

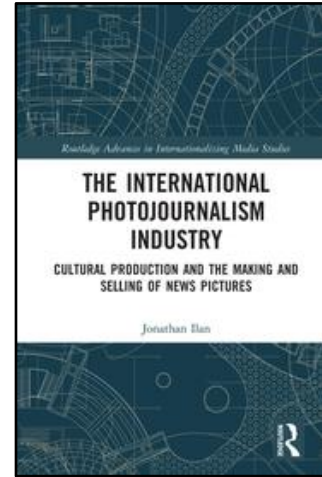
Jonathan Ilan, **The International Photojournalism Industry: Cultural Production and the Making and Selling of News Pictures**, New York, NY, and London, UK: Routledge, 2018, 253 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Photojournalism, as a profession, is relatively young. In the United States, it emerged during the 1930s and was established as a profession in 1945 (Zelizer, 1995). Even though, at first, photojournalism was not welcomed by the written-word journalists, today, we cannot think about the news without taking into consideration its visual aspects, whether in print, on television, or on online platforms. Much has changed since the inception of photojournalism as an industry due to the ecology of the media and the technologies of production and circulation. In an age of ubiquitous cameras, we habitually learn about current affairs by seeing them on news platforms. And as our attention span is progressively getting shorter, and as politics is, more often than not, about photo-ops, the visual matters. We make sense of the world by engaging with how it looks or, more precisely, how it is being represented by visual news media. But what do we know about this cultural industry? What do we know about the line of production of visual news? Who are the central players of this industry? Who are its employees? What are their professional dilemmas and constraints? What is their workload? What do we know about their ethics, identities, and loyalties? Despite its paramount significance for the ways in which we engage with current affairs, the cultural production of news pictures remains at the backstage. Jonathan Ilan's ethnographic study of this industry makes this invisible industry of the visual news visible and, in so doing, makes an important contribution for understanding the political economy of (visual) news production in a global age. As such, ***The International Photojournalism Industry: Cultural Production and the Making and Selling of News Pictures*** is a must-read book for those interested in visual culture and news production.



Ilan's book presents an extensive and prolonged ethnographic study of the various stations along the chain of production of the visual news industry—from the fieldwork of photojournalists at the site of an event and proceeding to the news agency hub where the photographs are processed and catalogued to finishing at the end point in the newsroom of a major newspaper. The work and operation done by individuals and organizations along the line of production is, unfortunately, understudied. Ethnographic studies of newsroom culture are very rare, and some of them are dated by now. Given that this industry is in a flux, as Ilan outlines in the concluding chapter, this current study offers an up-to-date and comprehensive observation on a significant, yet almost invisible, cultural industry.

The book begins with an Introduction that presents the methodology of the study and explains the pros and cons of ethnography as a research method for studying creative industries. This is an important starting point. The lack of ethnographic research in the field and the relatively limited scholarly knowledge about the production process and of visual news as a field yearns for field observations by scholars of

journalism and visual culture. The chapter then provides the theoretical frameworks that govern the book (creative industries, news production, political economy, and cultural studies) and maps the various axes that are explored throughout: culture and industry, art and journalism, objectivity and subjectivity, local and global, and immediacy and atemporality. These theoretical frameworks will be matched in the concluding chapter with a detailed exploration of contemporary global visual news industry. Together, these two chapters offer a thorough and well-grounded understanding of the political economy and the theoretical background to situate this industry within a broader field of research.

The remainder of the book explores the life cycle of photojournalism. Chapters 2 and 3 follow the collection, production, classification, and dissemination of photographic news, and chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of four case studies. This structure of the book allows a lengthwise and crosswise understanding of photojournalism both as a multifaceted, hierarchical, and industrialized chain of production and as a meaning-making process.

Chapter 2 follows the work of photojournalists at the scene of happening. Situated in Israel, Ilan traced down and observed local photographers in their work along the Israeli border with Gaza, in the West Bank, and in other locations. He detects the dynamics among peer photojournalists and between them and their subjects and delineates the various stages in the birth of a photograph—from the moment the photographer is sent to the scene, his (and, usually, these are men) performance on the ground, and the processing and distribution of the photographs back to the news agency. By observing the photographers at their work, Ilan's documentation captures the early stages of this chain of production, when raw materials are assessed and collected before they are packaged and shipped to the consumers in the following stages. This detailed ethnographic work unveils the horizontal and vertical structures and the dynamics between the photojournalists and their peers and between them and their superiors and the local bureau of the news agency.

Chapter 3 documents the process photographs undergo at one the news agency's global desks in Singapore. Ilan followed the classification and keywording of photographs the news agency receives from its employees worldwide. He describes in great detail the different stations at the global pictures desk and its organization, which includes photo editors on various levels, a keyword team, a graphics team, and a sales team. This comprehensive description allows the reader to get a better understanding of the industrialization of news in a global world and the workload employees in this industry experience. As this chapter shows, news images become a product that is systematically processed so that it can be sold to the end users: news organizations worldwide. This description manifests a sharp contrast between an alleged creativity associated with the creative industry and its bureaucratic functioning. The compartmentalization of process further enhances the sense of estrangement associated with mass production. The last section of this chapter presents observations from a major newspaper in the United Kingdom. It reveals the considerations employed by news editors as the clients of visual news agencies and how the embedding of visual materials looks from the other end of the chain of production.

While the two empirical chapters offer an overlook on the entire process of production at the macro level, the third and last empirical chapter analyzes the production of four individual photographs on a micro level, complementing it with semiotic analysis. In this chapter, Ilan focuses on four events and the four

images that were produced and circulated in their aftermath. This careful attention to single events and the performance of the various actors in their production shed a light on tensions in the photojournalists' work—local patriotism and professionalism, competition and collaboration, the claim "to be there" and the wish to emerge in the scene unnoticeably, artistic aspirations and commercial pressures. The analysis of the four case studies maps the various loyalties and communities of belonging the photojournalists have and how they choose to negotiate between them, if at all. Having this micro-level analysis chapter following the two macro-level chapters is smart and illuminating, as it helps one "to see the full picture." It brings to the fore the cultural background of the photographers (and the researcher) and the atmosphere in which they operate.

Focusing on photography, it is very tempting to use metaphors like "camera obscura" and "darkroom" to capture how little we know about the production process of photography and the global photojournalism industry. In this regard, it is very telling to reflect on the exchange Ilan had with the news agency he was observing prior to the publication of the book. At the beginning of the book and toward its end, Ilan mentions his correspondence with the legal team of the news agency, in which they inform him they will not authorize the use of his observations and interviews with the agency's personnel in his book. These observations and interviews were collected for Ilan's PhD thesis, but the agency does not favor their external publication. And so Ilan had to come up with a compromising solution that would allow the publication of this important research without violating the agency's request to ban materials he collected: Ilan had to remove all the clues that might reveal the identity of the agency he had studied. This incident—the refusal of the agency to allow the publication of this ethnographic work—further enhances the importance of the book, as this is a rare opportunity to peep into the mechanisms of production of (visual) news. In this case, it is a refusal of a traditional media organization to allow the public to observe and oversee its operation, but this point is applicable to other major information corporations who seal their modes of operation away from the public's eyes. These media organizations possess tremendous power over the flow of information and the ability of consumers (or citizens) worldwide to assess the information and exercise their media literacy skills. And yet these processes, these modes of operation of an industry, who usually argue for freedom of information and for full transparency and disclosure, remain out of reach in the "camera obscura," in the darkness of the darkroom. Ilan's book, in this respect, allows a unique and exceptional glimpse into the darkroom of the global visual news industry and hence its important contribution.

References

- Zelizer, B. (1995). Journalism's "last" stand: Wirephoto and the discourse of resistance. *Journal of Communication, 45*(2), 78–92.