

Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism field

VOLUME 15 | No 1 | 2026
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2026.1-206

Abstract

The annotated portfolio presented here will focus on analogue photography as a complementary methodological tool in a sociological study of the cultural press in print, audiovisual and online formats. This study is part of PhD research on the production and circulation of literary information in French-speaking Europe, providing an overview of this specific sector of journalism and, in particular, its international stakes. In this particular field, the relationship between social science researchers and cultural journalists is characterized by a high degree of similarity in their approach and intellectual tools, systematically leading the journalists surveyed to adopt a reflexive stance during interviews. Although extremely valuable for analysis, it can confine the data to idealism, with the study of representations taking precedence over the analysis of practices. Certain material conditions of the survey can then bring journalists closer to their practices, where photography plays a particular role.

Keywords

Photo-reporting; cultural journalism; literary press; French-speaking Europe; photo-journalism

The author

Léa Koenig is a sociologist, anthropologist and artist. She is writing a sociology thesis on the international implications of developments within the literary press in French-speaking Europe, under the joint supervision of Dominique Marchetti (Centre européen de sociologie et de sciences politiques, CNRS, Paris) and Paul Dirx (University of Lille).

In 2023, she produced an ethnographic 28 mn documentary about an Innu community in Canada. She also curated in 2024 a photography exhibition, about spaces and architecture in Switzerland (Geneva, Lausanne, Fribourg and Zürich).

e-mail: lea.koenig@ehess.fr

This annotated portfolio focuses on analogue photography as a complementary methodological tool in a sociological study of the cultural press in print, audiovisual and online media. My research is a part of a PhD research on the production and circulation of literary information in French-speaking Europe (Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Switzerland) and secondarily in Canada, providing an overview of this specific sector of journalism and, in particular, of its international stakes. In other words, it involves studying the processes of cultural internationalization or nationalization and the conditions for the production of literary and editorial actuality based on an analysis of specialized publications in literature (print and digital press and radio), and the literary sections of general news media in French-speaking Europe. The comparative and relational survey is based on prosopographic statistics and discourse analysis through interviews with journalists, some publishers and press officers, and through the studying of sample texts from books reviews.

As the fieldwork progressed, the agents I questioned led me to put greater emphasis on ethnographic observation outside of interviews. However, in this professional space, the relationship between the social science researcher and cultural journalists is characterized by a high degree of similarity in their approaches and intellectual tools (society issues, microphone interviews, photo-reporting, documentation, fieldwork and investigative writing). Howard Becker already discussed this issue addressing the work of sociological photographers and photojournalists, questioning what makes a photograph sociological or journalistic material¹. This proximity between the work of sociologists and journalists systematically leads the journalists surveyed to adopt a reflective posture while being interviewed. Although extremely valuable for analysis, this posture can confine data to a rather idealistic role, since studying representations might prevail over analyzing practices. Journalists find themselves in the situation of being interviewer interviewee. Certain material conditions of the investigation can thus bring interviewed journalists closer to their practices (advice given on the use of microphones during interviews, etc.), and photography has a special role to play in this.

One can take inspiration from the words of Raymond Aron: "*Dans l'action, chacun adhère au monde de telle manière qu'il ne reste plus de place pour le redoublement réflexif*"² in order to produce a genuine *photographic act*, which opens the way to a more ethnographic approach³. While my initial choice of visual tools was drawing and digital photography, the commitment required to photograph the field, the exposure time and the sensory nature of analogue photography, the films selection, the lighting conditions needing further work, the shutter click, revealed new aspects of the investigation, particularly with regard to intergenerational social relations and the evolution of techniques. The survey then enters a different time frame. If practices are becoming

¹ Becker, Howard S. *Sociologie visuelle, photographie documentaire et photojournalisme*, *Communications*, n° 71, *Le parti pris du document*, 2001: 333-335. On this subject, we may also consult: Maresca, Sylvain and Meyer, Michaël 2013, *Précis de photographie à l'usage des sociologues*. Rennes: PUR.

² We translate: "In the action, everyone adheres to the world in such a way that there is no longer any scope for reflexive redoubling" (Raymond 1948:64).

³ This methodological shift also inspired us from Pierre Bourdieu as an ethnologist photographer in Kabylie, Algeria.

standardized with the globalization and digitization of journalism, the materiality of the work remains specific to each national and local context, which is not apparent at first glance.

By stepping outside the framework of interviews, the ethnographic approach employed by analogue photography brings about a discourse and a subjectivity specified by journalism in the process of being done. Respondents then choose the objects and situations to photograph, move around the editorial offices, react to the use of photographic equipment by recalling their memories of reporting, their choices of equipment and their evolution, or situations of solidarity among journalists when equipment fails. They also comment on their surprise to see that a young person would use such equipment nowadays. Their discourse can approach a testimonial account of their equipment and practices of yesteryear. The sociologist and literary journalist thus share an emic practice: photo-reporting. From the perspective of both sociological photography and field journalism, it is a matter of thinking while making, just as pointed out by the anthropologist Tim Ingold⁴.

As a significant part of cultural journalists have been educated in social sciences, they are keen to advance the investigation and offer their analysis of the situation of the profession, which is under serious threat. In this way, where the sociologist Gilles Bastin actually sees symmetry as a reversal of roles in this specific survey relationship⁵, it is rather the imbalance between idealism and materialism that has emerged in my work. Analogue photography then changes the discourse of the subjects who become less reflective and more engaged in the materiality of the work by rebalancing the survey relationship and the importance given to practices in relation to representations and by setting bodies in motion into workspaces, rather than remaining confined to a recording studio for the interview. It also allows me, as a researcher, to engage in another kind of ethnographic observation and to be otherwise reflexive about the data collected in the field and the preconceptions related to the digitisation of journalism. It also prompts me to reflect on the relationship between writing and images in the profession of journalism as well as in my own work, the critical tension between analytical discourse and aesthetic discourse being a characteristic of this literary journalism. It should therefore be specified that, while the selection of shots for this portfolio was initially based rather more on aesthetic criteria, it was the articulation with the analytic writing in this essay that led me to rework the choices and sets of images.

All the photographs have been taken by the author Léa Kœnig with the permission of the respondents and editors in chief, between September 2024 and June 2025, in Switzerland and Luxembourg.

⁴ Ingold, Tim, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, London, Routledge, 2013.

⁵ Bastin, Gilles. « Le 'cas Mathieu' Ou l'entretien Renversé », *Sur le journalisme*, vol 1.1, 2012, p. 40-51.



Fig. 1, 2, 3 Various journalists' departments in Switzerland. Photo by Léa Koenig.

The journalists at the Swiss daily newspaper *La Liberté* are pleased to invite me to photograph their historic headquarters, which will soon be converted into an open-space office, as has been the case for most Swiss newspapers (which is also the case in many European countries). This aspect of their workspace was not discussed in interviews, but in reality, it is a decisive factor in their practices. In their final weeks working in these offices, they commented on my photographs as an essential historical document, then developed further on the threat of the disappearing print newspapers.

On the left (fig. 1), we can see the main corridor of the editorial office of *La Liberté* in Fribourg, with the editor-in-chief's office in the foreground. Next are the various offices assigned to each rubric, each with a permanent workstation.

On the right (fig. 2 and 3), the new headquarters of *Le Temps* daily newspaper in Geneva. In the foreground at the top (fig. 2) is the editor-in-chief's office, which has a permanent workstation in the open-space general office. The other journalists have interchangeable workstations, which most of them dislike, especially when it comes to storing the books they are working on. In these new offices, a television broadcasts a French news channel continuously (fig.3).

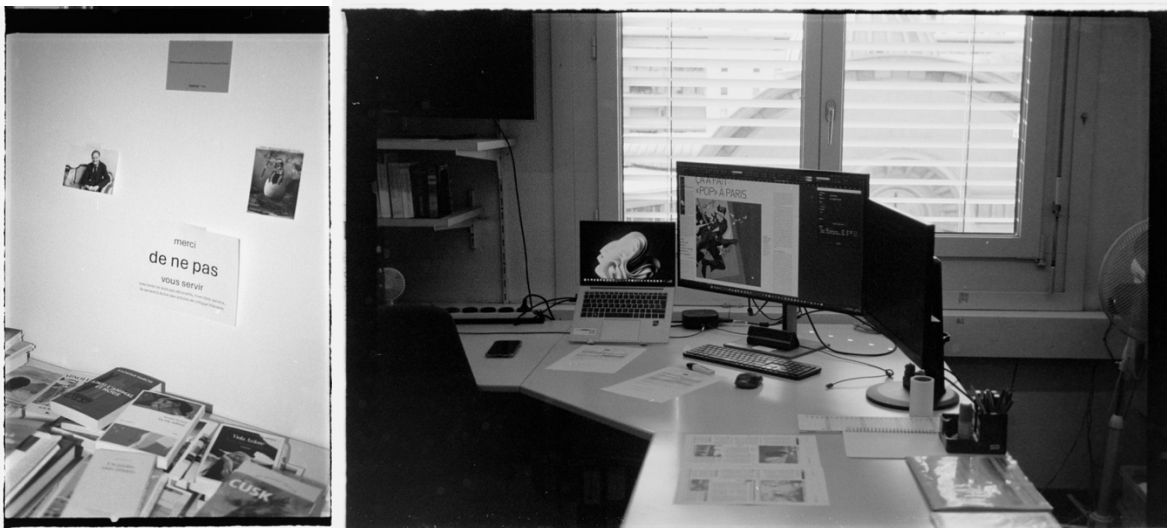


Fig. 4 and 5 Cultural section offices, *La Liberté*, Fribourg. Photo by Léa Koenig.

These two photographs were taken in the editorial office of the culture rubric of the daily newspaper *La Liberté* in Fribourg. On the right (fig. 5), the office of a permanent journalist with an article currently being written about pop culture in Paris. On the left (fig. 4), the desk where books received from publishers are placed for literary journalists to work on. The sign reads: 'Please do not serve yourself. These books are not decorative items or for free use. They are used to write literary critics.'

Fribourg, Bd de Pérolles, 2024

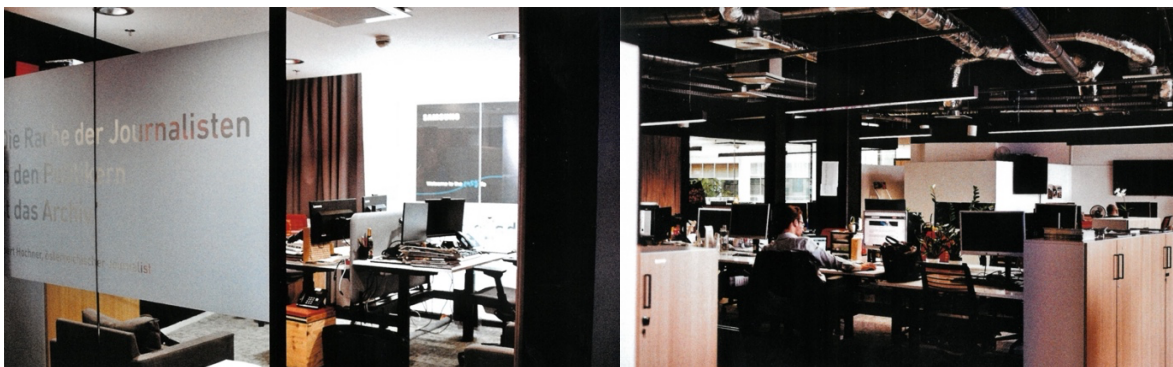


Fig. 6, 7 The hierarchy within the team is still visible in the spatial arrangement. Photo by Léa Koenig.

In Luxembourg, most offices are also open-space, but the offices of the publishing director and editors-in-chief remain separate. This seems to be the prevailing configuration today (AFP, *Le Monde*, etc.).

On the left (fig. 6), the office of the directors and editor-in-chief of the *Tageblatt*; on the right (fig. 7), a journalist works in the open-space office.

Edipress Luxembourg S.A., 2025

Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism field



Fig. 8, 9, 10 Coexistence of paper and digital media. Photo by Léa Kœnig.

These colour photographs were taken in the headquarters of the Luxembourg daily newspaper *Tageblatt*, which is shared with another French-language newspaper, *Le Quotidien*, in Esch-sur-Alzette city. Thus, French-speaking and German-speaking journalists work alongside each other in the same offices, a multilingualism that is unique to Luxembourg. Although both newspapers are published in print, the editorial work is carried out exclusively on digital equipment. However, we can clearly see the coexistence of paper and digital formats here.

Edipress Luxembourg S.A., 2025

In contrast, in the following black and white photographs, we can see a practice called “Le mur” (the wall). While I was conducting my interviews in Geneva in the morning,

I met with the editor-in-chief to request permission to photograph the offices. They then suggested that I return in the afternoon for what they considered to be more interesting photographs. Indeed, the editorial team at the daily newspaper *Le Temps* meets every day at 4 p.m. to assemble and make final adjustments to the next day's edition, using a paper layout pinned to a dedicated wall. For the time being, I have only observed this practice in Switzerland.

Le Temps headquarters, Geneva, 2024



Fig. 11, 12, 13 Editorial meeting and assembly of the newspaper on the wall, 4 p.m. Photo by Léa Koenig.

Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism field

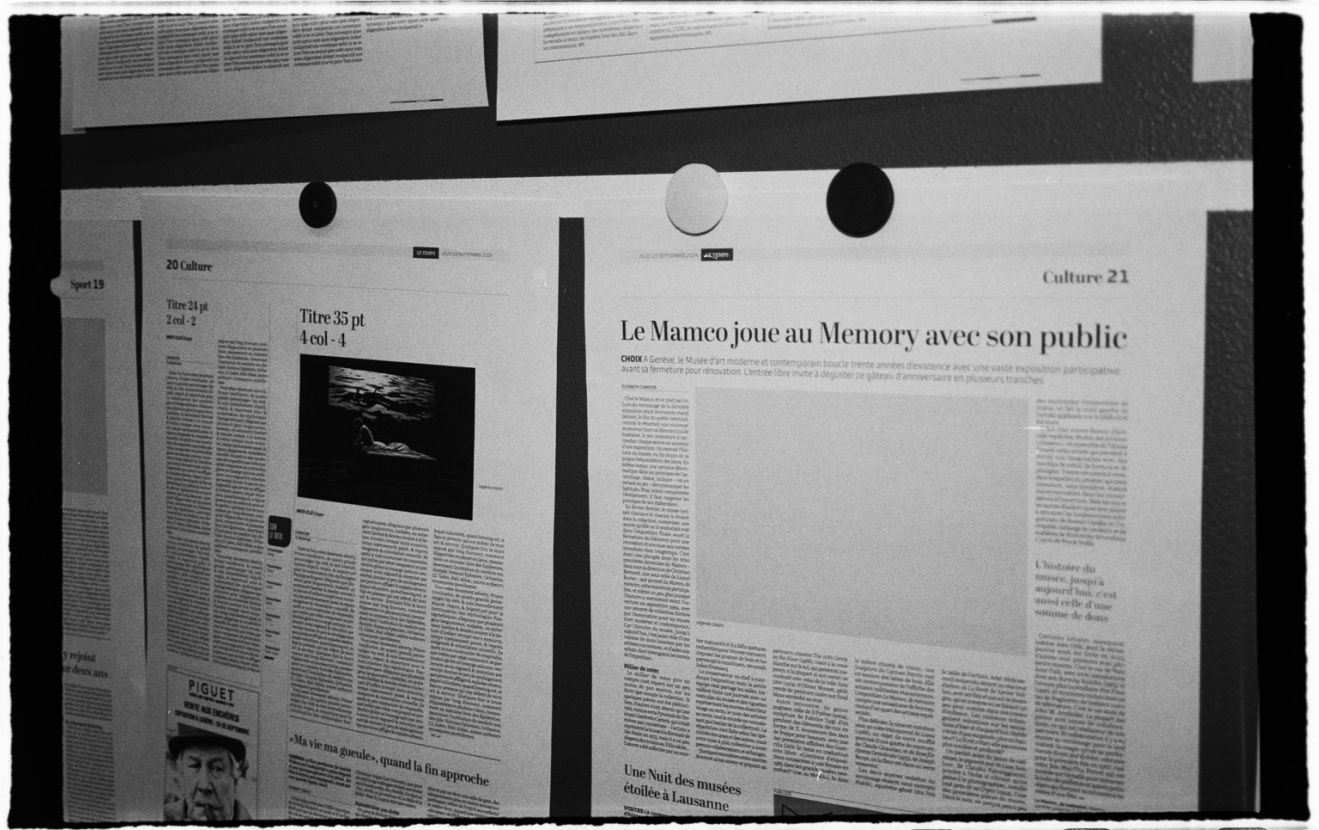


Fig. 14 Pages from the culture section at 4 p.m., Photo by Léa Kœnig.

The layout and editing have been completed and are awaiting the addition of illustrations and some last titles. The importance of the 'Wall' and therefore the prestige that the paper version seems to retain internally with its 'layout' offering a relatively stable page hierarchy.

Le Temps headquarters, Geneva, 2024

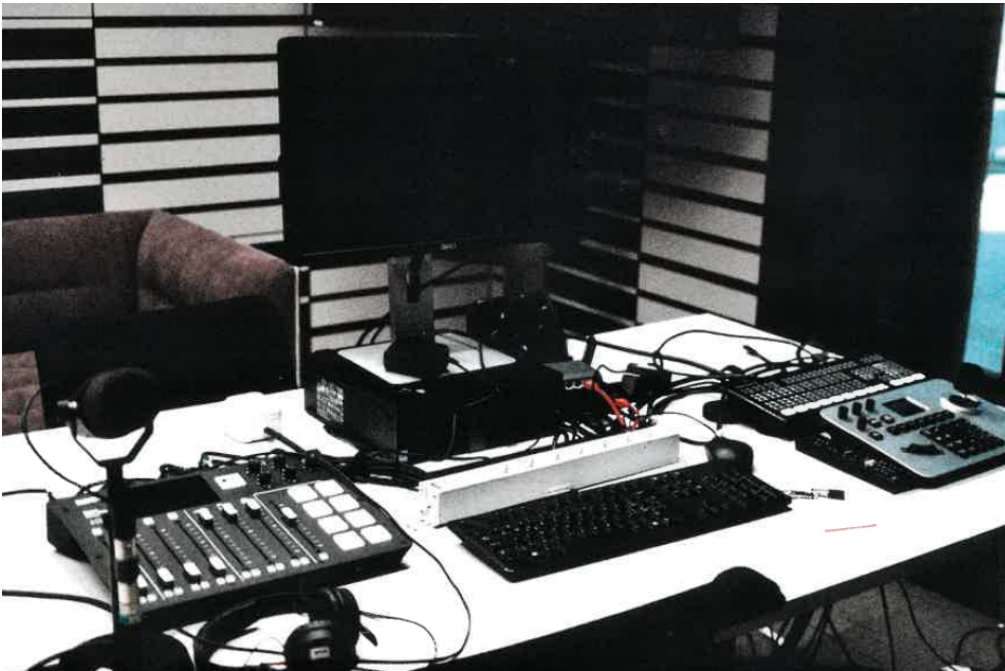


Fig. 15, 16 Specific interview conditions aimed at radio journalists, Photo by Léa Koenig.

Here are the studios of RTL (Radio Télévision Luxembourg), where I conducted two interviews. The first photo (fig. 15) shows a recording studio with a mixing desk, which allows journalists to produce their reports and interviews. The second photo (fig. 16) is a live broadcast control room.

Most radio journalists spontaneously suggest conducting my interviews in the studio to ensure better sound quality, which surprised me at first. The interview situation shows how important audio technology, particularly good sound quality, is to them, unlike perhaps

Analogue photography as an analytical and aesthetic tool for ethnographic observation in cultural journalism field

some researchers. While sociologists learn to 'make respondents forget about the microphone,' journalists here constantly advise me on how to use it. In the middle of the interview, a journalist who is watching his screen suddenly interrupts me, asking me to be quiet. He goes in live to make an announcement, then cuts his microphone and returns to our conversation.

RTL Studios, Boulevard Pierre Frieden, Luxembourg, 2025



Fig. 17, 18 RTL Studios, Boulevard Pierre Frieden, Luxembourg. Photo by Léa Kœnig, 2025.

Finally, while I was working with the radio journalists, one of them suggested visiting and photographing the television studios. At that point, I considered my interview to be over. But the discussion thus continues. I have to balance juggling the camera and taking notes, and I obtain some information that I would not necessarily have gathered

on my own. We can see in the photos the television broadcast daily news studio in Luxembourg and the equipment being adjusted, especially the lighting, for the evening news programme.

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