

Andrea Pogliano

**Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti (eds.),
"Amateur Images and Global News". Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 213 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/77052)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2014

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti (eds.), *Amateur Images and Global News*. Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 213 pp.

doi: 10.2383/77052

Amateur Images and Global News is a welcome collective book bringing together some of the leading scholars in the field of visual journalism and news production – especially concerned with journalistic practices and journalistic ethics. The book has a special focus in studying the role and impact of user-generated contents “vis-à-vis crises events” [p. 15], in continuity with the large majority of books and articles written on citizen journalism in recent years. This special focus is more than a focus, it is a frame, supporting some theoretical perspectives while inhibiting others. I will develop this critical argument at the end of this review.

The interest in studying citizen journalism by focusing on visual materials is expressed by the editors in these terms:

“[w]hat sets citizen-shot news photographs and videos apart from other types of audience content in the mainstream news media... is the discursive authority that rests on eyewitnessing” [p. 100].

References to key concepts in journalism studies such as objectivity and transparency are recurrent throughout the book. Other key concepts that are borrowed from journalistic studies are authenticity, journalistic authority and journalistic ideology, witness, sensationalism, and the dialectics between rationality and emotionality both in the production and consumption of news. As a whole, these concepts form the prevailing framework of this collective work. However, the book explores other concepts which fall into the field of visual studies, such as photographic indexicality, closeness and social distance, “rawness” and “reality effect” of visual contents. All these concepts are used to connect aesthetics, ethics and journalistic practices in order to assess what is at stake in the challenge increasingly posed by user-generated visual contents to mainstream news journalists and audiences. To this respect, the book is a well-balanced collective work on amateur images and the news.

The amateur images analysed in the book include those produced by “ordinary people” as bystanders, those produced by victims (e.g. survivors of the terrorist attack in London), as well as those produced by active protesters (e.g. in Iran in 2009), by servant soldiers (in Iraq), and by killers in school shootings (in Finland). This diversity in terms of sources is generally well-managed in the book, but when the audience’s trust in amateur images is concerned, as it is the case in chapter 10, a controlled use of these very different types of non-professional pictures would have helped in improving the research design and the theoretical discussion.

The book develops various approaches to various topics: Stuart Allan employs a historical perspective to critically discuss the relationship between amateur and professional images in war photography; Mette Mortensen develops an elaborated discussion over the redefinition of the historical and sociological role of the (eye)witness in a digitalized media environment; Ray Niekamp compares the aesthetic qualities of profession-

al and non-professional news videos of the Hurricane Ike story and discusses different editing standards; both Johanna Sumiala and Marguerite Moritz examine, in two distinct chapters, ethical and practical questions rising from the diffusion of mass murderers' own homemade videos, by studying the web circulation and the TV broadcasting of the killers self-portraits in the case of two Finnish school shootings; Liina Puustinen and Janne Seppänen investigate the audiences' evaluations of amateur pictures in terms of trusting; while Andy Williams, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Claire Wardle analyse audiences' and journalists' views on the role of user-generated contents in the news.

Notwithstanding such a heterogeneity of contents, a substantial part of the book is devoted to the analysis of rituals, practices and strategies through which journalists incorporate amateur images into the news narratives in mainstream media (both the press and TV broadcasting). Although the issue of the incorporation of amateur images into news narratives emerges in several chapters, it plays a central role in chapter one, chapter four and chapter five, which – along with chapter eleven – arguably represent the core of the book.

Chapter one, written by Karin Becker, presents a complex analysis that takes into account historical turning points regarding the use of amateur photography in the press, as well as journalistic ethical dilemmas in terms of moral distance. This analysis provides a context for the exploration of major routines and strategies adopted by journalism to control such moral distance and make amateur images fitting the news frame. Examples range from 1912 use of the private photograph of Captain Smith's wife published by *The Daily Mirror* the week after the sinking of the Titanic to the torture images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (2004), and their use in the press. Helle Sjøvaag, in chapter 4, analyses the coverage of amateur images from the London bombings (2005) as well as Benazir Bhutto's assassination (2007). By studying the use of these images made in two Norwegian's television channels, she outlines a distinction between the "embedding" and the "embellishing" narrative strategies, the former as characterized by the "accuracy approach", while the latter by the "immediacy approach". In chapter 5, Mervi Patti and Kari Andén-Papadopoulos explore how transnational commercial channel CNN and three national public service channels – BBC One, the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation (SVT1) and the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE TV1) – incorporate footage captured by ordinary Iranians during the 2009 post-elections uprising in Tehran. They question how broadcasters

“handle the challenges that amateur eyewitness imagery raises for professional ethics, specifically for the standards of accuracy and the use of graphic images” [p. 99].

Among many interesting points raised in the chapter, the central one deals with the redefinition of the concept of “transparency,” treated as a strategic ritual and a performance which is becoming ever more important in journalism. The increase in importance of the “performance of transparency” goes along with the loss in importance of the performance of objectivity. Indeed, Patti and Andén-Papadopoulos argue that accuracy and objectivity are now treated by journalists within “a more relative and post-modern view.” At the same time, they set the link between transparency and authority by writing that

“[i]n the networked-media environment the authority of journalism should rest more on the openness of journalists and journalistic institutions” [p. 101].

The starting point of these three chapters is that amateur images challenge the conventions of journalism and potentially redefine the role of journalism and the role attributed to eyewitnesses in societies. The authors conclude their examinations by critically discussing this position, by highlighting how narrative strategies employed by journalists counter this challenge or even allow journalism to renew its authoritative role in society by taking advantage of new materials. For instance, the intent of Helle Sjøvaag’s contribution is to show how journalists – through editing and framing – manage to balance the threat of non-professional imagery by reasserting the journalistic authority which is founded on “the ideology of news,” while Pantti and Andèn-Papadopoulos, argue that

“the ritual of transparency functions simultaneously as a source of legitimacy and a justification for exploiting the sensational value of such material” [p. 107].

In chapter 11, Williams, Wahl-Jorgensen and Wardle reinforce this general approach, by adding the perspective of the audience. Analysing a huge amount of data collected in the years 2007-08, they show how *both journalists and the audiences* limit the potential of a new participative culture in journalism. Such a limitation takes place by stressing the effect of reality and the emotional value of amateur images and by downplaying or even openly criticizing other roles for “ordinary citizens” in the production of news. In so doing, it dramatically reduces the potentially pivotal role of “the eyewitness picture producers.” “This – the authors conclude –

strengthens newsroom hierarchies and allows journalists to continue privileging authoritative and elite voices as news sources” [p. 207].

As the editors write in the introduction [p. 15],

“*Amateur Images and Global News* aims at providing a more nuanced and empirically based understanding of the contexts and uses of amateur imagery in the mainstream media and of how it is perceived and valued by journalists and audiences”.

To be honest, chapter 9 – which is one of the more intriguing essay in the book – is hardly includable in this declaration of intents. Liam Kennedy’s excellent analysis of pictures produced by serving US soldiers in Iraq focuses on their visual language, on their circulations on the web and on their functions, but the role played by mainstream media is not included in the discussion. Analysing the diverse sources and recipients of these images – private e-mails, individual blogs, popular photo-blogging sites, pornographic websites – and contextualizing them as being largely characterized by “a tourist frame” (and by showing how this frame “is closely linked to ‘trophy pictures’”) [p. 165], Kennedy offers an invaluable account of this flourishing phenomenon. At the same time, his essay shows an evident limit, that is the lack of comparison with professional images. Claiming that soldiers’ photographs supplement or challenge the visual knowledge of war offered by professionals, Kennedy touches the point but he does not discuss soldiers’ pictures by confronting them with those produced by embedded photojournalists. Indeed, it could

be argued that most of the professional pictures from Iraqi War have been produced within the same context and from the same visual angle of those produced by soldiers.

The lack of comparison between professional and non-professional images is a general critique that can be extended to the whole book. Indeed, when the comparison is posed, it usually occurs within a historical frame, by investigating

“how the border between professional and non-professional photography in the press has been continually challenged and redrawn” [p. 25].

This is the case of both Karin Becker’s and Stuart Allan’s contributions. By contrast, structural changes in professional photojournalism after digitalization, and deep cultural differences among visual media systems are the two key elements that appear overlooked. Digitalization has altered the structure of photojournalism and it has transformed the professional practices both in gathering and in selecting images. These changes intersect historical differences which are part of news cultures and which contribute to the formation of distinct media systems. As a whole, all these elements constitute a given context. To ignore such a context may lead to investigate amateur images *as if* the professional side would be completely different, characterized without exceptions by strongly defined ethical norms and practical standards as those referred to – for instance – in the Associated Press Code of Ethics for Photojournalists. Several arguments developed in the book produce this dichotomy.

To conclude, *Amateur Images and Global News* is an excellent and very welcome contribution in a field which is crucial to study the redefinition of the role of journalism. By considering key ethical dilemmas, new forms of circulations and the role attributed to non-professional images by both journalists and audiences, this work raises serious questions, offers new arguments for discussing major changes in communication, and contributes to debunk the myth of the “prosumers” that, by some scholars, are interpreted as key actors who arguably reduce the authority of more traditional forms of journalism.

As many contributors of this book brilliantly show, it seems that the authority of images, far from having been compromised, has indeed been revitalized by the digital turn. This is an essential starting point for further works. However, the book would have greatly benefited from a more nuanced account of the professional vs. non-professional dichotomy in the production of visual news. As a matter of facts, at least within specific contexts,

“a collaborative new style of news gathering – one that combines the contributions of ordinary citizens with the reports and analysis of journalists” (p. 99)

is not confined to a set of exceptional events involving non-professionals. Today this new collaborative style already represents the norm in many cases where self-declaring professional photojournalists are involved. Indeed, the role played by many “professionals” in the events they depict and the ethical standards of conduct they follow are often largely unknown to journalists in the newsrooms. According to Mortinsen, as well as to Pantti and Andèn-Papadopoulos, the “why,” “where” and “when” of visual news production has become problematic, but this problem is not limited to amateur contributions during breaking news events. Following this argument, the missing point of the book deals with the when-questions: *when* are images (graphic or not) ex-

plicitly defined and treated by journalism as problematic, and *when* are they explicitly framed as non-professional (the “embellishing strategy” or the “performance of transparency”) – and, of course, *when* they are not? In the future, taking these questions into account might be a way to seriously follow Mortensen’s suggestion of moving from the concept of citizen visual journalism to the concept of “the eyewitness picture producers,” as well as, more generally, a way to move towards a more sociological approach in the study of digital news images, putting amateur images in their wider structural context.

Andrea Pogliano
University of Eastern Piedmont