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Photojournalism: Art with a Purpose

by Thomas Struett

(English 1102)

The purpose of journalism is to inform the public about the world around them. This can be done through many mediums, but nothing quite compares to a photograph that can take a moment in time and convey a message and inform the reader. Images like the photo taken by Malcolm W. Brown of a Buddhist monk using self-immolation to protest persecution by the South Vietnamese government in 1963 convey more emotion and a more clear idea of the subject than any other form of journalism. Because of what photojournalism provides for the viewer, photojournalism is a service to the public. Even though photojournalism may have many controversies and a poor job outlook, it is an important and powerful career that is worth studying.

Photojournalism has been in use for over 150 years. The first known use of a photograph for journalism use was during the Crimean war in 1855 when Roger Fenton traveled from America to the Crimea to take photos of the war (309). In the early 1900s Lewis Hines was one of the first photographers to use photos for social change in an effort to end child labor (336). And In 1935 the *Associated Press* started sending photographs by wire, which helped photojournalism cover current news because photos could now be sent just as fast as written news. Finally, by 1999 the digital camera began being widely used by most journalists. With the digital camera, technological barriers of entry into the career have been lowered and now more emphasis is put on education and experience to stand out as an exceptional photojournalist.

Although education is not necessary to succeed in the career of photojournalism, education and training are highly recommended. Greg Lewis, author of the book *Photojournalism*, says a college degree is a requirement for most jobs at newspapers and studying photojournalism will give someone a good background in the field. With this, Lewis also recommends studying liberal arts and giving "serious thought to a second or even third language" (278). Lewis believes that writing skills are just as necessary as camera skills so schooling is highly recommended before trying to go into the career. In contrast, John Starks, a photographer for the *Daily Herald*, who has a bachelors degree in journalism explains, "Most of my time in classes was a waste. I learned by working for as many newspapers as I could get an assignment from during college. I didn't sleep much, asked a lot of questions, bothered a lot of photo editors, and drove a lot of miles." Starks does not think his education was worth as much as the experience he gained working. So, education can be beneficial to an aspiring photojournalist, but experience will help a photojournalist understand his or her career and become better at it.

Experience can be seen through a photographer's portfolio and this is why many employers believe a portfolio is the best way to judge whether or not to hire a new photojournalist. Lewis stresses that a portfolio is what is most likely to either get a photojournalist a job or not. Lewis insists a portfolio is really all an employer is interested in and that is why a photographer's portfolio should be revised and worked on so it will be the best it can be. He suggests that to make a strong portfolio, the portfolio should have diverse pictures to show that the photographer can cover all types of news. Also, only strong photos should be kept and weak ones should be cut out even if that makes the portfolio small.

An internship can be a great way to build up a portfolio and get a foot in the door. In the journalism world, Lewis explains, many job openings are not advertised but are filled through word of mouth. This is why Lewis believes getting an internship, going to conventions, and joining

organizations is important. He also emphasizes not to get hopes up because starting at the bottom is not necessarily a bad thing and many part-time positions lead to full-time job offers.

Other than working full-time for an employer, a photojournalist can become a freelance photographer. However, Lewis explains freelance photojournalism is very hard and a person "must be a business person as well as a photographer" to succeed (283). He explains that a freelance photojournalist will probably be doing more business than taking pictures. This is why he emphasizes taking business classes.

As a freelance photographer it is important to know who owns the rights to the photos taken. Lewis warns to not give away rights to photos because if they are great photos they can make a photographer money long after the news is over. This is because truly great photos of historical events can be published in history books and photography books. He says the key is to have good and new ideas that will be picked up by a paper or magazine because there are plenty of photographers that can take a good picture, so ideas are what set people apart.

Because photojournalists can earn a living through many different ways like freelance work, working full-time for one company, and doing studio photography, earnings can greatly vary between photographers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in May 2011, the 25th percentile of Photographer's earnings in media-related occupations was \$20,270 (United States). The median pay for photographers was \$28,860 and the upper 75th percentile made \$44,340. John Starks says he made \$16,000 his first year as a newspaper journalist and now the starting pay in the newspaper business is \$24,000-\$35,000. Starks also explains that photographers often have to supply their own photo gear, editing software, and car, which can cost a lot. He often puts over 20,000 miles on his car due to traveling to take photographs, and car maintenance and gas has become a major expense for him. Starks says, "Money doesn't necessarily come to you, even if you have a great passion for what you do. You must be a good businessman and look for opportunities outside of your full-time job as a newspaper photojournalist." He suggests doing studio photography or photography for weddings to make more money on the side.

To become more credible and learn more about photojournalism some professionals and students join organizations like the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA). The NPPA, which started in 1946 and is the largest and most popular association of photojournalists in America today. The association now has around 10,000 members. Membership costs \$65 for students and \$110 for professionals per year. With this fee members receive a monthly magazine called *News Photographer* that gives tips on journalism and photography. Members can also attend monthly workshops around the country run by top professionals teaching techniques on photographing and journalism.

Many states have their own photojournalism association. Illinois' Association is the Illinois Press Photographers Association (IPPA), which was started in 1946. It is much smaller than the NPPA and membership costs \$27.50 per year. By joining the IPPA, a member can go to the annual Midwest Photo Summit in Evanston. Association members can also join the directory of photographers, which then allows people looking for a photographer to search the directory and find a photographer near them. The directory can help a photographer gain a larger clientele and help become more known.

After getting a job in photojournalism, a photojournalist has to face many controversies in the field. One major controversy of photojournalism is the manipulation of photos that are then published without notifying the reader of the manipulation. The goal of journalism is to be as truthful as possible, and to inform an audience about something in the world, but through image manipulation the truth can be distorted. Some reasons that a photographer may manipulate a photograph is so that they will have a more awe inspiring photo that will have a greater chance of being published and may then evoke a stronger emotional response in the audience. With the large number of photojournalists, there is competition to take the best photograph and sometimes that competition leads to

photographers manipulating their photos so they can get the stronger emotional response and have their photo published instead of someone else's. On the other hand, a photographer may manipulate a photograph so they can deceive their audience on purpose and make them believe in something false. The issue of image manipulation has become very prominent in the age of digital photography and has taken a toll on the photojournalism industry because it has caused people to doubt the truthfulness of the photographs they see.

Making sure that people do not doubt the truthfulness of photographs is very important to publishers. In the article "Digital Deception. (Photo Journalism Ethics)" by Cheryl Johnston in the *American Journalism Review*, Clyde Mueller, past president of the NPPA, explains how important it is for photojournalists to be truthful because "the newspaper industry as a whole cannot sustain this type of exposure." Mueller believes exposure of image manipulations in publications is very detrimental to the industry because all publications have to offer to the public is their credibility, so image manipulation is something that needs to be stopped to keep trust in the industry. Without the public trust in the truthfulness of photographs, people will turn to other forms of media that are more reliable and can convey the truth better leaving photojournalists without a job. Johnston asks whether photojournalists break their ethical duty to be truthful because of pressure from the company they work for or pressure from themselves to get the best possible photograph. Walski, who manipulated a war photo in Kuwait and was fired because of it, says, "There are many great images coming out of Iraq so the pressure is high to get the best photos so you can be published" (qtd in Johnson). He also believes because of artistic photography and movies that make people believe all visual media looks perfect, the pressure for journalists to get a perfect photo is also high even though their duty is to convey the truth through their photograph and not beauty. Some photojournalists say that publications should more clearly state their code of ethics to the photojournalists they hire before they go out in to the field so they know what is expected of them.

Sometimes photographing a war can be just as dangerous as being a soldier in war. That is why photographers that choose to become war correspondents can easily be hurt or suffer from PTSD. Many of these photographers do not get proper help because of their relationship with the company they are working for and because there is a belief only soldiers can get PTSD. In the article "Overexposed: A photographer's War With PTSD" from *The Atlantic*, Adam Mccauley explains how photographers in war zones can suffer from PTSD and their position as a photographer (and not a soldier) can hinder them from getting the proper help they need. It has been found that "a 'third of war' journalists are at risk of developing PTSD" because of what they cover and where they go in a war zone. Dr. Elena Newman, a trauma psychologist at the University of Tulsa, conducted a study on photojournalists and says, "Amongst these elite [war journalists] you see high levels of PTSD, depression and alcohol abuse.... Nearly 28 or 29 percent of these journalists suffer from PTSD, and 21 percent suffer depression." Like soldiers, journalists are often afraid to reveal they are suffering mental effects from war because they feel they must be tough and that it was their choice to go to a war zone so they should not complain. A well respected war photographer, Gary Knight says, "My view may sound harsh, but if you go to war because you want to, don't moan if it hurts you." Some news agencies are now trying to prevent journalists from hiding their symptoms so they can get proper help. Mccauley explains that both CNN and the BBC have hired physiologist Dr. Feinstein, who developed a simple questionnaire that can be taken at any time by war correspondents to see if they are suffering from PTSD. Even though improvements like this are taking place many costly full-time war correspondents are being replaced by freelance journalists who provide their own medical insurance and travel at their own expense. Freelance journalists can be dropped from payroll at any time so freelance journalists are more pressured to hide mental illnesses like PTSD out of fear of being dropped.

Some photographs taken by photojournalists provoke people to wonder why the journalist was taking photos instead of helping the subject that was in need, and whether the journalist had a

moral responsibility to intervene in what they are documenting or not. A now famous photo of a man moments away from being hit and killed by a New York City subway train by R. Umar Abbasi was condemned by the public because the photographer was taking photos instead of helping the man and then capitalizing off of it by putting it on the cover of the *New York Post*. Another famous photo of a 13-year-old girl, Omayra Sánchez, who was trapped under debris from a mudslide taken by Frank Fournier, and won World Press Photo of the Year in 1985, was attacked by the public because the girl was never saved and died after being stuck for 60 hours. And in another controversial photo, a starving child in the Sudan is crouched over with a vulture nearby waiting for him to die was taken by Kevin Carter who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for the photograph. The photographer, Carter, killed himself three months after being awarded his Pulitzer Prize because he could no longer take the public hate and grief from not helping the child more. In the article "Killing the Messenger" from *Massachusetts Review*, Sean Dougherty believes Carter's photo was a great photo and deserves praise. He believes this because it makes the viewer want to act. He states, "People felt—horror, empathy, anger. But without the ability to act, without the necessary political apparatus to do something, so many turned, as in ancient Greece, and attacked the messenger" (610). Whether a photographer stands as someone who is there just to document what is going on or someone who should be interacting with the environment, they are documenting is an important question to ask. And a photographer should know where they stand before they go out to document the world.

Out of moral responsibility, a photojournalist should try their hardest to avoid being untruthful as much as they can. In *Photojournalism: An Introduction*, Fred S. Parrish says that the more knowledge a photojournalist has, the more truthful they can be. He believes that knowledge that allows for more truthfulness can be gained by taking "courses in college other than journalism skills" and that a person must "learn as much about [their] subject as reasonably possible" (293). He also stresses that time is important and that in a fast-paced job like journalism, one must use their time effectively so they can learn as much about what they are reporting on so they can be as truthful as possible.

The low barrier of entry into photojournalism and the low profitability for a publication to send a person to an event to take photographs is cause lower full-time positions for photojournalists and a rise in freelance photojournalists. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) states, "Over the 2010–2020 period, the number of photographers is projected to increase by 17,500, the largest increase among media-related occupations" (United States). With this large increase in demand for photographers over the next decade, the BLS explains there will be a large increase in photographers trying to take these jobs because of the low barriers of entry into the career and, therefore, competition will be high for most jobs. Employment of freelance photographers is expected to grow 15% between 2010 and 2020 and employment of photographers in newspaper publishing is expected to decline 30% between 2010 and 2020, according to the BLS. It appears that overall employment of photographers is expected to grow, but the possibility of making a living being a photojournalist is declining due to the larger use of social media sites and higher quality cell phone cameras.

In today's world where people can access the news from anywhere and at any time with the internet, people expect newspapers to provide up-to-the-minute on news. Newspapers compete with each other to bring the public the news first. Because of this, some news agencies are turning to social media sites instead of professional photojournalists because it is cheaper and faster than sending someone to a region to take photographs. Also, the possibility of getting the best image is higher because they can use the large general population that uses these social media sites instead of one or two professional photographers. Last October, *Time* magazine hired five users of the popular social media site Instagram who were living in the northeast to cover the approaching Hurricane Sandy with their iPhones. According to *Forbes'* article "Why *Time* Magazine Used Instagram To Cover Hurricane Sandy" by Jeff Bercovici, *Time's* director of photography, Kira Pollack says, "We just thought this is going to be the fastest way we can cover this and it's the most direct [sic] route.... It

was about how quickly can we get pictures to our readers.” By not using professional photojournalists, but users of a popular social media sites, *Time* magazine was able to attract 12,000 new followers to their Instagram in the first 48-hours of the storm. Plus, 13% of *Time* magazine's main site's traffic during the storm was due to the five iPhone users they hired for the storm. Benjamin Lowy, one of the five photographers, even had one of his photos used on the cover of *Time's* magazine. This new phenomenon of using social media sites for photographs could have major consequences for photojournalists. With the low cost, faster access, and broader range of photographs from social media sites, many news agencies may be tempted to do away with costly salaried photojournalists rendering the career extinct.

News agencies are realizing that it does not pay to send a photojournalist off to remote places to report in-depth stories, but it is cheaper and more profitable to do shorter reports in less remote places. In James Estrin's article "Financing Photojournalism by Subscription," he reports that many photojournalists are looking into new ways to still do in-depth reporting in remote places of the world since publishers are starting to stop funding this type of reporting due to its high costs. Estrin examines a new company called Emphas.is that gets regular people to finance photojournalists to do more daring and long-term reporting all over the globe. Emphas.is was started by Karim Ben Khellifa and Tina Ahrens after they realized agility and finding your own financing were just as important in today's photojournalism community as the ability to take pictures. Emphasis.is works by connecting "photographers with stories to tell and those interested enough to help finance them." Those who help finance the projects are then able to ask the photographer questions while they are working and see previews of the project. One possible downside to this form of financing is that people may use the ability to only pay for work they want to see as a tool to get photojournalists to produce biased and untruthful work for money. Emphas.is employs a review board that judges photographer's work to see if they are worthy and then reviews the "logistical feasibility of the project" to ensure only the best quality of work. One other company like this already exists called Kickstarter, but Khellifa's company gives "a more active and intimate relationship between viewers and photographers." Companies like this give a promising future to photojournalism where journalists will have a simple way to find financing for their journalism and they might have more freedom to pursue what they want.

Photojournalism has always been a powerful tool. Ansel Adams used the camera to show the beauty of the wilderness and that national parks were a necessity in order to preserve the landscapes shown through his pictures. Lewis Hines used the camera to end the suffering of hundreds of thousands of children in America forced to work in factories. Many others have used the camera to document and change the world. Although this form of journalism now appears to be shrinking because of the cost associated with it, it is important to keep photojournalism alive both for its beauty and its power to inform the world.

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