during the pandemic but assert that it is used widely in normal circumstances as well.

The reliance on news agencies for a large part of the coverage is stated as a fact and not a problem. An increased use of agency imagery, in general, can be seen as part of a shift away from unique local coverage (Caple, 2019). It should be noted, however, that live video and television are part of visual coverage to various degrees at four of the five newspapers. Furthermore, some of the newspapers cover less breaking news than before. Limited resources are another explanation offered by respondents. The managing editor at *Uppsala Nya Tidning* calls it a necessity to hand over visual coverage of local sports to photo agencies, to focus resources elsewhere: “We don’t need to be there if Bildbyrån is already there.”

Fulfilling photojournalism’s claim as witness is a challenge for editors at all five newspapers. According to the *Dagens Nyheter* picture editor in chief, selecting the visual aspect of stories and making sure it gets time is important. Although this needs to be continually

asserted: “Not necessarily a lot of time, but all the time it needs.” Furthermore, the notion that photojournalism is a form of journalism may need to be reinforced. The *Dagens Nyheter* picture editor edits a weekly page showcasing the work of staff photographers, a fairly new initiative: “People respond to the images, they critique them or they like them. That’s good. That means they are taking the images seriously. They see it as journalism.”

Respondents mention other challenges, including uncertainty about a newspaper’s future commitment to visual coverage. Also mentioned is the question of what a shift to visual journalism actually means. Says the *Svenska Dagbladet* assistant chief of the visual area: “One worry is that if we go for a “catchy” visual presentation just to grab the attention of readers, we may risk losing visual quality if that happens.”

## **Conclusion and discussion: Expendable or valuable?**

Photojournalists play a role in all five newsrooms, though their job descriptions differ, according to routines, resources, strategy, and other factors, such as competition and audiences. Furthermore, the newspapers’ own unique material, whether provided by in-house staff or freelancers, comprises only a part of the output, an indication of a niched journalism developing more broadly, not only in Sweden. Such a shift obviously has an impact on the direction of visual coverage as well.

All five newspapers rely extensively on agency imagery, a trend for several years and not unique to Sweden. This suggests that journalism is becoming less about being there (for the newspapers), paradoxically although respondents are “there” covering news stories but also frequently in-depth coverage. The effect of this development is perhaps most notable in sports journalism among the five newspapers, where an agency focusing on sports coverage provides one of the few visual perspectives of the topic in Sweden. Thus, the famous assertion that journalism is ceding its prerogative at witnessing rings true, at least partially, and in this case for different reasons than those suggested by Zelizer (2007).

When it comes to visual strategies, a move towards a different kind of photojournalism where photography is part of visual journalism,

which has been in process for several years, has been embraced by some but not all of the five newspapers, though notably mostly in the newsrooms with the most resources. This has led to an increase in visual perspectives and forms of presentation. The larger newsrooms have added specialized editors and other staffers who edit the materials. Where resources have been implemented, respondents assert that visual quality has increased, although some strategies are in progress while others were put on hold during the pandemic. As a result, recent hires suggest a certain professionalization or restoration of professional roles, following the literature (e.g. Wiik, 2009). However, *Västerbottens-Kuriren* appears to have opted for continuity rather than change in maintaining its photo area, in itself unique among smaller regional newspapers in Sweden. As a result, rather than a re-installment of previously held positions and skills, findings suggest an addition of new skills, and in some newsrooms a continuity rather than abrupt change.

Thus, a de-professionalization may not have occurred throughout the newsrooms discussed here. Rather, it is possible that photojournalistic skills are valued, as image-makers are expected to possess multiple visual skills and work on in-depth projects contributing to a newspaper's unique profile. In some of the newsrooms, staff photographers have been trained to also work with video, while in others, this skill is lagging as a result of a lack of resources and, according to some respondents, a perceived low interest among readers. Thus, seen through the lens of de-professionalization, the circumstances described by respondents suggest a kind of re-assertion of skills in some newsrooms, yet also an uncertainty about the place of photography in the newspapers' strategies. A pervasive discourse of "doom" (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017) coupled with several years of reduction also found in international research, may help explain a low level of expectations among photojournalists in general, and uncertainty on the part of some respondents, echoing an effect noted in the literature on de-professionalization (e.g. Nygren, 2014).

The challenges of reaching audiences, and in particular new audiences, is a theme repeated in interviews, and, as a result, may be an important factor shaping visual strategies. While some respondents were confident that photojournalism will remain competitive, others were not so sure given the competition for the time of audiences. Respondents expressing most optimism on this point were the visual

editors who work at the larger newspapers which, in turn, have the most resources. These findings confirm the argument that newsroom culture is decisive for how departments navigate change (Simonsen & Evensen, 2017).

Thus, notions of audiences, competition, media culture, and visual culture more broadly, rather than journalism, appear to set the agenda to some degree. Not all five newsrooms are in this arena, however. The regional newspapers discussed in this study appear to have a strong connection to their local audiences who turn to them for news coverage. Furthermore, a focus on a competitive visual edge might be a short-sighted commercial strategy rather than an investment in quality journalism. Further research might look into the implementation and outcome of such stated strategies. The internationalization of news, journalism, and the consumption of media discussed by respondents, might also be further examined by future studies. This could be explored, for instance, by looking into news organizations' visual strategies through a comparative perspective, in order to analyze the role of place in an environment where regional newspapers compete with global visual actors rather than domestic competitors.

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