



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 67/17

Project manager: Patrik Åker

Project title: Photographic realism in the digital media age. Photojournalism and visual literacy in Russia and Sweden (Fotografisk realism i den digitala tidsåldern. Bildjournalistik och visuell litteracitet i Ryssland och Sverige)

1. Purpose of the project

The aim of this project has been to investigate how the challenges by digitalization and a new (social) media landscape is met by educations for photojournalism and documentary photography in Russia and Sweden. In recent theories about photography it is common to underline that digitalization, the rise of Internet and social media platforms have transformed photography's relation to reality. What used to be understood as photography's relation to reality – the camera's capacity to mechanically register what is in front of it – has become questioned. Education programs for photographers are sites where future professional photographers, teachers, and experienced photo professionals meet and where discourses and practices around photography as a tool to communicate about the surrounding world (what we in this project understand as photographic realism) are developed. This project's starting point was to see these sites for learning as contradictory because from one perspective they have the goal to teach the profession's established norms and ideals, however, at the same time they constitute spaces partly outside the profession. This should open for possibilities to challenge established cultural conventions around photographic realism (they do not to the same extent have to think about for instance the media outlets political orientations, economic terms, owners or clients' interests and so on). Students and educators at photo programs can therefore be understood as important for forming future understandings of photographic realism in photojournalism and documentary photography.

The reason behind including educations in Russia and Sweden was that with departure from earlier research these countries belong to different traditions when it comes to understandings of realism. However, it is not strictly a national comparison because we also wanted to include schools with somewhat different orientations in each country. Because one of the main educations for photojournalism (at the Mid-University in Sweden) closed during the project we had to rethink the final selection of educational sites. This resulted in that the Swedish material is somewhat thinner than the Russian counterpart, but overall the initial intention has been followed.

The included educations in Russia are the two main schools for photography in Moscow. One is the Photojournalism and Media Technologies department at the Faculty of Journalism, Moscow State University (MSU). It is a 4-year full-time bachelor program (with 2 years of focus on photojournalism) and a one-year professional preparation program for people with higher education. The other educational site is The Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia. It is three-year full-time program (where



it is possible to specialize in different photographic genres) defined as “additional education” (which means outside of the university context).

In Sweden material has been collected from The Nordic Photography School located North of Stockholm on Biskops-Arnö island. Since the photojournalism education at the Mid-University closed it is the only longer program for documentary photography and photojournalism in Sweden (at the University of Gothenburg they offer a bachelor program and a master program in photography, but they are more oriented towards art photography). The Nordic Photography School offers a vocational education in form of a three-year full-time program called “Professional photographer – photography and moving image” (previously “Photographer – photojournalist”). Additionally, we have also reached out to the educators of a planned two-year Master Program in Photojournalism in Scandinavia, which had planned to be launched by Mid-Sweden university, Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), and Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus in 2020, however, as of 2022 the program has not yet started.

We have conducted focus group interviews and individual interviews (some online) with students and educators in these different educational contexts. We have also made observations (some online due to the pandemic) and photo-documentation of classwork and examinations, as well as exhibitions by students and alumni at different exhibition spaces. We have also collected written material such as study plans, literature lists, instructions to examinations etc.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

1) Continuation of earlier photographic practices

The documentary tradition is an ideal for most of both the students and educators. In that tradition the camera is used as a tool and the photograph becomes an interpretation by the artistic eye of the photographer. It put emphasis on the interpretative, subjective photographer who has artistic freedom but who should at the same time be true to the photograph’s assumed indexicality (the casual relation between what we see in the photograph and what was in front of the camera when the picture was taken). In our material the documentary tradition is understood as inherently dialogic in several aspects, such as that between the photographer and the photographed, between the photography and the media users. The dialogic dimension in the photographic expression is also something that is taught, discussed and trained at the photo schools. The traditional skills and competences related to the history of documentary photography is understood as a guiding ideal for how photography can be practiced in other contexts. And a broadening of the photographic profession is believed to be necessary in a situation where it is hard to earn your living as a photojournalist or a documentary photographer.

2) Old understandings of new technology

The heavy focus on a historical understanding of the documentary tradition in photography, and its importance for photojournalism, has also consequences for how camera technology and related media infrastructures are framed. The move from analogue to digital cameras has by some scholars been understood as a ‘paradigmatic shift’ because of the easiness to edit/manipulate photos, the ubiquitous circulation of amateur photos, the immediacy of distribution, and media convergence (new possibilities to integrate still



photos, moving pictures, sound, and text). There are examples in our material of using the affordances with digital media to find new multi-media ways to enhance the visual storytelling, but it is not the dominant way of understanding visual competences and skills. Instead, what is emphasized is knowledge about different kinds of photographs/images to make the students capable to working in different fields such as journalism (by incorporating a ‘civil gaze’), information, advertising, and artistic projects. Generally, there is a lack of discussions and practices around new technologies for direct dialogue with media users (the viewers), such as for instance integrating amateur pictures in finding new dialogic expressions. The immediacy of distribution is often understood as a threat to a slower photographic practice in line with the documentary tradition with the photographer as the master of the technology, and where post-production is limited to a ‘darkroom norm’ (that is, what you could do in the darkroom during the analogue era should guide what you can do with the digital photo).

3) Transnational understandings of photographic practices

The comparative design of the project made it possible to look for similarities and differences between the included photo schools. Because Russia and Sweden in many aspects have very different histories and understandings of concepts like realism, objectivity and photography’s relation to art, it is striking how many cross-national similarities we found between the sites for education and their understanding of photography. Common is an emphasis on the trained artistic eye (which also suggest that the ideal role of the photographer is active rather than passive, even though it depends on photographic genres), the ‘darkroom norm’, and a focus on visual storytelling (firmly in line with the history of photojournalism and documentary photography). However, these ideals are experienced by both teachers and students in the Russian context as hard to practice, at least in a journalistic context. Even if traditional photojournalism is experienced as threatened in the market-driven media landscapes in both Russia and Sweden, both students and educators in the Swedish material express some hopes and there is also a tendency that role models working in Swedish journalism are mentioned. In the Russian material they talk more about the dangers with the internet, manipulation of photos, and censorship. Some of the Russian students and educators also believe that there are stricter borders between documentary and art photography in the Russian context compared to how photography is practiced in Europe and the US.

3. The project’s contribution to the international research frontline

There are quite few studies of education for future photojournalists and documentary photographers. In earlier research there is also a tendency to focus on Anglo-American contexts, and there are seldom comparative studies. This project thereby contributes to filling these gaps in the international research. The project also develops and engages in the discussion about the relation between analogue and digital photography by emphasizing a literacy and practice perspective instead of a technological perspective. Moreover, the project advocates a professional literacy perspective on the photographic practices as a complement to the common understanding of literacy from a media user perspective. To highlight the importance of visual literacy (understood as competences and skills in image-reading, image-making, and image-presentation) from the perspective of the (future) media



producers opens for moving away from a too strong burden that often are placed on the shoulders of the media user in the literature about media literacy.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

Both students and educators in our material stress that journalism is a shrinking arena for the kind of photography they want to practice in the tradition of photojournalism and documentary photography. We have therefore applied for a new comparative research project which focuses on how photographs and other visuals are used in the newsroom context. Of interest is how visuals are classified, made, and presented and how that can be related to the results from this project about photo educations, but also how the practices at newsrooms can be related to technological shifts and possible new affordances, and in the long run, new demands on education programs for photographers and visual communicators.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

As already discussed, one significant result was the strong resemblance between how photography was understood and practiced in the (quite distinct) national contexts included. This gives evidence of a transnational photo culture in the Baltic Sea Region (but the results in this study also show similarities with understandings in other national contexts, suggesting that the Baltic Sea Region is not constitutive but that there is a wider transnational professional community concerning photographic practices). However, the ongoing war in Ukraine and how photographs and other visuals are used as propaganda tools in the Russian contexts also give evidence to how fragile the situation is. The witnessed discrepancy between how the students and educators want to practice photography and how it is used in journalism (a gap which is more emphasized in the Russian material) anyway gives hope for the future. It shows that the students at Russian education programs have understandings, competences and skills to shape the future media landscape in a more democratic direction if the circumstances are favorable. However, both the Russian and Swedish educational contexts are quite conservative and would benefit from adopting new ways of engaging and integrating with the wider audiences to make photography trustworthy and relevant in journalism and documentary projects in the future.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Chapter in anthology:

Åker, P. & Voronova, L. (2020), "Framtidens bildjournalist blickar bortom journalistiken". In: Gardeström, E. & Rehnberg, H.-S. (eds) *Vad är journalistik?* (pp. 111-123). Huddinge: Södertörn University. [urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-40498](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-40498) (open access)

Articles in international peer-review journals:

Voronova, L. (to be submitted) 'Who will you be?' Re-professionalizing photographers for economy of (digital) attention



Voronova, L. (to be submitted) For and through dialogue. Photojournalism and documentary photography education as a dialogic space

Åker, P. (submitted and under review) Framing 'the photographic self' in education programs for photographers in Russia and Sweden

Åker, P. (submitted and under review) Photographic realism. Reflections on photography and reality among future professional photographers

Conferences:

Voronova (2021). Photography education as a dialogic space. NordMedia (online), 18-20 August.

Åker (2021). Framing "the photographic self" in educations for photographers in Russia and Sweden. NordMedia (online), 18-20 August.

Voronova (2020). Comparing discourses on photographic realism in Russia and Sweden. Documentary photography and photojournalism education "on the move"? Comparative Media Studies in Today's World-2020. St Petersburg (online), April 2020.

Åker (2019). Photography Education and Digital Transformation in Russia: Discourses on Photographic Realism. Aleksanteri 2019, Helsinki, 23-25 October.

Voronova & Åker (2019). Documentary photography and photojournalism education 'on the move'? Discourses on photographic realism in Russia. Moscow Readings 2019, Moscow, 16-18 October.