

Photojournalists vs. The Camera Enabled Public: Does Anyone Win?

by

Aaron Fahrman

Copyright Aaron Fahrman, 2008

Introduction

American society has entered a new era of photojournalism. New technologies have changed the delivery of information such that old-world photojournalism is vanishing as an open-source workforce emerges that some call “citizen journalists.” The term “citizen journalist” implies the existence of professional training on the part of the citizen in photojournalism, journalism, or even photography—something that is for the most part not true. In this paper, they will be referred to as the camera-enabled public, or more broadly, the technology-enabled public.

This paper is not designed to discourage the public from camera usage and citizen coverage of events but rather to convey the price for the news consumer of legacy media reliance on the camera-enabled public instead of the professional photojournalist. I will cover on a limited scale what constitutes a professional while addressing the capability and reliability of information provided by “citizen journalists.” It will provide views of the consequences of a disturbing trend of the disintermediation of professional photojournalists by the technology-enabled public and even reporters without photography training who have taken-up the camera.

In the past, professional photographers were among the few who carried cameras with them throughout the normal course of their day. They could shoot, process, print and submit images to their editor in a timely manner. Darkroom work, technical skill, equipment knowledge, and film knowledge were necessary parts of the job which, among many other skills, qualified the photographer as unique in professional standing among the public’s perception. The trusted news organizations they represented created access opportunities to news-making events. They were further set apart by their experience and motivated devotion to creating excellent images without distraction from their chosen profession. The public had a trusted

advocate in the field producing newsworthy content with integrity. Even with the advent of Photoshop, the tools have changed, but the core of image making remains the same. The ubiquity of pocketable high-quality advanced digital cameras created false confidence among amateurs in their ability to provide professional journalist-quality imagery, primarily due to instant image feedback of the LCD screen.

Today, where the technology-enabled public carry cell phones, personal digital assistants or pocket-sized cameras, most everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the coverage of world events by being in the right—or wrong place at the right time. Crowd-sourcing is the new buzzword which in journalism refers to using the resources of the crowd to extract images of an event by image-mining photo sharing sites and photo brokerages. But how can coverage be averaged when there is no crowd? Photo brokerage sources and photography posting sites further remove the information provider source from the editor's control, meaning that images provided by the public don't follow any ethical guidelines and may suffer dramatic alteration by a camera-enabled citizen with or even without an agenda. Photographic predispositions toward an agenda can be expressed in what one covers as well as what one didn't cover. If an person representing an ethnic or social minority was being assaulted by a majority group, and a white-supremacist is the only camera-enabled citizen on the scene, he may choose to post imagery that doesn't depict the assault event, but instead may show the victim portrayed as an instigator. The editor of a news organization which unknowingly chooses to publish this image for coverage of the event will be publishing in essence white supremacist propaganda—not the news or any semblance of responsible reportage (Quart 2).

With the public providing coverage, is it possible and is it within the public's best interests, if professional photographers are replaced by the camera-enabled public? Or is the

citizenry, when it comes to news coverage en masse, the monkeys at the typewriter randomly striking keys, hoping for happy accidents. One might argue that the camera-enabled public are acting somewhere in between, a valuable resource, but not a reliable source for responsible news gathering unless a broad sampling of images in combination with professionally crafted photojournalistic images are incorporated to tell the entirety of the story. The disintermediation, however of the photojournalist and other specializations within photography is actually happening at an alarming rate. The problem is, if the professionals can no longer earn a living from their profession, they will move on to better opportunities and the news will suffer inconsistency, poor quality, and declining integrity.

“In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.” (Susan Sontag 3)

Sontag implies with her words, a level of responsibility tied into the camera-enabled public’s new freedom. Is the public skilled in Sontag’s ethics of seeing, or for that matter, any ethics of seeing? Can the public provide the quality news coverage and accountability necessary to communicate responsibly with their peers? Does the camera-enabled public care that much about ethics? One can infer that they have neither the motivation nor the accountability to care about ethics since they are held accountable by no-one and are motivated by forces different than that of the professional journalist.

Professional Ethics in Photography

An example of ethics in photography by a non-journalist was given in a recent program played on NPR’s syndicated show On The Media called “Snap Judgments”(Garfield and

Gladstone). This news program was seeded by the controversial Jill Greenberg photograph in which she made extra images of John McCain beyond her assignment for “The Atlantic.” These additional images portrayed him harshly under-lit; akin to when one tells a ghost story with a flashlight pointed toward one’s chin. Portrait photographers are one of many sub-specializations of photography, each with their own guidelines and ethical considerations. Several portrait photographers were interviewed and indicated that they are trying to reveal the real person, rather than restate the subject’s public persona. Greenberg’s photo was more self-serving, based on her personal views of McCain and was completed outside that which she submitted to “The Atlantic.” The radio program, while it missed the fact that portrait photographers are not journalists and don’t have the same ethics training, revealed the power of the photograph, the responsibility of the photographer, and the malleability of truth at the hands of the photographer. It showed how important and tricky ethics in photography can be—and that professionals themselves sometimes blur the lines. It also demonstrates that different ethical standards apply for each sub-specialization of the photography profession. This leads one to question how responsibly the camera-enabled public can work within a journalistic structure that the peripheries of journalistic professionals have difficulty navigating. Greenberg knew what she was doing—she knew how to make McCain visually into a maleficent being, and chose to make that photo whether ethical or not. What does that mean for the camera-enabled public or citizen journalist who may do such a thing by misunderstanding the medium's power to distort reality—by capturing a moment that any mainstream professional journalist would not publish for its lacking ethical responsibility, or respect of the subject’s privacy in approximating the truth of a situation? What of the readers who approach a trusted news source to find information only to get an accidental or intentional distortion instead of a professionally conceived interpretation of

the news? Who better to make these interpretations than those who know the rules and break them consciously at risk of their reputation and standing, or those who don't know the rules in the first place and may not place their values in check when covering events? Using the photographs of an amateur is akin to putting a pilot with no navigation training in the cockpit of a fully booked commercial airline. The passengers may get to some destination, but chances are greater that you are going to have to correct mistakes and may have a major legal problem on your hands.

Ethics in any profession is a grey area. One often has to rely on what feels right based on introspection and experience to determine the ethical considerations of a photograph. Classically-trained professionals have made a considerable time investment in the study and contemplation of ethics. The professional photographer understands the many complex theories and ethical considerations surrounding photography and incorporates them into their work on an almost subconscious level. Photojournalism is the specialization within the photography profession that has considered ethics most strongly due to the public's expectation of truth-telling. If one is formally trained at a university level in photojournalism or as a fine-arts photographer, ethics are discussed as a part of that training. Ethics are not discussed so much as to find a definitive answer, but to perceive the questions that arise so one can make the best informed decision when formulating their photographic communication.

Public Perception in Regard to Photography and Photographers

Professional journalistic, commercial, and artistic photographers have perceptually suffered from photography's popularity with the public. The ubiquity of camera technology and a publicly-marketed perceptions of the ease in which a photograph is made has created limited

profitability for the artist that uses the technology for their profession and their art. Susan Sontag says it best, “ *Manufacturers reassure their customers that taking pictures demands no skill or expert knowledge, that the machine is all-knowing, and responds to the slightest pressure of will.*” (Susan Sontag 14) Photographers earning their living within the profession haven’t been vocal enough about the differences between what they do and what the general public does, possibly because they have rarely had to defend their trade, but the net effect has been to reinforce the camera manufacturer’s claims that anyone can make successful photographs, and now feel falsely empowered by the crutch of technology.

Social responsibility and the Camera-Enabled Public

If everyone at a newsworthy scene is making photographs, then who can step in to help someone in need? (Susan Sontag 12) Will the desire of many to get the defining image result in a death or a tragedy where one could have been prevented had they not been in competition for potential social or monetary gain from the sale of an image? The professional photojournalist is a trained observer who has pre-considered these ethics, made similar choices in the past, and is one person instead of many in the face of a difficult situation. The camera-enabled citizen on the other hand is still a citizen.

Consistency of Coverage and the Camera-enabled Public

Citizen documentation of events is at best inconsistent unless there is a huge sampling of images from which to choose. Many citizens may not be in the frame of mind to record an event at the moment it is taking place for reasons of personal safety or state of shock. In the instance of the 2005 bus and subway bombings in London, some of the amateur images that came from

that tragedy were of low quality and from a cellular telephones, but were nevertheless important images because they showed the involved citizens perception of the experience. The amateur video probably even reinforced the impact of the tragedy by the very fact that it was amateur video. The camera-enabled citizen provided a valuable service in this instance by necessity and the rawness of the truth it portrayed. But did these people also impede the safe exit from the train by their inattention to getting out of the situation without distraction? Citizen coverage may have provided a valuable service to the public in their images since often in this type of event, it takes the professional's time to reach the scene, but one wonders whether the camera-enabled public should be focused on recording events instead of exiting the situation with all senses focused on safety.

An additional shortcoming of relying on the camera-enabled public for news coverage is that they place law enforcement and public safety officials in the position of judging journalist qualifications as was seen at the 2008 Republican National Convention in Minneapolis. The St. Paul Police chose not to judge qualifications, and in a controversial move, arrest everyone in the vicinity of the protest's front lines including credentialed journalists covering the event (Winslow 31-43).

Is it better to have several trained journalists working calmly within a scene or to have hordes of camera-enabled citizens converging to make images with the potential to create additional problems? What if a photo-blogger covers a fatal accident scene, photographs and posts the recognizable body of a person within it? What if an amateur photographer/blogger destroys evidence or arranges a scene to make news with the intent to draw more readers to their blog?

The photosphere, blogosphere, and its constituents are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Caveat emptor is the warning to be heeded when seeking information from this largely untrained group of self-described citizen journalists. Citizens have the right, and should have the right, to speak their mind and post content on the internet. The way to help create better journalistic coverage is to aid the technology-enabled public by actively educating them. This is an enormous task, but one that may become necessary and important to responsible amateur coverage. This would also require the unlikely universal motivation of the camera-carrying public to undertake such education en masse. One potential solution, although one can see the innumerable problems it would create, might be trained photographer aggregators—professional photographers who visit a scene, make images, aggregate, edit and piece together the public-supplied imagery to create a cohesive story. This is what a professional photojournalist would do when covering a story, with the added dimension of securing images from the camera-enabled public to fill out the story with imagery the professional could not get. In this scenario, the image professional acts as an editor, choosing images on-scene that match the ethical and journalistic responsibilities of newsgathering. The photos would appear incongruous, due to the pot-luck method of talent assemblage.

Editorial Use of Amateur Images

Editors, under increasing pressure to cut corners, are willing to accept images of lower quality for their publications. The cost-saving benefit of farming the camera-enabled public for free or low cost images is understandably appealing (Quart). The camera-enabled public requires no long-term contracts, no health insurance, no liability insurance, and may not even require payment for their services—to their own and to the professional photographer's

detriment. The camera-enabled public provides their own equipment, works on the scene at their own risk (and potentially others), and often have can have first-hand knowledge of the event.

The news media organizations are consistently trying to maximize profits for shareholders (Laforet). As a tradeoff, they have cut integrity, quality and reliability. The byproduct of this tradeoff is that they provide an increasingly inferior product, which reduces revenues, and subsequently requires more cost cutting. This is a death-spiral and suggests what happens when money drives journalistic content and quality decisions. There used to be an ethical divide between the business side of news and the reporters and photographers. This divide has been eroded by threats of layoffs, which in a death-spiral are inevitable anyway.

Microstock and Journalism Brokers

The advent of Microstock means one can sell marginal images to low-quality-need-level photography consumers at bargain prices and be published without being a professional. The income for the majority of contributors is not enough to maintain a livelihood, but it has created a huge negative income shift (Zalcman) for professional photographers who place value on their work. In the journalism world, the parallel to Microstock is the eruption of photo brokerage houses that sell citizen-made imagery to legacy media, or the highest bidder. These brokers allow citizens to upload images to the web from their cell phones or whatever imaging equipment they are carrying, after which the broker, will attempt to make its sale to legacy media.

The creation of these photo and video brokers means a significant change in the way in which journalistic images make it to the market. The ubiquity of technology for the coverage of events by the masses is an important transformational process in the reporting of news. A lot of

footage of the World Trade Center on 9/11 that news agencies used was made by amateur photographers and videographers, but the iconic images of the event were made by the professionals. New York had an amazing pool of professional photographers within minutes of the Ground Zero. The amateurs provided images as involved citizens which are no less important, but the images served different purposes. The professional images told a broader, more consistent narrative story, and the citizens provide the “at-the-moment” experience.

Public Professionalization and Existing Professionals

Eventually with practice and experience, there is limited, gradual, self-determined, professionalization that occurs among the public users of technology. It is the entry point of the path that those who have studied photography for decades have achieved. Those among us who grew up in the world of the typewriter didn't suddenly become professional writers when the word processor was created. There was a long period of professionalization that occurred where we benefited from the automated spelling and grammar checkers, but we did not suddenly have a glut of Shakespeare-worthy writers roaming around just because the technology created them. Some writers may have developed their talent more quickly aided by the advances in technology, but the learning and talent development was not replaced by the technology alone. Access does create a democracy of communication, but not a democracy of clarity or talent in that communication. Talent either exists or it is created with hard work.

On a substantive level, an amateur is an amateur because even though they can have an occasional successful photograph, they often can't consistently constitute that quality of image. Digital cameras have accelerated this learning curve due to semi-instant results, but as discussed previously, professionalization takes years of consistent dedication. Professionals have taken

advantage of digital technology to advance their work at a greater pace than one could do with film, but the amount of work to get to this point is the same no matter what technology is available. An amateur on the street is not going to see things with the same clarity of vision as someone with two decades of near daily photo story or project development. A photographer's style takes years of work to develop and is as individual and unique as the photographer using the camera. Consistency is even more important for the coverage of historical events since the event will only happen once. One may have access to purchase several thousand amateur images from a well attended event such as a campaign rally, but when it comes to reliable storytelling about an important event, the professional will have the most interesting, consistent and stylistically cohesive grouping of images. A group of images that are consistently well-crafted with the same stylistic tone, aid in continuity and narrative of a story. The archives of history will be woefully underserved if they are populated solely with amateur and beginner images.

Conclusion

Are photographers likely to be disintermediated? Is the solution for photographers to lower the playing field, compete with the general public for work and go for volume of brokerage sales to legacy media or Microstock instead of individual sales of an image under contract? Will photographers be forced to compete with the camera-enabled public for much less money—and would they continue photography as a livelihood if this were the case? Is the only remaining market for photographers going to be weddings (Laforet) and other historically-based social events?

The technology-enabled public does benefit from the democratization of voice. Everyone benefits from increased access and the increased transparency provided, but the loss of the

professional journalist could occur—and it's not within the public's best interest. There still remains a network hierarchy as defined by the internet using public. There are odd things that find fame on the internet, but these Warhol-esque acts of fame are the culmination of stranger than strange circumstances and the odd action of viral internet popularity. The wash of the bizarre tends to overwhelm the rational voice on the internet. The technology-enabled public is an important part of the news coverage mix, but they shouldn't become the replacement for the trained photojournalist or reporter. They will become the near sole news source, however, if the legacy media doesn't backpedal to a time when editorial and advertising don't cross paths, and investors demand quality of product over short-term investor gain. Professionals need to be able to earn a living, otherwise they will leave for better paying occupations.

The digital revolution has provided the public with an ability to contribute important images, but the public may not be self-regulating when approaching an event if money or fame is in the front of their mind. If the professional photojournalists are removed from the landscape, a consistent, reliable quality of storytelling images that convey a true sense of historical events will be lost.

The future holds the potential for a strange caste system to develop in response to the technology-enabled public. The better informed in the citizenry are and will be those willing to pay real money for reliable, quality news. If one wants information free, but unfiltered, unrefined, and advertising/advertorial-laden, then publicly sourced news such as blogs will be available, but one needs to be more skeptical of the information and the manner in which photographs represent the story of the event. Most who can afford the subscriptions, will also tap free resources to get a more complete picture of the daily happenings since the news professionals can't cover nearly as much as the masses. Journalists and photojournalists will

still exist to a smaller degree, but they will serve a more elite group of news consumers willing to pay for quality and will probably be assigned to cover only the major events for which coverage is cost effective.

The expansion of the camera-enabled public as citizen journalist is well underway, however, we are at the beginning of a long and possibly painful experience as free news coverage loses quality and becomes fragmented, biased, and untrustworthy. The future may include city streets filled with amateur commentators, spilling their opinions onto the web about everything and anything. Public journalism will reach a crescendo when it is discovered that the need to be heard, seen, and published can backfire and become a turbulent force in people's lives. The freedom of expression frenzy may be relinquished for the quiet and peace of moderated personal anonymity. Many of the talented photojournalists will have masters and doctoral degrees, while others will have left the profession for more lucrative employment in wedding and advertising photography. By the time the public realizes what they have lost, it will take years to cultivate the next generation of pre-digital-revolution quality photojournalists.

Works Cited

- "Snap Judgments." On the Media from Npr. Hosts Bob Garfield and Brook Gladstone. National Public Radio. 28 Nov. 2008
- Quart, Alissa. "Flickring Out: What Will Become of Photojournalism in an Age of Bytes and Amateurs." Columbia Journalism Review. Essay. July 2008. Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. 17 Nov. 2008 <http://www.cjr.org/essay/flickring_out_1.php?page=all&print=true>
- Laforet, Vincent. "The Cloud Is Falling." Sports Shooter. Sports Shooter, The Online Resource for Sports Photography. 1 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.sportshooter.com/news/2014>>
- Quart, Alissa. "Flickring Out: What Will Become of Photojournalism in an Age of Bytes and Amateurs." Columbia Journalism Review. Essay. July 2008. Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. 17 Nov. 2008 <http://www.cjr.org/essay/flickring_out_1.php?page=all&print=true>.
- Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977
- "Snap Judgments." On the Media from NPR. Hosts Bob Garfield and Brook Gladstone. National Public Radio. 28 Nov. 2008.
- Winslow, Donald R. "You Are All Under Arrest: Summer Sizzled in St. Paul At the Rnc." News Photographer 8 Oct. 2008: 31-43.
- Zalcman, Daniella. "Stock Waves: Citizen Photo Journalists Are Changing the Rules." Wired. 9 July 2007. Wired. 17 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.wired.com/print/techbiz/media/news/2007/07/stockwaves>>.

