

## CHAPTER 1

# Putting a Face on Journalism: Introduction

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June 2017. The major British tabloid *The Sun* calls on its readers ahead of the general election not to chuck Britain into the “cor-bin” – accompanied by a large portrait of Labour leader James Corbyn with a bin lid on his head. A Danish journalist goes to Turkey to sleep with Turkish men, and writes a reportage about it in one of Denmark’s quality newspapers. Farther up on the North Sea, in an interview for a Norwegian tabloid’s online TV, a young woman recounts how she makes a living by twerking, while the major Norwegian quality paper devotes its entire front page to Tobias, one year old, whose life was saved by a new medicine, though this hinged on being in the right hospital.

Individual exposure, a focus on individuals, and subjectivity seem to be everywhere in the media, and these are the topics of this edited collection.

Despite an increasing tendency during the last few decades of personalising news stories or “putting a face on journalism”, there has been very little scholarly attention given to this development. Notable exceptions, and contributions that discussed the phenomenon at an early stage were Fairclough (1995 and 2001) and Sparks & Tulloch (2000). More recent contributions are Rosalind Coward’s *Speaking Personally* from 2013, and different works on emotion in journalism, e.g. Peters (2011) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2016). In 2015, a group of mainly Norwegian scholars published the book *Individet i journalistikken (The Individual in Journalism)* (Hornmoen, Roksvold & Alnæs), a first attempt to study the same phenomenon from a Scandinavian perspective. This volume is a continuation of that work.

When we discuss the focus on individuals in journalism, we include a wide array of things. It may involve the use of non-elite sources and/or a focus on the assumed interests of the audience – things that have characterised modern journalism for decades, but which digitalisation has brought to the forefront in most outlets and genres (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2016). There is also the interest in the more personal aspects of all types of elite persons – politicians, artists, sports heroes, the rich and famous, and at the same time, there are the increasingly personal voices of many journalists in their stories and reports.

To the extent that this “individualisation” has been discussed, it has often been regarded as a problem for journalism. It has been seen as more or less synonymous with tabloidisation, and as an expression of the “dumbing-down’, ‘trivialisation’ and ‘sensationalism’ of the press” (Coward, 2013, p. 8). In many respects, it can be argued that this is a limited way of reading the phenomenon. It may also be seen as a way of democratising or humanising journalism, as an expression of a wish to include issues and topics in public debate that speak to the ordinary reader, listener or viewer, and not only to those higher up in society. The exposure of individuals and subjective views can be found in everything from undoubtedly trivial lifestyle journalism to including important voices from the audience during an outbreak of swine flu. One Norwegian study with a diachronic perspective on the coverage of homosexuals in Norwegian media found that the exposure of individuals had probably contributed to profoundly changing the perception of homosexuals over a period of 30 years (all examples from Hornmoen et al. 2015).

Apart from this introduction, this edited collection consists of 14 chapters that address different aspects of individual exposure and subjectivity in

the media. We aim to discuss how individual exposure and/or subjectivity now affect most journalistic topics and genres: from politics through sports journalism to science journalism; from health journalism to journalism about terrorism. It affects news and features, photos and front pages, and is of course the backbone of an increasing dialogue with the audience, in which case it also affects the role of the journalist.

One aim of this book is therefore to show some of this variation. Another is to contribute to a debate about the present state and also perhaps where journalism is heading. Where, and how, do we find individual focus and exposure? And why do different kinds of journalism – with a focus on individuals in common – trigger such different reactions?

## **The structure of the book**

This collection is divided into five parts, including chapters that discuss both the philosophy and the history of individual focus and exposure in journalistic media (parts I and V). Parts II through IV, consisting of altogether 12 chapters, each addresses a theme that resonates with the current political and social environment. Since individual focus today permeates all journalistic genres, with online and social media enhancing this tendency, and furthermore, as genres themselves are in rapid development, an edited collection like this cannot cover all aspects of the phenomenon. However we hope that our contributions will advance the understanding of some of the complexity of this increasing focus on individuals in journalism.

### **Part I. Subjectivity in journalism – a philosophy prism**

After this introduction, Steen Steensen discusses how different philosophical ideas at different times have dealt with the relationship between the individual and the collective, and how this can be related to developments in the public sphere and journalism (chapter 2). He argues that subjectivity is again on the rise in journalism, partly as a result of the influence from social media, partly as a result of the long-standing debate about what journalism is and should be.

His argument, and the argument of many writers in a more subjective tradition, is that the subjectivity of the reporters and their sources are more or less

two sides of the same coin – by being participants, journalists can create a “truer” journalism. Subsequently, subjectivity can be seen as a way of building a bridge between the particular and the universal.

## Part II. Representations of politicians and power

The second section of the book examines how the roles of politicians and people in other powerful positions are being exposed to increased personalisation, interest and scrutinising.

In chapter 3, Harald Hornmoen analyses and compares a set of ape-like caricatures that have been published in different outlets and under different circumstances, in Norway, France and South Africa. The caricature has been used to scorn and ridicule political leaders and powerful people for centuries. They can, however, be challenging to interpret. They demand some sort of common understanding between the artist and the audience. Historically, caricaturists have played the role of a “visual commentary writer” – with more freedom to personalise, but were still seldom detached from the publication as such. One conclusion is that the rise of social media has brought new challenges to the interpretation of caricatures. When they first appear in social media, the contract with the readers and the guidelines for interpreting – knowledge of genre, the sender, the general context – may present new challenges from the outset, and this also makes interpretation demanding when the caricatures later appear in legacy media.

This question of how prominent figures are represented and understood continues in chapter 4, where Birgitte Kjos Fonn and Anders Gjesvik present an analysis of profile interviews in Norway’s major business daily. When examining a number of interviews the authors find that when written for a broader audience, they reflect a set of values which differs from the neoliberal values that often guide the choice and framing of news in mid-week editions of the newspaper, and that this is expressed in a set of dominating discourses. What is more, these discourses also serve almost as a grid, where the individual’s personal stories and qualities are plotted in – probably to make the interviewees recognisable to a larger public, as well as to legitimate their position as people with power.

In chapter 5, Eva-Karin Olsson explores how recent Swedish prime ministers have been portrayed in the national press. Party affiliation and politics still

play a role, but the younger politicians in particular are also judged by how their personalities fit with broader societal trends. Olsson finds that younger politicians deem it very important to appear “like ordinary people”. On the other hand, it is also important to fit into current popular norms – to be good family people, to be youthful, sporty, etc. – a tendency that is also known from other countries, like Britain. There are for example obvious similarities between the remodeling of the Conservative parties in Britain and Sweden through the personalities of their party leaders David Cameron and Fredrik Reinfeldt (though some of the same strategies were also used by Tony Blair when British Labour was renewed in the 1990s).

Returning to the use of graphics and imagery to convey political messages, Hugh O'Donnell presents the front pages of the pro-Scottish independence, pro-EU and pro-social democrat newspaper *The National*. This is a publication which has in a short time gained popularity with the Scottish public. Chapter 6 is an analysis of how the paper uses graphics and imagery to reproduce Scottish, British and European subjectivities. It is clear that individual exposure on these front pages is intense, with entirely different graphic treatment of – in *The National's* view – the “good” and “bad” guys among British and Scottish politicians. *The National* is an example of a newspaper that takes a clear political stance, does not hesitate to do campaign journalism, and has perfected the using of and playing with images of individuals, mostly politicians, for this purpose.

### Part III. Evolving roles, changing narratives

Having examined how politicians and other public figures are represented, the collection now draws attention to the role of the media and the journalists themselves. This section is a collection of studies of changing narratives and functions. It includes challenges in reporting health journalism, to changing routines in news production, to the Questions & Answers services in online media – all of which demonstrate larger trends and forces at play.

In chapter 7, Yngve Benestad Hågvar examines genre development and role change in the Questions & Answers section of the online version of the Norwegian newspaper VG (vg.no). Since its launch in 2012, the VG Live Studio has become a permanent service with a steady staff and an ambition to answer all kinds of questions from readers. Strengthening the bond with

readers, but also being more open about the newspaper's work and priorities, were cited as important goals for the new format. But Hågvar's study of the service reveals that the questions and answers give little insight into the choices and priorities of the newspaper – this new genre rather seems to replicate the old journalist and reader roles.

Most of the contributions in this anthology concern Western journalism. Nathalie Hyde-Clarke's chapter (chapter 8) builds on this by providing an insight into the conflict between a Western approach and approaches from other cultural spheres. In a case study of the coverage of a so-called wildcat strike in South Africa which ended in a massacre, Hyde-Clarke discusses the connection between the outcome – a massacre – and how the strike was covered in the media. Arguably, in this instance, individual exposure might have facilitated a different outcome. In any case, the post-crisis reporting appears to benefit from its adoption.

Some elite persons have retained their status as heroes even after the onset of individual exposure in journalism. These are, for example, sports heroes – but when they fall from grace, the fall is dramatic. Ingvild Tennøe Haugen's chapter (chapter 9) is about the Norwegian cross-country skier Therese Johaug, who tested positive for a banned substance in October 2016. In a country where cross-country skiing is considered *the sport of all sports*, skiers are often among the national celebrities that a sports press with increasing exposure of individuals cherish. The downfall is accordingly full of emotion, agony, and hurt national pride, and Haugen analyses the major Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten's* coverage of the case, including both the news photos and an evolving genre – a so-called commentage – where the journalist mixes reportage and commentary.

In chapter 10, Tine Ustad Figenschou examines reflections on editorial practices and ethical dilemmas among twelve Norwegian health reporters and editors. In recent decades, health journalism has become an important feature of journalism, and the patient narrative a recognisable media genre. These are stories based on the personal experiences of individual patients, either in their own right, or as cases used to illustrate other health stories. But it is a challenging genre, in which individuals are exposed in the media when they are at their most vulnerable. Most stories spring from the traditional conflict between the little man and the authorities – or the doctors – but the watchdog function can conflict heavily with the need to protect people in a vulnerable position.

Journalists struggle with balancing professional distance and empathy with the sources, and also making the sources aware that media exposure can lead to far more – and different – attention than they anticipate.

The last contribution of this part is an essay that reflects on both individual exposure in journalism *and* journalism seen from the “inside”. In chapter 11, Silje Pileberg discusses the case of the Italian seismologist Giulio Selvaggi, who, together with six other academics, was indicted and at first convicted of manslaughter after an earthquake killed 29 people in L’Aquila in Italy in 2012. Pileberg takes as her point of departure the idea that science journalism is often educational, treats uncertain findings as simplified facts, and consequently also treats scientists as some kind of wizards, men and women with superpowers. The story about Selvaggi, one of Pileberg’s own pieces as a journalist, is however written in a far more narrative form, where the researcher is portrayed as an ordinary and vulnerable human being. Pileberg’s essay is also an example of a genre and methodology that is not very common, but could be used more in research in a practical-theoretical subject like journalism – a reflection on her own practice as a journalist. The methodological approach is “reflective practice” or “critical reflection”, and the aim is to develop new knowledge based on the author’s own experience.

## Part IV. The facets and faces of terrorism

What happens in and to journalism when terrorism strikes? Terrorism is a kind of crime that as a rule is regarded as an attack on the whole nation. This also has implications for media coverage – the victims will most often be regarded as representatives of “us”, and journalists themselves may feel strongly affected.

Nina Blom Andersen (chapter 12) investigates coverage of the mourning of the two victims in a 2015 terror shooting in Denmark, and raises the question whether the tendency of branding some people as “unworthy victims” is something journalism has left behind. Since the cartoon controversy in 2006, Danish public debate has been divided between those who advocate for freedom of speech and those who are eager not to demonise Muslims. This controversy paved the way directly into the mourning of the two victims, as one of them was interpreted as “less innocent” than the other victim after his death.

Are tolerance and freedom of speech perceived to be “binary opposites” in this context?

Although the ideal of objectivity and detachment in news reporting is constantly being questioned, there still seems to be a strong belief in it among journalists. The unexpected and unprecedented terror attack in Norway in 2011 also created unexpected challenges for journalists. Is it possible to remain untouched and continue doing one’s job in a situation where 77 people were killed, some of them only children, where there were dead people in the streets and along the shore, and even where some of the editorial offices were affected? This is the topic of chapter 13, written by Maria Konow Lund, Isabel Bech and Eva-Karin Olsson.

The next chapter discusses the conspicuously impersonal images of ID-like photos that often accompany news reporting on terror attacks. On the one hand, society probably needs to see the evil-doer in order to see that such catastrophes have a cause. On the other hand, the murderer is the ultimate “other”, the terrorist is the worst of them all, and we still do not want to see their “real” self. The Norwegian media, for example, refused to interview the lone-wolf terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, after the terror attack in June 2011, and the public reacted strongly to the publishing of a photo from his personal Facebook profile. Anne Hege Simonsen (chapter 14) argues that the ID-like photos of Anis Amri that circulated in the media after the attack on the Christmas market in Berlin in 2016, did not represent Amri as a person, but served “to identify the physical traits of a criminal fugitive”.

## Part V. A historical approach: Tensions in individual focus and exposure

The book started with a chapter in which philosophy was used as a prism to understand varying views on subjectivity. The book’s coda, part V and chapter 15, is an outline of a few important historical developments in the press which regard subjectivity and individual focus and exposure. The chapter depicts six developments that we have reason to believe can tell us something about contemporary journalism. As Birgitte Kjos Fonn states, all these developments are rife with tensions, and may therefore help us to understand why reactions to current trends in individualisation are so varied.



## Concluding remarks

It is possible that critics are right to claim that many aspects of individual exposure and subjectivity in journalism *are* trivial, but as we demonstrate in this collection, the phenomenon is also far more diverse than that. In some cases, the lack of individual exposure probably weakens the quality of the information the public gets. In other cases, the exposure of individuals is part of an ongoing negotiation between the media and the source. Sometimes the exposure of a murder victim can be skewed, due to underlying political assumptions among journalists and debaters.

Today's individual exposure and subjectivity in journalism are the result of the combined forces of democratisation, commercialisation and also the professionalisation of the press. Sometimes they work together, sometimes they pull in different directions.

It is our hope that through this project we can inspire other scholars to do further studies in this significant, yet under-researched field.

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