

Being a photo-reporter in Venezuela: Trying to define the concept of the profession.

Written by Alvaro Cabrera and Pedro Ruiz



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...“Being a photo-reporter is not easy. It goes beyond image composition and the pushing of a button. A good press photographer must have a series of qualities: You have to know how to see; you must have the tact and the empathy when relating to other people; you have to study and to be informed; you have got to have quick and agile mind and body; you must also have persevearance, luck, courage and team spirit” says Carlos Abreu, a Venezuelan specialist, in his article “El reportero gráfico: testigo ocular de la historia”, (The photo reporter: an eyewitness of history) published in the book: El estallido de febrero (1989) (p. 51).

However, all of these virtues have not been enough to grant some prestige to the profession. In that same article, Abreu defines the photo reporter as the most underestimated professional of the communications area and reckons that over the last hundred years they have been deemed as mere assistants of the writing journalists, when in reality their work is as –if not more– demanding.

The derogation towards photo reporters is evidenced by the fact that most professionals in the Venezuelan press did not complete their studies and started out by mere chance, without any photography background, and had to learn in the streets.

“It has been said that journalism can hardly be taught in a school or faculty” says Miguel Ángel Bastenier (2001) on his book *Blanco Móvil, Curso de periodismo* (Moving Target: A journalism course) (p.17).

In Venezuela is not a requirement to have any social communication studies to work as a photographic reporter in a newspaper, and there are no regulations whatsoever regarding this matter, it is a question of finding out about an opening in a newspaper through word of mouth. Even to take a portfolio of your work is an optional practice that only a few people do.

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Journalist Jose Pulido tells a story about Luigi Scotto -one of the most important photo reporters of Venezuela-. Two months after his arrival from New York in 1947, when he was strolling along Plaza Bolivar with a Leica around his neck, he was approached by a stranger "Are you a photographer?", he said, "Ultimas Noticias is looking for one." Luigi's response was "What is Ultimas Noticias?" When he found out it was an evening newspaper, he went there and got the job (pg.8).

This tells us something about the informality of this trade in Venezuela, which is probably one of its most noticeable features. However, such informality does not take away the importance of the work done by these people on an everyday basis. The pictures taken on October 14, 1936, on October 18, 1945, on January 23, 1958, of the "Porteñazo" in 1962, on February 27, 1989, February 4 1992 or the Coup of April 11, 2002 and the events of those days until the return of president Chavez on April 14 have all made history.

As a matter of fact, the pictures taken on the early morning of April 14, 2002 by Hector Rondon made him the first-ever Venezuelan to be awarded a Pulitzer prize. This contradiction between the importance of the photographic work and the scarce professional education of its authors, was a feature of the Venezuelan photojournalism during the 20th century.

But, what is a photographic reporter? In Venezuela, there is no such career in the University nor it exists a specialization on this field as part of the communications program, it is barely an optional course of the program of the communications major.

We know that the photo reporter is mainly a photographer, since his job is to take pictures, but in addition to being a photographer, he is -at least to some- a journalist. Hence the variety of names this profession bears: photo journalism, graphic journalism, press photography. The diversity of skills required by the profession makes it difficult to define.

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On this regard, the Venezuelan law of 1994 refers to these professionals as “graphic reporters” and states that they are able to work without being members of the National Association of Journalists. We gather this means they are lesser journalists than their writing colleagues.

Nevertheless it is possible that the confusion of the exact definition of the profession is due to the phot-journalist concept used by magazines such as National Geographic in which the photographer is also in charge of the texts. In this case, texts and images form a unit that is almost indivisible. Photographs are not complete without the text and vice versa. A photo reporter in Venezuela cannot be compared to a photojournalist as we just described it.

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The Spanish writer Joaquin Estefania in his foreword to the book of American author David Randall "The Universal Journalist" said that journalism is the first draft of History. It is in this relationship between journalism and history that photographic journalism finds its spot, since photographs have -since the beginning of photography- served as a tangible evidence of the facts.

If written journalism is the first draft of history , then photography-all photography but specially press photography- is a frozen moment of history. Thanks to photography we are able to see the changes in urban structures, in customs, in garments, and we can put a face on those anonymous or transcendent characters of an ever-evolving society. Even though photographs by themselves do not inform in a strict sense of the word, it does present evidence, something that the written word is unable to do.



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El Porteñazo © Héctor Rofa February 27, 1989 © Tom Grillo

Luis Brito recipient of the 1996 National Photography Award of Venezuela, commented that the graphic reporter "...is an historian as much as any history scholar, the filmmaker or even the television. Furthermore, the image remains, that is what is happening out there, that is history and that is what is being captured by the photo reporter".

In February 2001, another recipient of the National Photography Award of Venezuela, Jose Sarda agreed with Brito saying that the photo reporter is "like an historian" and added that "the graphic reporter is the man that somehow stops time. It is the man that can take an instant of something that will become part of the history of a country". Even though a photo reporter's job is to look for images to illustrate history, this is a possibility shared by any photographer or even anyone with a camera on their hands.

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Sarda himself tells an anecdote. He was sent to Puerto Ordaz to cover the boat accident that caused the death of 36 teachers in 1964 at La Llovizna Park. He and the writer that was with him, found a man that had taken pictures of the accident and he agreed to give them the film. One of the photographs showing the picture of a teacher holding on to a tree root with the water up to his chest was on the front page of the newspaper El Nacional the next morning. So, perhaps the graphic reporter is much more of a photographer than a journalist. We shall say that he is a specialized photographer but not a limited photographer since working in photo journalism does not mean you can not do other kind of photography, on the other hand he is a limited journalist since, at least in Venezuela, his journalistic work is limited to taking photographs.

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