

The Monica Lesson

Written by Dirck Halstead



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I was asked on the National Press Photographers' list, what it was like to discover a picture from two years ago that turned out to be the "picture of the week".

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There have been lots of rumors running through the photo journalistic community about the picture that was the cover of TIME magazine, showing Monica Lewinsky, her red lips glowing, her eyes closed in anticipation, being embraced by President Clinton at a fund raising event in October of 1996.

Here, from the photographer's finger-tips, is exactly what happened.

I have a theory that every time the shutter captures a frame, that image is recorded, at a very low threshold in the brain of the photographer. I have heard this over and over from photographers around the world. It doesn't matter if the photographer saw the processed image or not. These split seconds, as the mirror returns, are recorded as "photographic lint" on the mind of the photographer.

When the photographs of Monica Lewinsky, in her beret, on the lawn of the White House, emerged in February of this year, I KNEW I had seen that face with the President. I had no idea when, or where.

When I take photographs on assignment for TIME covering the White House, which I do every third month (nobody could do it more), the pictures first go to the magazine. They have first-time rights on the photos. Once they have gone through the take, and pulled a few selects for the TIME-LIFE picture collection, the take goes to my agent, GAMMA-LIAISON. They then comb the take a second time, and pull their selects. Eventually, the take comes back to me, and resides in my light-room until I sort through it again, then send everything to the University of Texas, which is where my archives reside. Because I am busy, I only get around to sending the pictures to Texas about every 18 months.

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When the Lewinsky story broke, all these organizations started to go through their files, and found nothing.

I hired a researcher, and she started to go through the piles of slides in the light room. After four days, and more than 5,000 slides, she found ONE image, from a fund-raising event in 1996.

By that time, the original "news break" was over. I told TIME we had found an image, and sent it to New York. We all agreed that this was an important image, but the story had moved away from us.

So, we all sat on the picture for six months. When you think about it, that is incredible. Not only TIME, but also Gamma-Liaison kept a secret for six months.

When Monica went to the prosecutors, and offered her testimony, the story went back to page one. At this point, TIME and the agency went into action. The photo was run as a cover on TIME, and is now in magazines and newspapers around the world.

So, what is the lesson from this episode?

I wrote several months ago about David Rubinger talking about how important our archives are. I would rest the case on this example.

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One of the things that become clear is that first, the wires, could not find this photo, even after it was released in their files. That may be due to several problems. First, they have cut back on their support staff - who is going to go through their photos ? The reality is that after several months, out takes go into ware houses. If the photographers to the left and right of me on that stage, that night, were shooting digital, they probably erased the files (Monica, who ?) The networks, once TIME released the photo, were able to go back into pool footage and find the picture . However, we have not seen anything from the other photographers who were there, other than an amateur photographer who was in the crowd, and whose photo was the cover of NEWSWEEK.

I will make some money from this picture (not nearly as much as most people think), but if I did not own my photographs, if I did not go through them, the picture would never had emerged.

That is why ownership of your photographs is SO important. The simple fact is that no organization has the "memory of the image" that the photographer who took it has. The people who want "work for hire" from photographers, also disassociate their greatest asset from the thing that they have to sell.

A last note...I am not talking about Monica versus the President...who is lying and who is not...I am talking about the photographers who record history, and have an obligation to make those photographs available to future generations.

Please go to the excellent web page on photojournalism that is run by Dirk Halstead: <http://digit.aljournalist.org>

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/halstead/monica.html>