



Selfies: Witnessing and Participatory Journalism with a Point of View

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Introduction

Selfies, as the word implies, are visual presentations of one's self and as such can be understood as photographic representations and formations of identity (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 2005; van Dijck, 2008). They are a "new visual genre—a type of self-portrait formally distinct from all others in history" because they are frequently shared online (Saltz, 2014). Selfies often serve to claim, "I'm here!" (Myers, 2010, p. 274) and "reflect the view of ourselves that we want to project out into world" (Gye, 2007, p. 282). Taking and sharing digital photographs is increasingly understood as a form of communication and social currency (Rainie, Brenner, & Purcell, 2012; van Dijck, 2008) but also as witnessing (Reading, 2009). In that respect, selfies mobilize a complex web of motives and social norms connected to presentations of identity/self, often within the private-public spaces of social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Whereas a vast number of selfies contain little more than a face or faces, highlighting the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), this article goes beyond the notion of self and identity by examining the relationship between the self and the geographical and social space around it. In particular, we examine a type of selfie that places the self in an event or location of interest such as a sporting event, tourist attraction, or even disaster area or war zone. We argue that the visual interaction between the person and the space can be considered a process of meaning making, resulting in a particular identity that is informed by both the space and the self, and presenting the photographer/subject as a witness. The relationship between space and self is not only a claim that "I'm here!" in a particular time and space but also a claim that "I witnessed this event," which is elementary to any form of journalism. These selfies, we propose, can then be understood as journalism with a point of view (POV) that leaves online the historic trails—that is, visual artifacts—of an individual as part of a larger community. As such, selfies can be considered a form of witnessing that has the potential to provide multiple yet highly personal

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perspectives of significant events in society. In the following pages, we will further explicate our idea of selfies as journalism with a POV by drawing on the literature on witnessing and photography, as well as self-presentation online, and by examining how selfies are produced and shared.

Literature Review

Selfies in the News

Recently selfies have increasingly become the subject of journalistic attention. Numerous stories appeared about Pope Francis taking selfies with a group of believers after the Palm Sunday service (Mosbergen, 2014), while David Ortiz's controversial Samsung advertising selfie with President Obama (Boren, 2014) and Ellen DeGeneres' Oscars selfie (Smith, 2014) also generated copious headlines and numerous retweets. Not only celebrity selfies have made the news: ordinary citizens in Los Angeles and New York City taking pictures of themselves with people attempting suicide in the background made headlines as well (Martinka, 2013; Schwarz, 2014). These incidents represent ethically concerning forms of witnessing events in the public arena, similar to tourists taking selfies in front of burning trash containers during the May Day protests in Barcelona, Spain (Fernandez, 2014) or with members of the Thai Army in Bangkok after the military coup (Ries, 2014). Yet these selfies provide very personal, value-laden perspectives and, we argue, can be understood as a form of witnessing or reporting with a point of view because they are part of the public sphere.

Selfies are mostly taken by nonprofessionals, although the teenage Reuters photographer Molhem Barakat, who was killed on the job in Syria, also used selfies while reporting in a war zone (Al-Ali, 2013). Thus selfies can be understood as a form of proof for professionals indicating they have been at a place at a certain time, underlining the credibility of having witnessed events firsthand. In their extreme form, selfies can also be used to document personal activities to gather evidence and proof. For instance, a Philadelphia resident used selfies to track his spending habits for the IRS (Stampler, 2014). Sometimes selfies can involuntarily bear witness or become proof. The geo-data of selfies taken and then shared via Instagram by a Russian soldier in the summer of 2014 suggested that the Russian army was shelling Ukrainian positions at that time, while officials were denying the existence of such attacks (Lokot, 2014; Seddon, 2014).

Witnessing, Photography, and Selfies

Witnessing is crucial to communication and in particular for journalism. Before information can be shared or passed on to news audiences it has to be first acquired or witnessed. In that respect, witnessing is tied to "fundamental questions of communication" such as "truth and experience, presence and absence" as well as "the trustworthiness of perception" (Peters, 2001, p. 707).

The act of witnessing consists of two phases: "the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying. In passive witnessing an accidental audience observes the events of the world; in active witnessing one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge" (Peters, 2001, p. 709). The creation of selfies, which also captures a place or event in time, conflates these two phases into one, while gaining

legitimacy through the use of faces or bodies as criteria "of truth and truthfulness" (p. 717). Similar to the process of witnessing, selfies first "see" or capture a moment of an event and then "say" something about it when the image is shared with others. In this respect, selfies are analogous to "the communication situation of broadcasting," which displays reporters in various locations and where "experiences are mediated to an audience which has no first-hand acquaintance with them" (p. 717). Banita (2012) describes this phenomenon as "media witnessing," and argues that through visual repetition, media witnessing may have effects on audiences similar to forms of unmediated witnessing or witnessing events firsthand.

Peters (2001) points out that "different people who witness the 'same' event can produce remarkably divergent accounts" (p. 710). The same may be said about selfies taken during the same event. Yet, as visual accounts, selfies may be better understood as different perspectives or points of view that, when shared and observed together, can provide and map multiple perspectives of an event, strengthening core journalistic values such as objectivity and truth telling, especially since a photographic image is generally seen as a "natural witness" of something that happened (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 2005), "representing the world in a cloak of apparent authenticity" (Alvaray, 2014, p. 109). Photographs as representations of reality (Cruz & Meyer, 2012) contribute to a claim of objectivity by providing visual proof of events, places, and people. Yet, as with any form of photography, and in particular digital photography, selfies cannot always be considered accepted artifacts of history. On the contrary, they may occasionally be staged or altered to obscure or modify particular meanings. However, this possibility of manipulation does not preclude the potential of photography or selfies to document or witness events.

While all photographic images can be considered "certificates of presence" (Barthes, 1981), they were primarily considered mnemonic devices to archive important events, while also underscoring an element of identity presentation, in particular in the form of portraits (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 2005). Van Dijck (2008) argues that the memory function of photographs sank into the background as the rise of digital and mobile devices shifted the use of photographs from remembering to "communication and identity formation" (p. 58), through their enabled connectivity (Cruz & Meyer, 2012). The easy use and simple production of digital images have made them overly abundant, changing the worth of images from priceless "mementos" to valued "moments." "Pictures become more like spoken language as photographs are turning into the new currency for social interaction" (van Dijck, 2008, p. 62). This is in line with the ideas of Banks (1995), who suggests that "photographs provide a basis for narrative work; there are stories about photographs, and there are stories that lie behind them and between them" (p. 89). But van Dijck (2008) acknowledges that these images are also indicators of the "here and now" that bear witness to the activities of the person activating the shutter.

Reading (2009) calls images taken with mobile devices "mobile witnessing" because "mobile phones allow us to capture, circulate, and engage with data on the move" (p. 72). She describes mobile witnessing as a data exchange "through global networks" that can be understood as "performances and speech acts between different parties" (p. 61). After all, mobile phone images are often taken to be shared to evoke emotional reactions or to serve an informational purpose (Kindberg, Spasojevic, Fleck, & Sellen, 2004; Reading, 2009). Hochman and Manovich (2013) showed that sharing images is significantly related to social and cultural events. Their study

found people shared digital images more frequently during Israel's Independence Day and Memorial Day than on other days. The impact of mobile devices on communication is thus not just technological but rather social and cultural, as "the mobile camera phone is extending and modifying media languages, practices, and forms" while also "traversing binaries such as the private and the public . . . the journalist and the citizen" (Reading, 2009, p. 63).

Since selfies are primarily taken with mobile phones, we propose that selfies that not only depict a person's face but also an event, time, or place should be considered mobile witnessing. As such, selfies can be understood as journalism with a POV combining self-presentation and the presentation of visual proof of a witnessed event.

Self-Presentation, Impression Management, and Social Media

Many users turn to social media to share photographic images, and photo-related activities have been shown to be a prime motivator to use Facebook (Tosun, 2012). Growing portions of these images are profile pictures, portraits, and selfies. Leary (2013) points out (in a blog by Oxford University Press) that people use selfies to express a particular notion of the self or to convey a certain impression: "Through the clothes one wears, one's expression, staging of the physical setting, and the style of the photo, people can convey a particular public image of themselves, presumably one that they think will garner social rewards." Moreover, selfies or snapshots of the self can "capture significant live moments, portray important, social relationships, and reflect people's cultural and contextual shared meanings" (Drenten, 2012, p. 8). Research indicates that such images, in particular among adolescents, impact identity presentations online (Davis, 2013). Drenten's (2012) study on the use of selfies among teenage girls suggests that participants made a deliberate effort to control the presentation of an ideal image that was often strategically placed in different locations, such as schools or retail stores. Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) found that college students use photos to communicate and "visually play out their lives for each other" (p. 270), thus displaying their student identity within different contexts. These varying contexts are influenced by the different physical spaces (school, home, football games, etc.), which are abundant with various social meanings and values that are used for representation. Forrester (2000) suggests that the images one chooses to display are narrative representations. The "stories we construct and tell ourselves about 'ourselves' [are] a form of discourse first, and only a secondary something which necessarily relates to the mind (self-concept) or an actual lived-in body" (p. 96).

"The presentation of self" can also be understood through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach. Goffman proposes that individuals strive for ideal social role presentations in relation to a specific context and situation in which interactions take place. But these presentations have to meet the social expectations of others to be seen as authentic. Marwick and boyd (2011) found that self-presentations online, and more specifically on Twitter, strive to be authentic accounts of the self in respect to local and temporal context. Within the social media context, this effort has been complicated because here private and public spheres collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011), leading to the "lowest common denominator culture" of self-presentation (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011), akin to mainstream media. Marwick and boyd's (2011) study of Twitter users' self-presentations showed that "participants maintain a public-facing persona to manage impressions with potential readers.

Context collapse creates an audience that is often imagined as its most sensitive members: parents, partners, and bosses” (p. 125). Van Dijck (2013) points out that online users engage increasingly in strategic self-presentations that vary with the context and design of social media platforms. “Facebook engineered its interface to stimulate self-expression first and self-promotion second, while LinkedIn explicitly focuses on professional performance and experience” (p. 211). Since these social media presentations of the self are asynchronous and highly curated (Hogan, 2010; Krämer & Winter, 2008), Hogan (2010) describes these presentations of selves on social media as “exhibitions.”

The “presentation of self” online is often bound to a specific context and place that influences the understanding of the claimed role, as it is in face-to-face communication. Selfies, then, may literally be understood as a performance of the self that aims to manage impressions in accordance to the norms of social settings and shared audience expectations in a given situation (Goffman, 1959). Selfies thus create context-bound identities that simultaneously visually verify the existence of this presented identity in relation to a specific time and space. As such, selfies not only present or form an identity but can also be understood as a sign of proof that underlines the activity of witnessing an event by placing oneself in a particular space and time. When shared, these selfies also become highly personalized participatory journalistic accounts, descriptions, or stories of the witnessed events.

Selfies as Witnessing and Journalism with a Point of View

Selfies, we argue, may be considered a special communication medium that serves a double function, in which the form and content are inextricably linked. First, they are a performative act of brand or identity building. Second, they are a proof of “truth,” an act of witnessing that indicates the veracity of the individual’s actions as well as documenting an event from a hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) by making the observer/witness simultaneously part of the observed/witnessed event.

Selfies may also be understood as a form of digital storytelling that embeds personal autobiographical elements (self-portraits) about members of a particular community and displays them in semipublic spaces such as social media. In that respect, selfies taken and shared by a variety of people documenting the same event can provide multiple perspectives. Thus, selfies reflect not just personal impressions but also communal experiences of modern life within societies around the world, while creating a constant flow of visual artifacts of personally witnessed history. Of course, the aggregate of this flow may currently not be seen by most, or even many, viewers because access to these images may depend on the size of an individual viewer’s social network.

As a kind of journalistic witnessing with a point of view, selfies may contribute to conceptual and practical changes in journalism. When aggregated, they can provide multiple visual perspectives of an event, strengthening core journalistic values such as objectivity and truth telling. Selfies can be viewed as one of several participatory journalistic activities that were enabled by the spread of affordable, mobile digital media technologies. The rise of digital technologies and the introduction of social media have influenced journalistic practices (Bivens, 2008) and changed some core ethical principles of journalism toward goals such as transparency and community (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2014). McBride and Rosenstiel (2014) point out that transparency in reporting can help uncover points of view or biases, which enables

audiences to critically assess journalistic work. As such, one might argue selfies are visually highly transparent because they document events with the producer of the image in the frame.

Thus, we propose that selfies that include events, other people, and places, being strongly tied to self-representation and intentional publicizing of the information encoded within, can be analyzed as a public performance of witnessing. In tandem with more traditional forms of news coverage, selfies have the potential to create an interactive, community-based form of journalism that is highly transparent, reflecting reality through multiple hyperpersonal perspectives. We argue that when coupled with traditional forms of journalism, selfies can add to an overall understanding of different events or newsworthy events. This is because the combination of citizen journalism with multiple personal points of view (selfies provided by many different people) and traditional journalism can provide more comprehensive insider and outsider perspectives of communities. In this regard, the primary intention when taking a selfie may be negligible, as the documentation or witnessing of locations and events within a selfie can never be fully undone, even if the primary reason for taking the selfie is to manage impressions. Nevertheless, there may be a tension between the "event" that is witnessed and the "self" that is represented. We argue that this tension will not fully erase one of the two aspects but rather will establish a point of view. Thus, no matter if the act of witnessing is intentional or not, it cannot fully be eradicated.

In order to explore this proposed idea of selfies as a form of participatory journalism with a point of view, this study analyzes how selfies taken and posted by nonjournalists were used by different news media as a form of witnessing and reporting an event (private, semipublic, or public). This research is guided by two main questions: (1) How are selfies strategically used to place the photographer/subject in a particular geographical and temporal location? and (2) How are selfies used to establish the photographer as witness to a particular event?

Methods

This study analyzed the use of selfies to place the individual at an event as witness. A sample of selfies was gathered from news media reports and various other sites that posted the photos as part of reports. The images were not randomly chosen, but rather were selected specifically because they were used by the individual to place him- or herself at an event of public interest. A Google image search of the term *selfie* led us to various news sites (*The New York Post*, *Vice Media*, *CNN*, *The Washington Post*, *Mashable*, *The Atlantic*) to find selfies that were taken as an act of witnessing or placing an individual at an event. Thirty selfies were selected but only seven were chosen for analysis in this exploratory study. Images that featured no indication of place or time were excluded.

Banks (2001) noted that social research with pictures involves three sets of questions:

(1) What is the image of, what is its content? (2) Who took it or made it, when and why? and (3) How do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it? (p. 7)

The analysis conducted for this study seeks to answer the first set of questions regarding the content of the image—what Banks (2001) calls “the internal narrative”—as a way to move toward an answer to the second set of questions regarding how and why a photo was taken, and even the third set, regarding how other people read the image.

Thus this study began by coding each image for content, and then considering the why and how of the use of selfies for witnessing. Images were analyzed by two coders for the following elements: (1) the location portrayed, (2) framing of the location (portion of the frame given to the location), (3) elements that identify the place that is included, (4) framing of self in the image, (5) other objects or people included in the frame, (6) text commentary, (7) culturally specific visual elements of presentation pertinent to a specific country or region, (8) varied demographical markers (age group, gender, etc.), and (9) particular memes and themes that may dominate the self-presentation of individuals within a selfie.

The subsequent analysis uses Goffman’s theory of “presentation of self” to decode the intentions of the photographer/subject. We analyze these selfies as a public performance of authentic witnessing, considering the photographer’s intentions and the role these images may play in a journalistic ecology.

Analysis

Multiple selfies related to the Thai military’s takeover of the government appeared in legacy as well as emerging media outlets in May 2014. Mashable highlighted that trend with a story titled “In Thailand, Martial Law Is a Backdrop for Selfies” (Ries, 2014) and Vice News added “The Complex Consequences of Thai Coup Selfies” (Lennard, 2014). Both sites published the image of a Thai woman with short hair and sunglasses at a Bangkok street corner, her right arm extended, smiling while taking a selfie in front of a Thai soldier in a jeep. There is a large machine gun seemingly suspended in the air above their heads. As the woman places herself into the scene, she becomes both part of the story and a witness of it by providing visual proof. The distribution of the selfie turns the act of witnessing into citizen reporting and a form of participatory journalism, while the presentation of self turns the event into a public performance indicating a point of view.

Another selfie places two tourists in the midst of a May Day rally in Barcelona, Spain, as protesters burn a trash container (Fernandez, 2014). The women’s faces peek into the scene of flames and thick black smoke rising toward the sky. This image adds a tourist or outsider’s perspective to a local newsworthy event. As such, this selfie may be seen as a news spectacle—a dramatized and hyperpersonal account of the May Day protests.

A sports fan during the first NHL playoff game between the Montreal Canadiens and Tampa Bay Lightning also placed himself into a spectacle (Wyshynski, 2014). As players fight at the edge of the ice rink, fans directly behind the glass protectors can be seen taking photos of the players, yet one person is visible taking a selfie and putting himself in the middle of the action. The image shifts the focus from the fight to the witness and acts as proof that he has witnessed the scene personally.

The dramatic aspect of selfies is highlighted in its extreme by a woman who captured herself and someone attempting to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge. *The New York Post* ran this story on its front page. Here, the process of taking the selfie became a newsworthy event in itself because of the violation of ethical norms that normally prevent journalists from documenting suicides (Martinka, 2013). Yet, while the woman placed herself into the image, becoming part of the scene and story, she also documented the event and provided proof of having witnessed it.

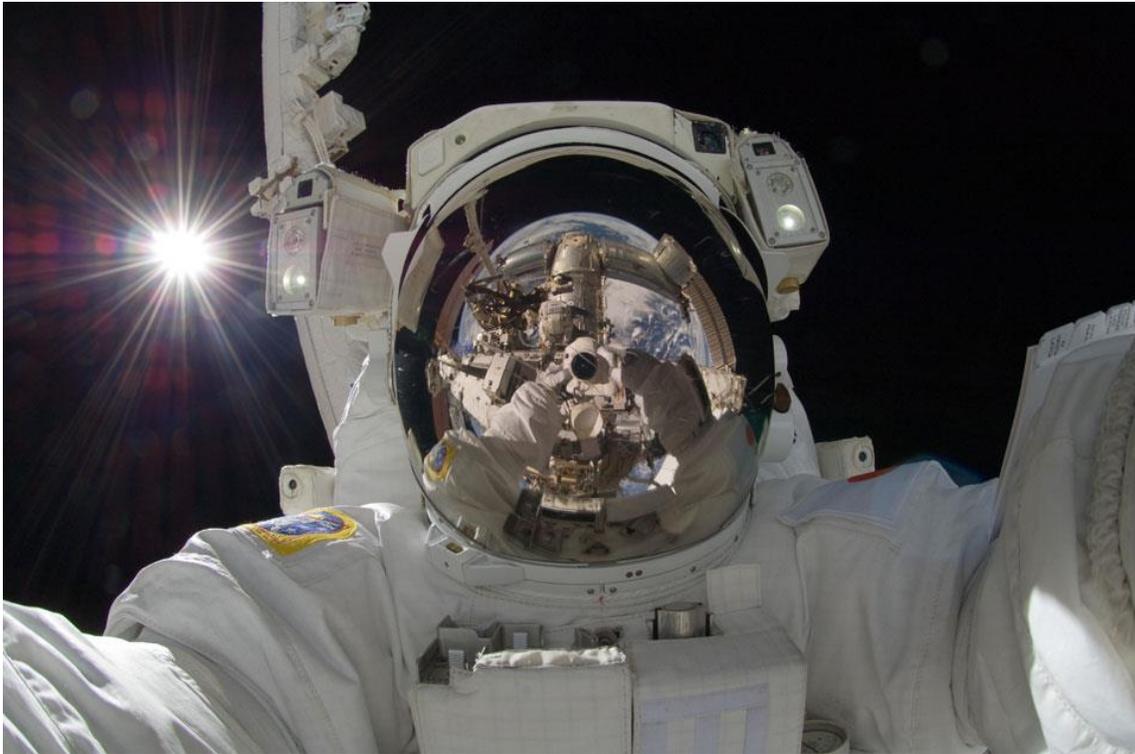


Figure 1. Astronaut Aki Hoshide's selfie in space.

While "normal" citizens' selfies make the news, many celebrities who are part of the news cycle also use selfies to capture and witness particular moments (see Figure 1). Astronaut Aki Hoshide, for instance, photographed himself in space wearing his space suit and helmet, in which are reflected the earth and the International Space Station (NASA, 2012). His face is not visible. Hoshide took the image as a way of hyperpersonal reporting from space, where no news outlet is yet able to send reporters. He captures an incredible act of space-walking that he bears witness to as the protagonist and photographer.

Another selfie, taken by French Rugby player Brian Habana, shows him with two teammates holding the Heineken Cup trophy just after the game, still wearing team jerseys and medals (CNN, 2014). The background is the rugby pitch and the crowd and players and officials leaving the field. The choice to

take a selfie when you are already part of the event varies in some ways from the choice to take a selfie as an outside witness, inserting oneself into the action. In this case, a selfie is more an effort to claim individual ownership of one's part in the event, and the representation of that participation. Although an official photographer had certainly documented the game and was presumably going to take team photos, the selfie is a way for the player to assert his own claim to the experience.



Figure 2. Molhem Barakat's mirror selfie.

Teenage Syrian Reuters photographer Molhem Barakat, who died on assignment in Syria, also took selfies (see Figure 2). One image was taken in a mirror (the alternative to the arm's length approach) and shows the photographer standing in a broken doorway (Al-Ali, 2013). A man armed with a large rifle is partly visible next to him, and destroyed buildings and rubble are in the background. This image is perhaps the most interesting use of a selfie because the photographer, whose role is precisely that of a witness, shows his own face and, in doing so, places himself in the war zone he is photographing. It is an insertion of the witness into the frame, so he is not simply witnessing the events transparently, acting as a lens for the viewer to see the war, but rather staking a claim to his own importance and presence there as the witness.

Discussion

A selfie as a form of witnessing includes two actions of “seeing and saying,” that is, of reporting (Peters, 2001). A selfie can be seen as a “possessor and producer of knowledge” (p. 709) that is highly dramatized by highlighting what Goffman (1959) calls the presentation of self. The meaning of the self—presented through a selfie (which depicts more than a face or faces)—is created in the interplay of the persona and the space/event behind it. As Goffman indicates, the presented self needs to be authentic to be accepted by others. We argue that the selfie does exactly that; it authenticates the self by providing visual proof—proof that is essential to witnessing and journalism. Selfies can be understood as a form of communication and identity formation (van Dijck, 2008) and also as a contribution to public understandings of events. On the one hand, selfies communicate that one has witnessed a particular event, while on the other hand, they claim an identity by placing the self in the center of it. We argue that the visual placement of the self in a particular situation establishes associations between the self and the event or place, thus forming a specific impression of an identity the creator of the selfie aims to present to others. But only when they are shared can selfies become a form of witnessing or journalism with a POV; that is, informing others about an event and authenticating the information by a single messenger, witness, and event participant visible in one frame. This witnessing, in aggregate, may contribute to a less biased portrayal of events, given that it includes perspectives of many different witness/participants. Of course, this kind of journalism does not follow traditional mainstream journalism ethical principles, which generally rely on the individual, independent journalist to perform his or her job objectively, seeking “truth.” Journalism with a point of view does not require or depend on such traditional behavior from journalists, but like many participatory or crowd-created artifacts, it relies on multiple contributors to provide a kind of socially negotiated or constructed truth. Selfies, as elements of reporting or witnessing, may actually help to make sense of an increasingly fractured and community focused journalism that relies on multiple accounts of truth. In fact, emerging values in professional journalism such as community and transparency (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2014) indicate the need to acknowledge this shift in claims of journalistic truth. Selfies as a form of witnessing and journalism with a point of view—at least conceptually—represent this shift as a transparent and community-based (intentional or not intentional) endeavor to depict the truth.

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