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Visions of Visual Journalism in AI-Futures

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What does the future portend for visual journalism when its guiding norms, conventions and values are being recast in the emerging era of Artificial Intelligence? Efforts to gather and interpret evidence for making predictions, or to strategize possible models or scenarios, offer little reassurance when inchoate technological logics and rationales defy confident prognoses. Uncertainty is the only certainty, however clichéd it may sound, while the features of familiar newscapes are being recontoured before our eyes.

Visual journalists are under incessant pressure to create distinct, original reporting in an ecosystem where their professional authority is open to challenge, not least when news photographs, video capture, infographics, or illustrations produced elsewhere turn out to have been synthesised by computational algorithms. Machine learning-based image generation and editing is increasingly taking hold, rendering shared conceptions of 'truth' and 'authenticity,' even 'reality,' evermore precarious in their affective ephemerality. This when social media platforms are infusing journalistic spaces with a profusion of visual modalities, thereby reshaping viewers' customary ways of seeing themselves and others, near and far, with far-reaching implications. Not surprisingly, then, both 'visual' and 'journalism' are undergoing recalibration as well, with the ongoing mediation of convergences and divergences between the two warranting critical attention.

As tomorrow's brave new world comes into sharper focus, now is the time to pause, reflect and make strange time-worn concepts and presuppositions in our theory-building. Indeed, in light of this Special Issue's ambition to re-imagine visual journalism in a digital age, it may be helpful to revisit early imaginings of what ordinary, commonplace socio-technological experiences of visibility might look like from different vantage points in the past. Here I would suggest a short story published by E.M. Forster at the turn of the twentieth century, 'The Machine Stops,' offers us a number of intriguing insights for our speculations about AI-futures beyond our immediate horizons. Science fiction's creative prophesies, as we all know, sometimes turn out to be surprisingly close to the mark, and even when they fail to resonate, ensuing frictions can nevertheless spark fresh, counterintuitive thinking. In this commentary, I will make the case for this short story's relevance for this Special Issue's agenda, particularly with respect to facilitating a re-imagining of visual journalism's commitments to civicism in socially responsible reporting consistent with the public interest.

The Machine Stops

Forster's (1909) cautionary tale envisages a world where individuals' everyday lives are lived in underground rooms or 'cells' deep beneath the earth's desolate surface 'of dust and mud' that 'supports life no longer.' Vashti, described as a 'swaddled lump of flesh,' sits in an armchair beside a reading-desk, with electric buttons and switches at hand to deliver her every need. Whilst alone, she is not lonely, knowing as she does several thousand people through virtual interactions made possible via the telephonic screens and pneumatic posts of the Machine ('in certain directions,' she maintains, 'human intercourse had advanced enormously').

The Machine satisfied everyone's requirements, or so Vashti believed until a surprise call from her son, Kuno, disrupts her sense of contentment. He pleads with her to come visit him where he lives in the other hemisphere, 'so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.' Scrutinizing his face on the glowing blue plate before her, Vashti is perplexed:

'But I can see you!' she exclaimed. 'What more do you want?'

'I want to see you not through the Machine,' said Kuno. 'I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine.'

'Oh, hush!' said his mother, vaguely shocked. 'You mustn't say anything against the Machine.'

Kuno's insistence that his mother travel by air-ship to see him in person is almost impossible for her to contemplate. Vashti was 'seized with the terrors of direct experience,' we are told, unmediated communication having been all but eradicated since the 'clumsy system of public gatherings' disappeared over time. This was an insulated world of seclusion, where 'people never touched one another,' the custom having 'become obsolete, owing to the Machine.' By a similar technicist logic, 'first-hand ideas!' were severely curtailed, as expressed by the admonishment: 'Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far removed from that disturbing element – direct observation.'

Individuals are portrayed as isolated, lacking a sense of personal contact through community, and preoccupied with the illusory distractions playing out on their screens every day. Curated learning through cybernetic interactivity takes the place of 'first-hand ideas,' and thereby the lived experience of direct observation or interpretation, and independent, critical thinking. Creativity is disembodied and stifled, compounded by the self-censorship necessary to sustain simulated realities for expediency's sake. Dependency melds apathy and obedience to a technological infrastructure, the precarious fragility of which becoming apparent to Vashti only when it is too late. 'The floor heaved and fell and flung her from the chair,' we are told. 'A tube oozed towards her serpent fashion. And at last the final horror approached – light began to ebb, and she knew that civilization's long day was closing.'

The ominous threat of homelessness served to quell dissent, with any transgressor – 'On atavism the Machine can have no mercy' – being unable to survive in the outer air on the earth's surface. Resistance against such an all-encompassing system becomes, almost literally, unthinkable. 'Humanity, in its desire for comfort, had over-reached itself,' the narrator explains. 'Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine.' And onward the Machine proceeds at speed, 'the friend of ideas and the enemy of superstition,' in essence 'omnipotent, eternal; blessed.' Until one day, that is, when 'without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness, the entire communication-system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended.' [1]

Envisioning Embodiments

‘The Machine Stops’ is widely appreciated for its remarkable prescience, Forster anticipating in 1909 several technological innovations familiar to us today – ranging from the world wide web, to instant messaging, video conferencing, immersive reality (achieved in the story when the ‘gramophone’ and ‘cinematophote’ converge), automation in the home, digital archives, and so forth – many of which are increasingly governed by the algorithmic decision-making of machine learning and intelligence. Its depiction of a dystopian future speaks to a long tradition of science fiction posing challenging questions about the nature of the human in humanity. Relevant in this regard is this story’s rendering of issues such as its characters’ over-reliance on mediated communication, the loss of active agency in a climate of passive conformity, and the social enforcement of mechanistic authority to suppress liberty, diversity and difference.

Today’s news reporting of AI developments and their possible ramifications for tomorrow’s societies often includes voices describing existential crises, some of which echo this threat of technological singularity leading to human extinction. Accordingly, in considering the question posed at this outset of this commentary, I believe a case can be made that the cultures of human disconnect and alienation Forster so eloquently conveyed in 1909 help to instil a sense of urgency in our thinking about the evolving characteristics of visual journalism in the AI era. The story’s speculative ideas about all-controlling automation, so vividly committed to paper long before ‘machine learning’ was consolidating in the 1950s, continue to reverberate with current techno-fears and anxieties.

Where visual journalism is concerned, we may discern in this story’s narrative a heuristic basis for delving beneath the surface of things, such as by exploring how and why AI-driven imperatives may be undermining the conditions of visibility for civicness in reportorial forms, practices and epistemologies. Related criticisms of news organisations include their perceived unwillingness to devote adequate resources to the promotion of visual news literacy in their provision. Such is the compulsion for ‘clicks,’ transparency in news and editorial processes may well complicate the ‘bottom-line’ calculative demands of financial metrics. That is, to the extent algorithmic ‘efficiencies’ of optimisation strategies are prized in their own right, the risks of ‘alternative facts’ being legitimated may be exacerbated, together with reductive visual tropes or stereotypes of disinformation, and the like. Even where efforts are made to improve public trust (such as tips on how to confirm an image’s provenance, understand the nuances of verification or authentication in labelling or captioning, or detect manipulative digital alterations or deceptions, amongst other pressure points of accountability), the civic dimensions of visibility tend to be left undervalued when they are recognised at all.

Indeed, precisely what the presence of civicness entails, ‘The Machine Stops’ shows us, can be defined by its absence as well. Subjugated under the Machine’s solipsistic surveillance, meaningful participation in civic communities sharing equal rights and respecting needs and obligations is, in effect, virtually unimaginable. The monologic subjugates the dialogic, thereby curtailing self-enactments of human connectivity to effect change in visual repertoires and vernaculars across modalities, platforms and networks where a studied illiteracy of indoctrination predominates. And yet, as the character Kuno in the story acknowledges: ‘The Machine is much, but it is not everything.’ Civicness, in the social empathy and reciprocity of its lived embodiments, is subversive in its excess; that is, it engenders a spontaneity of communicative affordances that cannot be perfectly anticipated, let alone managed by predictive modelling or simulations.

Civicness and Visual Journalism

The value of scenario mapping that draws upon science fiction from the past to forecast future probabilities should not be overstated, of course. To the extent such imaginings provide conceptual counterpoints, however, they may well prompt alternative framings, and in so doing, help us to illuminate vicissitudes in and between the utopian-dystopian sway of possible worlds.

Theory-building projections of visual journalism into possible AI-mediated futures may well prove to be unsettling exercises, particularly where truth-seeking is difficult to distinguish from post-truth fixations in the flux of disruptive, potentially transformational change. Longstanding commitments to bearing witness, a lynchpin of journalistic roles and responsibilities realised through first-hand documentation at the scene, risk appearing almost anachronistic where news visualisation blurs into the photorealism of synthetic illustrations. In trying to envisage the way ahead, how best to rethink the sustainability of visual journalism worthy of the name is an open question, particularly where it currently relies on commercial platforms pursuing the monetisation of the attention economy, where fiercely partisan polarisation is a relentless generator of profitability, and when ostensibly public interest principles and priorities are a rhetorical ruse to move the merchandise. Each of these and related imperatives are further exacerbated where journalistic norms, conventions and values are being re-engineered in the service of AI.

In this commentary, I have argued for a reversal of the conceptual lens, so to speak, contending that we start with what exceeds the machine, and with it the prospect of human alienation permeating Forster's disturbing dystopia. Taking care to interrogate celebratory and dispiriting idealisations in equal measure, we need to explore actionable solutions to make good the enlivening promise of civicness in visual journalism to challenge the normalisation of prejudice, discrimination and othering in the far right's anti-media populism. Inspiring inclusive, progressive dialogue and debate about journalism's visual ethics is demanding work, especially when striving to foster co-creative engagement, innovation and experimentation in and between diverse interest communities and stakeholders across the reportorial field. As this Special Issue demonstrates, however, digital journalism scholars are well placed to contribute informed, evidence-based perspectives for public deliberations over the acceptable standards and protocols of AI-driven imagery, to help fashion a social vocabulary alert to the nuances of complexly political contingencies, and to ensure proposed regulatory policy measures are sufficiently civic-centred in their projected impacts, amongst other inputs. The obstacles are formidable, but now is the time – before the machine stops – to forge visual journalism's civic aspirations anew in a climate of algorithmic ascendancy.

Endnote

[1] Literary criticism of Forster's 'The Machine Stops' includes studies by Beauchamp, 1986; Caporaletti, 1997; March-Russell, 2005; Thompson, 2018. For more technology-centred appraisals of its depictions, see Burton et al., 2016; Kibel, 1998; Zimmermann & Morgan, 2019.

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