



It is ironic that in the more than thirty years that I've been associated with photojournalism some of the most reliable income it has provided has been from writing articles predicting its imminent demise. But like a recalcitrant old relative, however frail its condition, it refuses to breathe its final breath.

And even this is a misstatement. In fact, photojournalism as an activity is alive and healthy; it is the market for photojournalism that is in need of life support. Courses in documentary photography, such as those provided by the International Center of Photography in New York,

are oversubscribed; newspapers, the last bastion of staff photographers, have a choice of talent on the rare occasions that a vacancy develops; for every grant awarded to a free-lance project, there are hundreds of applicants; some newspapers, such as the Newark Star-Ledger, are leading the way in the production of striking documentary photography; even the gray old New York Times has transformed its look through the bold use of space and color.

There are plenty of people producing serious photojournalism. Each day photographers churn out miles of film and billions of pixels to record life on this planet. But if you're a free-lancer and you try to sell the results of your efforts to a publication with a circulation of more than 500, suddenly being the manager of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays doesn't seem such a bad job. Even if you do succeed in placing your work in a national publication the financial reward will be minimal. When I joined The New York Times Magazine in 1987 the day rate for free-lance photographers was \$250.

Today this has risen to \$400 (unless you're working in an area where people are actually shooting at you, when it doubles). Even someone with my limited math skills can work out that this raise is in fact a reduction. Time magazine pays the same quotidian amount to free-lance photographers, higher for those on contract, and an extra hundred bucks a day for nonexclusive electronic rights that The New York Times Magazine includes in its \$400. In a market where there are few buyers and many willing and talented suppliers, it is unlikely that even the most successful photojournalists will work more than 100 or 150 days a year. So it becomes clear that whatever motivations exist for doing this kind of work, money isn't among them.

What happened to the market, and the reasons for its dramatic shrinkage, are complex, and the advent of television is only one of them, albeit a major one. As someone brought up in Britain I never experienced the weekly anticipation of the arrival of Life magazine, but I've had it recounted to me often enough to believe it was a reality. Television's impact on Life was twofold: it made its news content less relevant, and it siphoned off advertising dollars on which

the magazine overly depended. I say 'overly' because in its desperate attempt to maintain circulation numbers it was offering subscription discounts that were so deep that the cover price was no longer a significant revenue source. Furthermore, advertising and photojournalism have always had an uneasy coexistence. Few auto manufacturers or jewelry retailers want to see their wares promoted within the context of a story on famine or drug addiction.

And while we're on the subject of consumer goods, this brings us to another problem that photojournalism had during the last half of the twentieth century, namely peace and prosperity. The old adage that nobody sends you to the airport to photograph a plane that landed safely has applied to most of this period. As a civilization we seem to respond most strongly to imagery during times of stress. Think of the photographs that have burned their imprint on your memory. They are likely to include the work of the WPA during the depression, Robert Capa's blurry record of the D-Day landings, Joe Rosenthal's inspiring flag-raising at Iwo Jima, or Margaret Bourke-White's witness of the horrors of Buchenwald. Other candidates are Ed Clark's mourner at FDR's funeral cortege, David Douglas Duncan's battle-weary marines in Korea, Eddie Adams's capture of a street execution in Vietnam, Nick Ut's photograph of napalmed children, or John Filo's pictures of the Kent State killings.

The events of September 11 gave renewed relevance to the still documentary image. Although the terrible beauty of the cascading towers belonged to television, the rest of that long and tragic day was memorialized by the still photographers on the scene. The hunger for images then was palpable. Special issues of news magazines sold out the minute that they hit the stands; the remarkable 'Here is New York' project, in which photographers, both professional and amateur, displayed their work in a Soho storefront, attracted thousands of visitors; a postage stamp was made from Thomas Franklin's Iwo Jima redux of three firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero.

Still photographs really do seem to give us something to hold onto, a memory and a comfort

that the moving image or even words rarely can. But the validation that the world of photojournalism experienced in the days after September 11 was short-lived. In fact, the brief period during which the public's hunger for serious photography seemed insatiable served more to highlight what has been lost than to proclaim photojournalism's rebirth. The harsh truth is that photojournalism is no longer a popular medium. The end product is often too unsettling for magazines geared more to entertaining than informing. As *Life* died, *InStyle* ascended. Except under extreme circumstances, such as the September attacks, photojournalism rarely appears in publications as an independent element, as was the case in the old magazine or newspaper days. Today it is the accompaniment rather than the serenade, and W. Eugene Smith's self-comparison to Beethoven would have even less validity now than when he made it decades ago.

The nineties saw the emergence of two huge, super-powerful, digitally based photo agencies, Getty and Corbis, both headed by very rich men, Mark Getty and Bill Gates. These mega-agencies have become the photographic equivalent of factory farming, and although they provide an effective marketing system for some commercial stock photographers, to date they have proved to be least effective in the sale and promotion of photojournalism (see 'Narrowed Vision,' page 60).

These super-agencies have had one good effect on the photography business, and that is to give its practitioners a boot-in-the-backside reminder that it is in fact a business. Photographers routinely overestimated their earnings and underestimated their expenses. Mom-and-pop agencies operated on the assumption that a 50/50 split with photographers was a fair division of revenues, without ever having done a business plan to see if this was true. Getty and Corbis, on the other hand, came in with contracts between them and their suppliers (a disturbing move in what had largely been a handshake industry), with percentages on sales weighted in the agency's favor.

Contracts have now become the norm, ranging from the truly onerous, such as Condé Nast's, to the well-intentioned Business Week version. Because publishers had no business model for Internet publication, they try to protect themselves by including in their contracts such apocalyptic phrases as 'all technologies hereinafter devised' and 'throughout the universe,' which shocked photographers who thought they were shooting for a U.S.-based magazine that would be off the newsstands in a month. Technology has changed all that, and now they are not only shooting for magazines that have multiple language editions in multiple markets, but for accompanying Internet sites as well. (So far, publishers have generously limited their rights needs to this universe, and not extended them to those hereinafter created.)

When the digital revolution first arrived, it polarized photographers into two opposing camps. Some took a Luddite approach, refusing to have any work scanned or posted on the Internet; others thought it was the answer to all of photojournalism's troubles. What has transpired of course is neither one thing nor the other. The fear of massive piracy of pictures on the Web has pretty much subsided. But with a few exceptions ' MSNBC and The Washington Post among them ' the hope that the Internet would provide a robust alternative market has yet to become a reality. Digital technology has had other benefits, however. More photographers, especially photojournalists, are shooting with digital cameras and transmitting directly to their clients via satellite phones attached to their laptops. This has neutralized television's advantage of speed. (One of the biggest logistical difficulties for the photographer in the field today is keeping the batteries charged, which becomes a nightmare in places such as Afghanistan. The recent conflict there produced stories of harried photographers transporting portable generators and the requisite gasoline on the backs of horses through the mountains, ancient and modern working together.)

Another interesting and unpredicted consequence of technology is the ability of photographers to come together on Internet forums to discuss their hopes, fears, frustrations, anger, and sometimes, although infrequently, to offer solutions to the problems that beset them. Their empowerment through such groups as EP (Editorial Photographers) has been revolutionary. Until recently the easiest workforce to divide and conquer was photojournalists. They were a union organizer's nightmare: self-employed; highly individualistic; constantly on the move; often working alone; very competitive; usually desperate for money.

None of them knew much about what their peers were doing, or being paid, whether they were flying business or coach, or what scanner gave the most consistent results. All of that has changed as, from apartments and hotel rooms around the world, they gather nightly to berate editors, discuss contracts, and share information on pricing, copyright, and staff benefit packages. The strength that this improved communication has given them was evident during the recent strike by the French Sygma photographers against Corbis. Every day e-mails containing press releases full of Gallic flair and drama would land in the in-boxes of anyone deemed worthy of receiving them. They even included photographs of naked photographers, their photographic equipment modestly covering their natural, symbolizing the way they felt stripped by Bill Gates's henchmen.

Given that so far this assessment of the state of photojournalism is as cheery as a performance review of the FBI, a question arises: Why are so many young people becoming photojournalists and how will they ever make a living out of it? The first part of the question is, of course, easier to answer than the second. I recently conducted a series of interviews with ten of the world's leading war photographers. Among the commonly expressed attractions of their extremely hazardous careers was the feeling of being part of history and the sense that what they did had importance beyond supplying illustration for magazines or newspapers. They often felt that the witness they provide will have more value in the future than in the present, as evidenced by the fact that the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague is using photography taken in Bosnia to prove the massive human rights violations that occurred there (see 'Shooting War,' page 48). There also still exists enormous romance swirling around the figure of the photojournalist, although the free-spirit, devil-may-care hero of legend is frequently at variance with the anxiety-ridden and impoverished reality of many of my acquaintances.

The advice to the would-be war photographer from one of the interviewees, Patrick Chauvel, was to be rich or do something else, and although I wouldn't go that far, I understand what he means. Those who are not able to rely on a trust fund have to look for other means of support to enable them to work. Unless you're an established free-lancer or a staff photographer for a newspaper, being a photojournalist today is a bit like being an actor or a painter. You often have to take a day job to help make ends meet. Some of the greatest names in photojournalism supplement their incomes with non-journalistic work such as advertising or corporate annual

reports. Other avenues of financing important projects that are unlikely to be extensively published are grants and awards.

Institutions such as the Alicia Patterson Foundation and the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund provide a limited amount of money to a small number of people. But for many young photojournalists the only option is to be determined and courageous, and not mind living in poverty for several years. The fact that so many are prepared to do exactly this is both photojournalism's biggest strength as well as its biggest challenge. The challenge is the danger that young photographers will breathe too much of their own air. It takes enormous discipline and maturity to work on a self-assignment, a discipline that is automatically imposed through a magazine or newspaper commission. If photojournalists are only producing work for the approval of other photojournalists, then its value will be compromised. Without a healthy market to give the photographer clear direction, even the best work risks descending into a spiral of irrelevance.

Yogi Berra once said that anything was difficult to predict, especially the future, and that certainly applies to seeing photojournalism's place in the twenty-first century. Maybe the Internet will finally provide the showcase that is its potential; maybe the answer is the 'Platypus' photographer envisioned by Dirck Halstead, a combination of still photographer and videographer (see 'Moving Pictures,' page 54); maybe there is a case to be made for a WPA project in times of prosperity as well as depression; maybe photojournalism becomes a medium whose home is on the walls of art galleries and museums or niche Web sites. Whatever its future is, photojournalism's survival depends on finding and developing markets, either new and unforeseen, or established but undeveloped.

For the immediate future it is difficult to see much changing in the fortunes of this battered profession, and yet this doesn't seem to dull the enthusiasm and resolve of its practitioners. Several years ago the late Howard Chapnick and I started a cheaply produced magazine called

Outtakes. Its mission was to provide an outlet for work that was either unpublished or under-published. The one problem that we never had during its three-year lifespan was finding material with which to fill its pages. There was a deluge of stories, more than we could handle, ranging from such luminaries as Sebastião Salgado and Mary Ellen Mark to photographers just out of college. We ceased publication in 1995, because, as Howard said, neither of us needed that big a tax write-off, and yet to this day I get submissions. One thing you've got to say about photojournalists, they're a stubborn and determined lot, and it's those qualities that will determine photojournalism's future. It will die only when people stop doing it, and there seems to be no risk of that for the moment.

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Exposure to light: The Exposure to light The Photographer's Eye in a Digital World

Written by Peter Howe

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