

Proximity and its role in photojournalism consumption.

Case study: How does geographical proximity to a social issue influence media consumer's ability to relate to a social story?

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Abstract: The article starts from the hypothesis that media consumers are more drawn to a deeper emotional response or connection to social stories that are geographically closer to them in contrast to similar stories that are placed farther away [Allan, 2005]. We used a focus group to test this theory and we approached a general subject that was reported on different occasions, in different states and continents. The study focuses on the subject of children in distress, being abandoned or separated by their families on state borders. Sample stories from the Ukrainian-Romanian borders, Mexico -United States borders and stories from the scenes that occurred in Afghanistan during the U. S. military retrieval from the country have been used. Photojournalistic images to showcase the stories have also been employed. The chosen events took place in recent past and produced strong visual content, photojournalistic images that really assist media consumers in visualizing and understanding the story.

Keywords: *proximity, new media, public, photojournalism, impact, media consumers.*

Mass media theories have placed proximity as a key factor in relation to the interest the public gives to information. Media globalization initially meant the World Wide Web (Sharma 2004 *apud* Shabir *et al.* 2015) but it rose to a much higher scale with social media. Social media means unprecedented, split-second access to stories from around the globe. So, is the space proximity still a factor that influences the impact of a media product in the public's life?

Firstly, we must note the well-known fact that the media mainly reports stories and news that present a negative outcome. From tragedies to public policies, the ones that push the agenda with power are the topics that reveal something bad.

Professor Stuart Allan noted that that media consumers are more drawn to have a deeper emotional response or connection to social stories that are geographically closer to them in regards to similar stories that are placed farther away (Allan 2005). However, thinking about the topics related to tragedies, it seems that the barrier of proximity is not always there. On one

hand, armed attacks or major natural disasters that took place even on other continents were followed as subjects by the public in our country even before the social media boom (such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami or the 9/11 attacks). On the other hand, social problems like those in Africa or in Arab countries do not seem to sensitize the Romanian public that much. So, we wonder: is spatial proximity, still, a very important media consumption factor? Should it be analyzed in connection with the immediate emotional impact of the problem? How does the balance hang nowadays?

Another point that must be mentioned here is the fact that, currently, the consumption of information is predominantly visual. Photos and short or long videos take up an overwhelming proportion on social media pages. The public prefers to consume visual media content rather than read press materials (Adami, Jewitt 2016). This is also the reason why we chose to present the media topics as images taken by photojournalists to our focus group, instead of offering them written topics.

I. Methodology

We want to make it clear from the beginning that this study represents an early stage within a further analysis. We wanted to conduct a first focus group on the topic of space proximity and its role in consumption of photojournalistic materials, limiting our participants to ages between 18 and 21 years old, that live or study in Suceava County, Romania, a county on the border with Ukraine, country that was at war with Russia at the time when the focus group was formed, the questionnaire was applied and the present article was written.

We considered the focus group as a research strategy because the theme directly concerns the way in which the public perceives certain media topics.

The questionnaire applied to the focus group had four multiple-choice questions (detailed below) from which the participants had to select either one or more.

I.1. Sample media stories (photojournalism pieces) used to test the theory. Context and images

As said before, we used sample stories from the Ukrainian-Romanian borders, Mexican-United States borders and stories from the scenes that occurred in Afghanistan in the days of the US's military retrieval from the country. We decided to focus only on the subject of children in distress and we used three press photos.

For the issue from Ukrainian-Romanian borders we chose the following image, shot in March 2022, in Siret border, by myself. The context was as it follows: it was the second week of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and thousands of refugees, only women, children under 18 and men over 65 were allowed to leave the country, were crossing the borders to Romania. One of the predominant scenes of those days were lonely mothers that had to navigate the chaos of escaping war but having to leave their husbands behind and become

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the sole protector of their children who were often overwhelmed by the harsh context that they were in.



*A Ukrainian mother kisses her little girl after arriving in Romania.
March 2022, Saul Pop*

The next picture is from June 2018 when a little girl from Honduras is seen crying while her mother is searched by authorities at the border between Mexico and the United States of America. Donald Trump had decided to tighten the rules of access to the country.



A two-year-old Honduran asylum seeker cries as her mother is searched and detained near the US-Mexico border on June 2018, Getty Images, John Moore

The last picture depicts a baby in Kabul being hoisted over the barbed wire fence of the airport during the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The background is that after the US military had been in Afghanistan for around 20 years, they began the process of withdrawing and handing over the administration of the country to local representatives. This process was interrupted by the Taliban who recaptured all the territories left behind by the Americans. All this led to impressive scenes at the airport in Kabul, which is where the American troops left from. Locals who feared the Taliban's regime stormed the place, wanting to leave, too, or at least hand their children over the fence to be taken by the American army.

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An Afghan baby is lifted over a wall at Kabul airport during US military evacuation of Afghanistan, August 2021, Agence France-Presse, Omar Haidiri

I.2. The questions addressed to the focus group participants

We had two types of questions in the questionnaire: those in which the participants had to look at the images and/or read the context and choose the one they empathize with the most, and those in which they had to provide the motivation for their choice from a list of predetermined answer.

As a working method, the participants first received photos depicting children in critical situations without any context. Later, for the same photos we provided the context and the participants were asked to choose again the subject with which they empathize more and to give the reasons for their choice. We did this to see whether or not contextual clarifications play a role in the choices the public makes.

The questions were as follows:

1. Which image do you resonate/empathize most with?

Instructions: You can choose only one image.



2. Why? Instructions: You can choose more than one answer.

- The emotions expressed by the main subject
- Image context
- I think the main character could be me or someone I know
- Being physically close to the event site makes me resonate more strongly with the subject

3. Now read the image descriptions and choose, once again, the image you resonate/empathize most with.

Instructions: You can either choose the same picture if this is your reaction after reading the description, or choose a different picture if your reaction has changed.

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Image I. A 16-day-old girl is hoisted over the wall of the Kabul airport during the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. September 2021



Image II. A mother kisses her daughter after crossing the border between Ukraine and Romania following the military invasion launched by Russia. Siret 2022.



Image III. A little girl cries as her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, is searched by a policeman. Texas, 2018

4. What is the reason for your choice? Instructions: You can select more than one.

- The emotions expressed by the main subject
- Image context
- I think the main character could be me or someone I know
- Being physically close to the event site makes me resonate more strongly with the subject

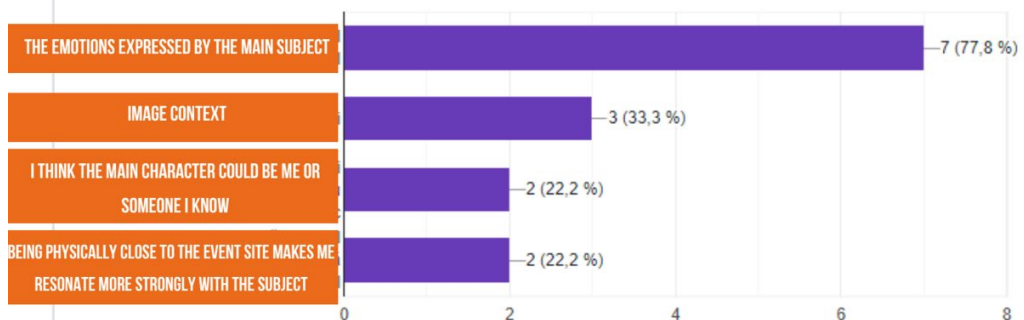
II. Results and discussion

II.1. Aspects related to respondents

Our focus group for this topic consisted in nine participants, 66,7% women and 33,3% men. 88,9% were 20 years old and 11,1% were 21 years old. 66,7% were from Romania and 33,3% from Republic of Moldova.

II.2. Aspects related to sample stories

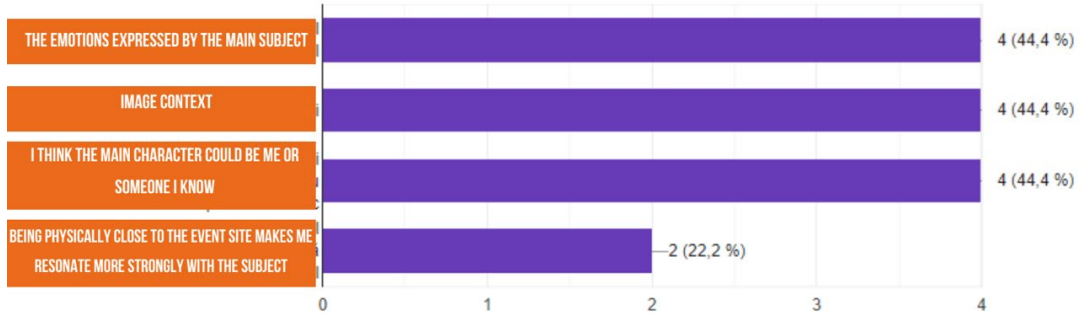
When participants were asked to choose the image they empathized most with (question number 1) 44.4% chose the image of the border with Ukraine, while 33.3% chose the image from Mexico, and 22.2% the one from Kabul. The main reason according to the poll was *the emotions expressed by the main subject*.



When the participants were asked to choose the image they empathize more with, but also given the context of the issue (question number 3) the choices changed, with them prioritizing mainly the issue in Mexico, despite the spatial proximity to the war in Ukraine. 44,4% chose the photo from Mexico, 33,3% the photo from Siret, and 22,2% the one from Kabul. The main reasons

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were equally elected with 44,4% for the items: the emotions expressed by the main subject, image context and i think the main character could be me or someone I know.



Firstly, we have learned that our focus group had a strong emotional response towards the images. We have also seen that without any information regarding the location, they used their emotions as guidance.

Once they have learned about the story of each picture and the location of it, the results shifted showing that the focus group used as a decision factor the story of the subject presented. We believe that due to social media the context plays now a much bigger role than the proximity.

Another important factor chose by them was the possibility of seeing themselves or loved ones in similar situations. This is an interesting conclusion in the context in which the situation in Kabul is unlikely to happen here.

The focused group showed a consistency of being influenced just marginally by the physical closeness to the scene factor. The present research piece raises a question, then can and will be addressed in future research, and that is: are the results influenced by the portraying of the Ukrainian migrants by propaganda or not?

Conclusions

The results obtained from this preliminary study based on the focus group described above show us that the hypothesis of spatial proximity as an essential factor in the way the public empathizes or not with a media subject is no longer confirmed within the new media in which the public lives and consumes information.

The fact that information today comes to the public through social networks, without the public having the direct intention of consuming news, contributes to redefining the parameters in which we can analyze informational values. The barriers of time and space are today more blurred and the audience feels closer to everything. Also, the fact that today's consumption is predominantly focused on the visual side contributes to another type of relationship between the individual and the media product. If you are just reading about a particular piece of information/problem happening on the other side of the world your relational/empathetic response might be lower. The moment you have an on-the-spot image of that problem, the situation changes.

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However, we strongly state that we cannot, at this point, draw a definitive conclusion that spatial proximity does not really play a key role anymore. We want to expand this study to a more diverse age group sample and also from other areas of the country to see what answers we get in such an analysis framework.

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