

The Dual Model of the Digital Photojournalist: A Case Study on Romanian Photojournalism beyond the Economic Crisis

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Abstract: *This article aims to put in perspective the “crisis” notion: beyond the economic crisis of the past decade, the adoption of the digital media in the journalism field has brought into question not only news business models, but also professional ones. Our theoretical approach examines the definition of the double-sided crisis in the context of the media industry, and more specific regarding digital photojournalism, and wishes to identify the emerging professional and business models of the new media economy. The second part of the paper explores this transition from a local perspective, using a qualitative approach, based on a body of fourteen interviews, conducted one-on-one, with Romanian photojournalists.*

Keywords: *economic crisis, digital photojournalism, professional and business models.*

1. Preamble: a brief overview of the Romanian printed press

Around 2009, the main titles of the local quality press relied on national editions of 64 pages for *Adevărul*, or 40 pages for *Jurnalul Național*, or on supplements of 128 pages for *Adevărul de Weekend*. Newspaper groups were launching periodically new products, free dailies (such as *Adevărul de Seară*, *Compact* and *Ring*) and

daily themed supplements. Also, back then, the photo departments of the main newspaper groups included teams of over ten photojournalists.

Nowadays, at the time of this study, more than a handful of the main titles no longer have print editions: *Cotidianul* and *Business Standard* since December 2009, *Ziua* and *Gardianul* since January 2010, *Financiarul* and *Gândul* since 2011 and *ProSport* since December 9th, 2013. Two of them, *Ziua* and *Gardianul* have closed even their on-line platforms, shortly after ceasing their print editions. Besides heavy cuts in the number of pages (from 64 pages to 32 for *Adevărul*, or from 40 pages to 16 for *Jurnalul Național*), there is also a change of format, from broadsheet or Berliner to tabloid (*Evenimentul Zilei*, *Adevărul* and *Jurnalul Național*), as well as reductions or closures of supplements (*Pagina de media*, Selected articles, 2010-2014). Finally, photo departments barely number one to three photojournalists.

Apart from illustrating the dramatic recent changes of the Romanian newspapers, this brief comparison highlights a first observation regarding a defining element in the work of photojournalists: there is a constant decline of dedicated space for press photography in print media, both in terms of surface and quantity, of number of images. Still, the question is far from being a local matter, as the global dimension of the financial recession changed the working conditions of professionals all over the world (Wellford 2013)¹. Nevertheless, a deeper enquiry among the local photojournalist community suggests that, besides press photo decline, the newspaper crisis cannot be reduced to the only effects of the economic turmoil affecting local and global media.

Part of an ongoing study on Romanian photojournalism, this article explores the specific definition of the “crisis” notion taking into consideration both the impact of the financial recession and, before that, of the adoption of digital technology. As Siles and Boczkowski observe, in a review article assessing the recent body of research focusing on the newspaper crisis (Siles & Boczkowski 2012), investigation of the crisis should adopt a process orientation, instead of focusing on the outcomes. Moreover, the agenda for future research should also embrace further productive strategies, such as integrating a historical perspective, conducting a more international, comparative research and supplementing the empirical research based on qualitative methods.

Critical to our understanding of the subject is to consider the actual development of Romanian photojournalism according to a process-driven perspective. In this

1 Portfolio reviews and round table with James Wellford (former International Picture Editor at *Newsweek Magazine*), organized at the World Press Photo Exposition in Bucharest, May 17th, 2013. Amongst other observations, M. Wellford reviewed cuts in staff and closures affecting publications with a tradition for photojournalism, leading many employees to consider freelancing and projects outside the media industry.

respect, the question is how local professionals react to economic and technological changes, as well as their response to the transformation of the media industry. An interrogation on the crisis theoretical framework is key to our approach.

2. A crisis within a crisis

The first issue we intend to explore is the definition of the “crisis” notion in the context of media industry. Hitherto, the global financial crisis that unfolded since 2008 appears to be only the tip of the iceberg, as it amplified the economic difficulties that the industry was already facing, under the effects of the emerging digital media eroding the traditional business models of the print news. Two main quality titles, *The Times* and *The Independent*, changing their newspaper format from broadsheet to tabloid, may well illustrate an adaptive strategy of the British press groups (Zegout 2013).

Moreover, one can only notice the polysemy of the “crisis” notion, linked to a cyclic process that goes way back in the history of print news. As Philip Meyer observes, along the technological evolution that contributed to the demassification of media, the Internet is merely the latest disruptive technology, as a progressive, and not isolated effect (Meyer P. 2009, p. 12). A similar point of view conveyed by Lev Manovich, when defining the term “new media”, is to consider the potential of a trans-media analysis rather than focusing solely on computer-based network technologies, thus exploring “certain aesthetic techniques and ideological tropes which accompany every new modern media and telecommunication technology at the initial stage of its introduction and dissemination” (Manovich 2003). Two aspects are to be considered in the adoption of new media: the first is related to a more accurate terminology referring to technological change, as “digitalization”² and “the Internet” are “two developments that are distinct but tightly interwoven and this makes the cause of changes to media industry very difficult to disentangle” (Küng, Picard, & Towse 2008, p. 172). Furthermore, placing the newspaper and magazine publishing within the media industries puts in perspective a complex range of transformations, from structural industry change to distribution, creation of new products and markets, thus “forcing incumbent to confront out-of-date products, practices and business models”³. The second aspect links to processes

2 The authors consider “digitalization” – the conversion of any media content into binary form – to be equally or even more important than “the Internet” – a distribution system of digitized media content – for the media industries, for it provided the means to transform all content, new and old, into the new medium, thereby being able to provide more content, instead of only new content, *ibid.* “Digitalization” should be differentiated from the term “digitization”, seen more as the process of moving from analog to digital, reshaping the value chain.

3 *Ibid.*

concerning the early stages of adoption, i.e. the debut of online newspaper editions mirroring the print versions with similar content and layout: Clark Gilbert reviews the response of newspaper organizations to the rise of digital media, stressing out two distinct categories of inertia when dealing with disruptive innovation: “resource rigidity”, or the failure to change resource investment patterns, and “routine rigidity”, seen as the failure to change organizational processes that use those resources (Gilbert 2005).

Another issue to consider is the relative global dimension of the print media crisis. On the one hand, World Press Trends surveys produced by the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers show a steady and significant positive trend of print circulation for the maturing economies in Asia and Latin America, while decreasing in Northern America and Europe (WAN-IFRA 2014 and 2013). On the other hand, Paolo Hooke points out some of the reasons why newspaper markets are growing strongly in China and India (Hooke 2012). As the author notes, economic growth calls for higher incomes and rising standards of living – and this calls, in its turn for the specific audiences – an emerging urban and literate middle class. Still, the current global trend for readership is to migrate to digital media at the expense of print, with a global shift for mobile traffic and for video content⁴. Finding sustainable business models for digital news media remains a challenge.

2.1 What about photojournalism?

A similar trend can be identified in this particular domain: effects of the recession rooting in the adoption of digital technology, and one of its major outcomes – the democratization of photography creating the false impression that a state-of-the-art digital camera may equate professional and amateur or citizen photojournalism. David Campbell retraces the crisis origin in the end of the so-called “golden era” of photojournalism, marked by the closure of weekly pictorial magazines, such as *Life* and *Look* in the 1970’s (Campbell 2010, p. 15). Overall, one can observe a crisis of the medium, the printed press, or, to put it differently, a crisis within a crisis, where photojournalism, let alone freelancing photojournalism, sounds today like an impossible job.

With a brief survey of the existing literature produced by industry observers and scholars, this study puts in perspective four main themes regarding the changes brought by the rise of digital media. They concern the emergence of: (a) new actors, (b) new praxis and process, (c) new products and (d) a new value chain. Favoring a systemic approach, this section examines the transition from the

4 See “World Press Trends surveys” 2013 and 2014, see also OECD. (2010). *News in the Internet Age: New Trends in News Publishing*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

traditional model of photojournalism to the digital one, taking into consideration economic, technological, and social changes.

Key to these four themes is the concept of “new media ecosystem”. Introduced in 1989, first as a metaphor in understanding the impact of the Information Age (Berger, 1989), the “ecosystem” notion was fostered over a decade after as an attempt to scrutinize the new emerging media environment (Rosen 2005; Benkler 2006). As to our concern, we favor the approach describing the novel news ecosystem as the passage from the traditional linear model of publishing to the digital model viewed as a non-linear, decentralized interactive system (OECD 2010, p. 51). In this respect, Anderson, Bell, & Shirky emphasize the process as a radical outcome: “The arrival of the internet did not herald a new entrant in the news ecosystem. It heralded a new ecosystem, full stop” (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky 2012, p. 83). A second key concept is “new media economy”. Industry analysts, like Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired* magazine, are documenting the features of a new economic order using a transitional approach. Kelly emphasizes the role of networks in the emerging business models (Kelly 1999), while David Campbell reflects more on the abandon of the traditional dual revenue business model of mass media in a context where “defining characteristic of the new media economy is the separation of information from its means of distribution” (Campbell 2013, pp. 28-34). Still, the complex nature of the object, due to the fast moving nature of the business and the relative youth of new media, is reflected in the body of scholarly work by prudence on generalizing theories, supporting instead partial topics, such as critical approaches of political economy (Mansell 2004), (Jin & Winseck 2012) or as multi-sector and multimarket approaches (Küng, Picard, & Towse 2008), (De Prato, Sanz, & Paul 2014), or by the bias of interdisciplinary perspectives, on cluster modelisation, (Cooke 2006; Pratt 2000), or on content and cultural industries (Bouquillion & Matthews 2010).

Emergence of new actors

Digital technology advances and capabilities, as well as mass market penetration of digital cameras added several new features to the new digital photojournalism: accessibility, availability, immediacy and mobility, along with a progressive lowering of entry barriers for new actors in the field. Next to the traditional complementary actors, photo and wire agencies, newspapers and magazines, staff photographers and stringers, new players emerge as image providers, acting as intermediaries or producers of news photos. In this recently developed context of networked activity (OECD 2010, p. 52), the new actors are:

- Amateur photographers act as suppliers for news organizations, whether by choice, following the “Citizen Journalism” model, or by demand, via a crowdsourcing model favoring local coverage responding to assignments

issued by news organizations⁵. Seen as a cheaper alternative source of still photography, amateur photojournalists may also be a complementary source for scoops, partnering with professional photographers for an in-depth coverage of the subject (Keller 2011).

- Photo-sharing platforms, such as Flickr, Instagram, Tumblr or Pinterest, are providing on-line presence and exposure for individuals, along with monetization solutions (Oliver, 2009), as well as archive digitized images free of copyright and ready to use (Kelion 2014).
- Social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, were used as sources of exclusive photos for breaking stories or ongoing crisis (Keller 2011). Still, as Keller notes, limitations are to be considered, regarding copyright issues, and manipulation of imagery.
- Internet portals and photo aggregators (Pixable, Imgur) function as points of access to photo archives revolving on particular topics.
- Hardware producers are providing physical devices with built-in cameras and wireless communication capabilities (ranging from e-readers, mobile phones and PDAs to video game consoles), while software producers deliver applications enabling photo editing and social media sharing (Instagram, Hipstamatic, Camera+). The increasing popularity of applications with image enhancement features, such as color adjustment, lighting effects, overlays and customized filters, set out particular aesthetic trends (e.g. „Instagramming“) adopted even by professionals, as the embedded photojournalism project of 2010 in northern Afghanistan carried out by *New York Times* staff photographer Damon Winter (Alper 2013). Besides technical and aesthetic debates, Alper emphasizes that, in fact, ethical issues should be considered when professionals simulate – with the use of iPhone and Hipstamatic – the way soldiers produce their own images of the war.
- Consumers and audiences, shifting to a more active role, as “users”, are starting to play a fair part in diffusing, distributing and even rating specific photo projects on social networks.
- Stock library images (Corbis, Getty, Shutterstock) and micro-stock (Istockphoto, Dreamstime, Alamy) offer subscription time-based plans, bulk packages and images on demand formulas, under Royalty Free or Rights Managed licenses.

5 See Demotix, a commercial online platform collecting photos and video from ordinary people and freelance photographers for the use of international news media. At the time of this study, the site (www.demotix.com) states 30,000 contributors, as well as and clients in the mainstream media all over the world (BBC.co.uk, *Le Monde*, Amnesty International Online, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Newsweek*, etc.). For 2009, David McCairley referenced, citing the site, 5,000 professional and amateur contributors (McCairley, 2009, p. 3).

Along with amateur photojournalism, these actors were accounted for the constant decrease in the pecuniary value of press photography. Two aspects are to be seen: first, the vast array of editorial still photos serve as cheaper or even free alternatives to commissioned editorial assignments (McCairley 2009). On the other hand, considers image market observer Johannes Glückler, the success of the Royalty Free business model, allowing “the first fully-fledged e-commerce trading to emerge” (2009, p. 3) imposed a stable market share structure and decreasing prices for images. Later on, the alliances forged by smaller agencies perpetuate this trend (Glückler, *Knowing Your Industry*, 2008). The recent Global Stock Image Market Survey of 2012 brings a detailed picture, with three dominant players: “agencies that trade images on behalf of other creators, archives which preserve collections of primary image sources, and photographer alliances or cooperatives that only trade their own images” (Glückler & Panitz, 2013, p. 3). Almost half of the total sales in 2011, (47%) came from editorial images; still, the report states an ongoing price deterioration of visual content, as well as an overall stagnation and a trend toward market concentration, reflect of the economic crisis and decrease in publishing activities.

In this new environment of digital photojournalism, the most affected actors appear to be professionals coming from the traditional model. The report commissioned in 2009 by the European Federation of Photojournalist identifies a series of challenges met by these traditional players, and documents the eroding status of professional photojournalism in a context where “the advent of the digital era should, in theory, be ushering in a golden age for photojournalism” (McCairley 2009, p. 2). However, scholar research is more cautious on putting a direct link of casualty between the adoption of digital media and the actual crisis of photojournalism, but instead focuses on a negative synergy between the new and old weaknesses of photojournalists, determined not by the digitization itself, but rather by the way it was implemented (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014).

Emergence of new of praxis and process

The basics of photojournalism may have not changed in the digital era, with ongoing core values such as “telling stories that are well researched, engaging, based on facts, accurate, fair, balanced [...] properly contextualized, [...] ethical” (Kawamoto 2003, p. 25). Its principles remain, considered late Romanian photojournalist Mihai Vasile: “The photojournalist should not compose or interpret, but record. It is not a creative act, but a subjective, responsible one” (Vasile 2013).

Socio-professional organizations, such as World Press Photo Academy, the Pulitzer Center and the European Federation of Journalists have met the problem of amateur/ citizen photojournalism with a number of well-documented reports. Beyond solid technical skills, these reports state the profile of the professional photojournalist as a visual storyteller, opposed to the amateur photographer that can capture, randomly, a relevant image. The focus moves from the topic, the isolated image or the photo essay towards a complex visual story – approached using specific professional journalism resources: extensive time, sources, references etc. In this respect, the Pulitzer Center aims images that are able to pass the test of time, promoting a valuable photojournalism and a type of storytelling that go beyond scoops and breaking news (Keller 2011).

On the other hand, digital media is prone to blurring boundaries of praxis and process. The beginning of the new millennia brought real-time coverage, regardless of time and distance⁶, in a context where the adoption of digital technology revolutionized the entire production process of photos (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014). A second effect, strongly connected to the democratization of digital photo equipment is a steep learning curve of technical skills, by a change of paradigm in the educative potential of the medium: film through quality and digital through quantity.

Over exposed in social media, controversial subjects such as the alleged manipulation of a World Press Photo Award Winner photo brings into question the post-processing of digital imagery, but many tend to forget that debates over the extent of image editing in photojournalism are not new (Laurent 2013). Still, the 2010 iPhone coverage in Afghanistan reveal deeper issues than blurring the boundaries between reporting and editorializing (Alper, 2013). Another converging prospect of digital media concerns the innovative multimedia approach to news coverage and visual storytelling: the introduction of DSRL cameras with video capabilities and increased performances, as well as the use of voice recorders for testimonials, shifted roles of still photojournalists to video photojournalists, leading to the development of a new vocabulary in the process (Meyer C.D. 2003, p. 97).

Emergence of new products

Relying on a consistent body of photojournalism images and examples, Fred Ritchin explores the potential of the new medium and traces the coordinates of a novel paradigm he calls “hyperphotography”, as digital photography becomes “a

6 A professional milestone recalled by the media industry is the 2001 coverage of the war in Afghanistan, just three weeks after the events of 9/11, when reporters equipped with computers, digital cameras and satellite communication were constrained only by the rigors of war (Meyer C.D., 2003, p. 93).

component in the interactive, networked interplay of a larger metamedia” (Ritchin 2009, p. 141). Moreover, he puts in perspective the digital photo as a hypertextual medium, whose malleability reveal both weaknesses and opportunities: subject for heavy editing and photo manipulation, but also material for documenting a possible future, supporting a preventive program.

Taking advantage of the specificity of the medium is key to the developments of new products: “[...] because digital media do not have the same kind of space and time constraints imposed on traditional media, stories can be told with greater depth and wider breadth” (Kawamoto 2003, p. 25). Technically, it provides a broader context to single images that accompany other story forms, through hypertext links to other stories or archives, taking advantage of other forms of visual representations, such as maps, timelines and infographics. Moreover, the multimedia approach enhancing linear slideshows or nonlinear galleries has proved to be a powerful tool to innovative narratives that develop the concept to create interactive and engaging content. Still, Ritchin deplores mainstream media lacking new strategies that take advantage of the digital medium, in a context where “dissimilarities between digital and analog media weren’t taken seriously” (Ritchin 2010, p. 6).

Emergence of a new value chain

In the novel news ecosystem, the production, dissemination and reception of news follows a new interactive and multidirectional model, different from the traditional linear one of print publishing (OECD 2010, p. 51). Similarly, in the picture industry there is a change of the value chain, from the linear photographer-agency-customers model to a more complex, interactive network with new players; a model reorganization can be seen, shifting traditional roles and relying on players that “fall either on the side of the producer, with agencies specialized in production, image brokers, association of photographers or on the distribution side with portals, universal market leaders, picture research services” (Glückler 2008, pp. 4-5). More recent reports employ a broader view and suggest a slightly different modelization, with a value chain articulating three main types of actors: “image creators (photographers, cinematographers, graphic designers), image users (e.g. news media, advertising, publishers) and intermediate image suppliers who provide the commercial trade of usage rights in return for royalty payments” (Glückler & Panitz 2013, p. 4).

Patterns of organizational structures are reshaped by the proliferation of new means of distribution. The Associated Press mechanism meant to identify and capture citizen journalism, for further verification, crosscheck and reference illustrates a dynamic of change with appearance and disappearance, shifts, replacements or widening of roles (Keller 2011) (see also Surugiu & Radu 2009). At the same time, the downside concerns combining and merging jobs as multi-

tasking and multi-skilling that become industry requirements, placing increasing demands and pressure on professionals (McCairley 2009; Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014).

Digital photojournalism brings also a shift in the business model, from the traditional corporate model of media organizations employing staff photographers/ or stringers (freelancers), towards an individual one: the freelance photojournalist focused on a project-based approach, where he/ she assumes multiple roles: producer, editor and photographer working on topics directed to a community of readers and not a mass audience (Campbell 2010, p. 17).

In conclusion to this section, the brief survey of the specialized literature reveals the complex structure of the new media ecosystem where the challenges faced by photojournalists go beyond the sole transition from analog to digital photography. Moreover, the recent development of the new media economy points out two major trends concerned by this study: (a) the emergence of new professional and business models in the field of photojournalism and (b) the agents of change in the new media economy, fostering this innovative approach, come not from the mainstream media, but they are independent professionals working all over the world, active in “redefining roles, experimenting with new narratives and strategies of dissemination while attempting to broaden the photographic enterprise even further” (Ritchin 2013, p. 40). Ritchin’s observation is backed by a 2014 industry report examining how the European industry copes with the economic crisis, suggesting that freelancers “are the driving force behind the new business models that could create new jobs and greater flexibilities” (Bittner 2014, p. 13).

2.2 What about Romanian photojournalism?

This section draws its observations from a previous paper on the topic (Bardan 2013), correlated with complementary local findings that bring a broader perspective on the digitalization of media companies in Romania (Surugiu & Radu 2009; Radu & Surugiu 2006). As stated in the cited articles, digitalization of the local industry got off a late start, due to its specific sociopolitical context⁷, but rapidly recovered and started at full speed in the mid-90s (Surugiu & Radu 2009, p. 13). Adoption of the digital media kicked off in photojournalism around years 2002-2003⁸ and occurred in a favorable context of ongoing increasing investments made by media organizations, materialized in the publishing of a broad range

7 Romania was a Communist country until December 1989, and the highly centralized regime had severe and strict regulations on communication technologies.

8 Although media organization considered the dramatic cost-cutting of the production process, the pretty high prices of the first generation digital cameras was a barrier that delayed the process with a few years, as compared to other countries in Europe.

of new titles and products. Research provides important insights on the specific challenges faced by local photojournalists in the process. It also helps to retrace the chains of events clarifying the timeline of technological changes and industry decline.

Two particular circumstances are relevant for the matter. The first one concerns the adoption of digital media, where survey results indicate that little was done proactively in newsrooms to provide photojournalists with training in the use of new technology or to reduce uncertainty related to technological changes. Nevertheless, the enquiry among the local photojournalist showed that their concerns did not translate in terms of troubling disruption, resistance to change⁹, or threats related to employment and work conditions. Challenges posed by the adoption of digital technology were met mainly “on the job”, through experimentation, informal sharing and self-training, fitting in the general pattern identified by Surugiu and Radu (2009)¹⁰. Moreover, photojournalists distinguish between craftsmanship and professional development, as mastering the digital camera presented few difficulties due to the structural similarities of the equipment, which works basically the same way regardless of film or digital. The digital camera did certainly enhance work and productivity, but from a photojournalistic point of view it is perceived as a tool, that should be known inside out, but still a tool. Thus, upgrades of equipment were welcomed but not essential. In other respects, integration of new skills, such as digital processing of the photos (i.e. Photoshopping) and computer literacy were identified as more challenging.

The second case emphasizes on the context where the growing demand for photojournalists met a pretty low trained workforce, in the absence of specialized schools¹¹. The steady development of the industry was accompanied by a process of rapid and dynamic professionalization of the local community of photojournalists with certain implications on the short and long term. On the short term, additional favorable circumstances recall the increasing interest for press photography, through the publishing of annual albums, professional awards and highly

9 Opposition to the new medium was met mainly by the older generation of photojournalists, who were trained and worked before 1989, and who did not believe in the favorable outcomes of the digital camera.

10 In this respect, a variation in the digitalization processes, as related to the findings of Surugiu and Radu (2009) concerns the fear associated with the dependency on the ICT systems for those in charge of its maintenance. Photojournalists view digital photography as more reliable, as opposed to the uncertainty related to film shooting and processing. See also Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2014.

11 University undergraduate courses in photojournalism are minimal, and specialized trainings provided by Journalism associations are usually short-termed and non-consistent.

promoted exhibitions, initiatives promoted and supported by media owners. Photo departments grew steadily, attracting and training newcomers¹². On the other hand, the boom of electronic media also generated a fluctuation of staff from one media organization to another. While beneficial for senior photographers, who could substantially increase their salaries¹³, this so-called “Brownian movement” affected the local media on a larger scale having adverse side-effects for newcomers, stuck to a relatively poor level of payment (Surugiu & Radu 2009, p. 12). Furthermore, other effects point to an overall trend of de-skilling, fueled by discontinuity of professional practices, of internal communication in newsrooms, even of the editorial line, thus fostering low professional standards.

On the long term, processes described above proved to be acutely counter-productive once the recession unfolded, as severe measures meant to counterpart its effects were taken starting in mid-2009 (*Pagina de media* 2010-2013). Salary cuts and downsizing of photo departments were negotiated based on the threat that a pool of unpretentious newcomers would accept lower wages just to get the job. Also, the recession highlighted less visible factors undermining the photojournalists’ status and job security. One of these is the lack of specialized training (multimedia, digital editing, web design) cumulated with a lack of general training in visual literacy of the local industry, informing on the secondary status of the professional (the photojournalist) and the product (the press photography). In the first case, there is quite a distance between the profile of the photographer employing a journalism approach and using the image instead of words to develop news content and the general conception viewing the photographer merely an executant, the one “pushing the button”. The latter is related to the definition of press photography as a commodity. Whereas in the global picture market, stock photography reshaped the demand for and the value of editorial images, in the local market these variables are largely unclear, if not completely absent¹⁴. These factors may explain why few Romanian photojournalists were working as freelancers before the recession. Last, but not least, the absence of a professional union advocating a consistent professional agenda joins a more global trend as to the erosion of professional photojournalism (Klein-Avraham & Reich 2014).

Findings of this section point to the adoption of digital media and the democratization of the photography as beneficial for the local community of

12 Respondents recall informal competitions between photo departments based on performance, stimulating and motivating the newcomers (Bardan, 2013).

13 The numbers advanced by the respondents lead to an estimated average increase of 50% to 75%.

14 Our survey recorded several examples recalled by the respondents where they were asked to pick quickly a photo from Google Images in order to illustrate a story.

photojournalists. Findings also nuance and complete certain observations of the 2009 report commissioned by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) (McCairley 2009)¹⁵. The choice of an intriguing title report¹⁶ suggests rather an exploration of the economic crisis than challenges posed by the rise of the digital media, still inspired by the latter. The four main common concerns stressed in the EFJ survey (“Low rates”, “Competition from non-professionals”, “Authors’ rights”, “Expensive equipment”), do not find equivalent in our survey on Romanian photojournalists, when related digital media changes, as local professionals did not perceive these changes as threats. Finally, and perhaps the most important observation, this section’s findings infirm a direct causal link between the rise of digital media and the deteriorating job security and working conditions of professional photojournalists. Within a young and (still) immature media market, and with a slightly different historical timing of the recession, the “crisis” notion describes, in Romania, escalating changes that put the adoption of digital media not as a primary, but as a complementary cause.

3. The research design and methods

Following the theoretical overview, the aim of the empirical analysis completing this study is to identify the emerging professional and business models of the new media economy, and to explore this transition from a local perspective. Reframing the problem within the crisis framework calls for a specific questions: how did photojournalists react to reduce uncertainty related to industry decline?

As newsroom staffs undergo severe downsizings and photo assignments are in short supply, photojournalists are either reinventing themselves or find a new way to make a living. In this particular context, the industry standards indicate three main types of institutional integration: (a) full-time staff photographers relying on a fixed regular payment, who do not own any of their work¹⁷ or whose work is assigned by a contract¹⁸; (b) stringers working on a commission-based structure¹⁹,

15 One of the report’s limits concerns the lack of information about the sampling and the methodology; there is a mention stating that “a survey was conducted among the EFJ’s member unions” (McCairley, 2009, p. 2). The survey report data only from the following European countries: Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, Slovakia and Spain.

16 “Photojournalists - An endangered species in Europe?”

17 Due to the copyright system in the US, UK, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, India, Australia, Canada (the Anglo-Saxon model).

18 According to the authors’ rights system functioning in most European countries.

19 They commission from sales, i.e. get paid with a sum depending on several variables: timing of publication, circulation, reuse etc.

who own the copyright when they shoot on assignment, with the exception of “work-for-hire” contracts, seen as short-termed employments regulated by contracts; and (c) freelance shooters operating as independent contractors on project-based work, who license their photos. Staying in the business and coping with the industry decline can be achieved by transitioning from staff and stringer positions to freelance. Previous literature on the transformation of practices and identity in the journalism field (Laville, 2010) inspires our approach of the subject, describing the transition as a gradual passage from one configuration to another. Whereas a qualitative method is suited for the purpose of the study, allowing the researcher to “inductively and holistically understand human experience and constructed meanings in context-specific settings” (Patton 1990, p. 37), our research design articulates a three-step process as follows:

First, a refined theoretical representation, of Weberian inspiration, is built in order to simulate the emerging professional and business models of the new media economy. The two models are defined as complementary to each other, thus functioning as a dual model, and serves as a beacon, or a theoretical and methodological benchmark to guide future observation. We build in a series of features as variables meant to reflect the four main themes underlining the changes brought by the rise of digital media with the emergence of: (a) new actors, (b) new praxis and process, (c) new products and (d) a new value chain. Also, the variables should describe as accurate as possible the dual working model. As a methodological best practice, and in order to achieve a homogeneity of the corpus (Bardin 2005, p. 128), we limit the literature review to reports produced by industry observers, of a more factual nature, thus giving up scholarly texts, based on reflective and analytical thinking.

Second, a survey will be filtering the new routines and practices of digital photojournalism as recorded in a body of fourteen interviews with Romanian photojournalists. As qualitative inquiry typically investigates the “why” and “how” of processes, it focuses in depth on relatively small samples, relying on purposeful sampling to select *information-rich cases*, that “are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton 1990, p. 169). The lack of local directories of photojournalists indicated the use of a snowball or chain sampling procedure, as an approach for locating information-rich key informants (Patton 1990, p. 176). The only limitation criteria was that potential respondents should be ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky 2001), i.e. having experienced film photography before working on digital. This research relies on empirical data collected between 2012 and 2014. Gathered within an ethnographic approach, the interviews are narratives upon the evolution of Romanian photojournalism embedded in the professional and personal life of the respondents. The length of the interviews varies from one to three hours. Given

the fact that the project aimed from the start to get a broader image on Romanian photojournalism, all interviews followed an open structure, with two main questions as a starting point: (a) The adoption of digital technology and (b) The effects of the recession – as seen through the work experience of the respondents. After the initial phase of interviews was completed, audio files were transcribed, ensuring interviewee’s discourse was verbatim.

Third, findings were processed through content analysis (Bardin 2005) and on a comparative basis with the dual theoretical model identified in the first step. Given the aim of the research, and a sensible large categorizations of the dual model, data from the survey was hand-coded on themes fitting in the model. The process of coding each transcript by hand to structure raw data was preferred in this case, as the search for patterns was more organic, informing on the subsequent content analysis.

4. Results and discussion

Building up on insights from the industry literature review, particularly useful were EFJ, World Press Photo and Nieman reports featuring case studies and interviews with freelancers or founders of specialized studios, such as Brian Storm, an award-winning multimedia social documentary publisher. The dual model of the digital photojournalist is profiled in a narrative form as follows:

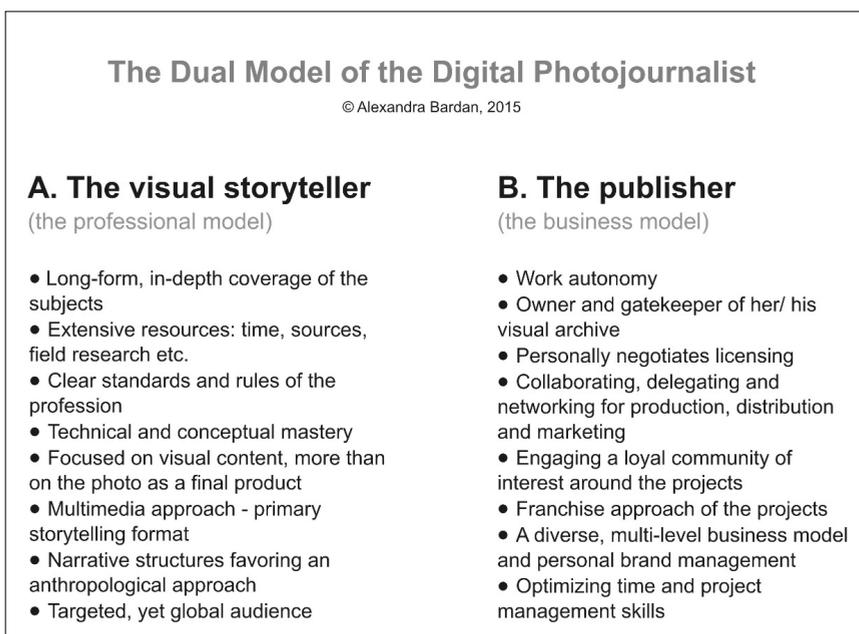
A. The visual storyteller – or the professional model

This person is the trained professional aiming to record more than just the events she/ he witnessed, thus overcoming the limitations that the publishing of a single photograph may have. This kind of visual journalism requires also a diversification of resources; it is preferring the multimedia format that is providing the context around an image. Brian Storm summarizes thoroughly an anthropological dimension of the job: “still pictures [...] are an incredibly powerful way to communicate. But photographs require context to tell a more complete narrative. The best thing for photojournalists to do is to slow down, become a little more engaged, and spend a little more time on their projects in a much more intimate way” (Storm 2010, p. 11). Another crucial aspect comes from the project management: it should foster an initial level of engagement across different media, may it be image, sound, or video footage, maximizing the opportunities for distribution – targeting different audiences, via different platforms. A new set of skills and routines are put to work, merging new media tools with traditional ones. She/ he improves on the use of new and social media tools to effectively convey a narrative beyond a local audience and beyond a fixed temporal line, finding additional channels to distribute stories and revive significant issues.

B. The publisher – or the business model

This part of the model comes with a different level of authorship, as the photojournalist shifts from an executive position to be the main manager of her/ his visual archive. As both owner and gatekeeper of this archive, she/ he selects and publishes photos under terms and conditions personally negotiated. Collaboration and delegation optimize the professional model, since effective multi-skilling is rare, just to mention shooting, editing, web development and marketing. Building a franchise around the projects is also key for ROI. Quoting again Brian Storm: “projects should be across multiple platforms, so they – photojournalists – can get the most exposure, reach the largest body of viewers, and generate the most revenue possible so that they can continue to do this type of in-depth, long-form work” (Storm 2010, p. 12). In this respect, networking is a key resource, not only for the production stage of reporting, for funding it, but also by engaging the audience to be a part of the process of telling stories, and also distribute them via social media. The digital photojournalist builds a diverse business model, while taking advantage of the emerging new media funding solutions. A complementary strategy is to build a personal reputation and to develop existing affiliations with media organizations, as well as pitching other kinds of clients interested in storytelling images. Thus, time and project management skills are crucial.

A more condensed representation of the dual model of the digital photojournalist is illustrated in the figure below.



The recession hit the local media industry gradually: the first signs came from cuts in the travel budgets. Further declines concerned the projects, with less time, interest and money for in-depth topics. Products followed, with reductions of supplements, formats, number of pages, even entire publications, peaking with dismissals. Downsizing of photo departments lead to odd situations where the only photojournalist left in the team was acting at the same time as a photo editor.

Content analysis of the fourteen interviews with Romanian photojournalists answered the questions of “why” and “how” local professionals reacted to industry decline. Besides formal compliance with the dual model, analysis stressed out a few observations on the context that the body of interviews provided for this study. The first trend noticed was that the vast majority of the respondents (eleven out of fourteen) were once employed as staff photographers, and started at some point to work as freelancers, mainly after 2010. With very few exceptions, the overall impression and tone of voice of the interviews are marked by a certain pessimism and lack of confidence in the future development of local media. These observations give a deeper understanding of why freelancing was considered in most cases as a matter of necessity, and not of choice. Except two or three cases, the respondents are former employees whose staff positions were affected by the recession. Most of them had to reconsider career options. From this point of view and a vocational one, two extremes were encountered: on one hand, a respondent decided on giving up photojournalism for another full-time job; on the other hand, the profile of two respondents showed significant dissimilarities: one opted to emigrate and keep on working as part time freelance photojournalist, the second revealed a particular approach of career management, the respondent positioning himself more as a “visual artist” aiming to exhibit work at museums of modern art. In-between these opposite poles, one can identify certain trends.

Respondents can be seen in the early stages of entrepreneurship, developing and learning the appropriate skills. Therefore, most of them have a diverse business model, with multiple clients, where corporate jobs, press conferences and wedding photo shootings co-exist with personal projects that are close, in concept, with the model of the visual storyteller. Networking is starting to be seen as a crucial part of the business and small teams are created based on personal and professional affinities.

Reskilling or upskilling, as part of digital media adoption, is still incomplete, as some did not embrace the vast array of tools, such as film editing, web-design or accounting. In this respect, the multimedia format is rarely employed, mainly because most projects are not initially designed towards this approach, thus still photography work remains norm. However, experiments of still image and sound recording, or multimedia as a global approach were recorded. It is a strong possibility that this comes as a result of a series of specific circumstances: first,

with some exceptions in print magazines, the local media development is marked by a decline in the quality/ and quantity of content resulting in a demand for visual products of low end value. The declining status of photographers, seen as mere executants, is resulting in commissioned work of low concept value, where the end-product is seen mostly in terms of a picture (or of a series of pictures), and not visual content. Last, but not least, there is a constant financial undervaluation of the photo, making negotiation for a project a difficult job. Second, the local community is seen as marked by a high tendency for individualism, for it is more a community of practice linked by the passion for the job but not by the work itself, or through a professional union. Collaborative work is still at the beginning, and the trend is to team up for occasional projects, and not by specific projects.

Examples of projects that fulfill most of the variables of the visual storyteller and the publisher can be found. One of them is “Pride and concrete” (Călinescu 2010), documenting changes in traditional Romanian villages from Maramures, as a result of the massive migration in search of work. Different stages of the project were funded by different sources, there was an initial multimedia approach materialized in photo exhibitions (Bucharest, Cluj, Berlin and Negrești-Oaș), a website as main distribution channel featuring a short film and still photos, and more recently an album was printed through crowd-funding. Moreover, an increasing number of ongoing projects were recorded at the time of this study.

Conclusion

The potential of journalism content creation and distribution fueled by increasing technological sophistication may well be one of the main advantages of digital media that can benefit from and be beneficial for photojournalists coming from the traditional model of the printed news.

The theoretical model of the digital photojournalist we proposed has little correspondence with the current state of Romanian photojournalism. One argument for this conclusion could be that many local variables are still in a transitional stage, and further panel analysis could confirm the validity of this model. It may well prove itself within the framework exploring developments in professional communities located elsewhere.

The international relevance of the Romanian case is underlined by the specific socioeconomic context that shaped a different response to the rise of digital media, as compared to concerns identified within professional counterparts in other Western countries. For a local point of view, this study points out that the new practices and routines developed beyond the economic crisis translate freelance photojournalism as an emerging industry trend for the Romanian media.

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