

Photojournalism and the Internet:  
Competition, Collaboration, Convergence  
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Ever since it became practical to print photographs on newsprint, photography has been an integral part of news media. Rhetoric can be slanted, quotations can be misrepresented, but (ostensibly) photographs were objective and reliable. At the same time, photojournalism (and photography as a whole) was solely the province of elite professionals, since most citizens did not have the equipment to take pictures--or, if they did, they had no means of disseminating them. Recent advances in technology, in particular the popularization of the World Wide Web, have challenged this authority from both sides. Free and simple-to-maintain blog software has allowed anyone who cares to be heard by the world, amplify individuals' criticisms of foibles of the mainstream media. At the same time, citizen journalism of a variety of flavors has proliferated as ordinary people become accustomed to taking and uploading images of events that they witness. For the most part, mainstream media outlets seem to have adjusted to these trends, but what do they mean for the practice of photojournalism? While photojournalism online may have some troubling consequences for ethics and privacy, overall it appears that the Internet's effect on photojournalism will improve the practice if not the profession.

**Photographic authority before the Internet**

Because photographs are a mechanical reproduction, they have traditionally been accorded much more authority than other types of images such as drawings or paintings. According to an 1844 ad for the first book on photography, photographs "contain nothing but the genuine touches of Nature's pencil" (Ritchin 1). A more modern proverb states that "the camera never lies." Of course, this has never really been the case. Photographers choose when and where to take a picture; they decide how to crop it; they choose what lenses and lighting effects to use. Perhaps most importantly, they (or their editors) write the caption, fixing the meaning of a photograph that might otherwise be open to interpretation. Nevertheless, photographs were seen as more objective than purely human-mediated art, so they were

avored by news organizations.

The increasing capability and use of photo manipulation software have decreased the authority of photojournalism in the public eye. The first publicly-acknowledged manipulation was the repositioning of one of the pyramids on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1982. The editor defended the photo modification as a “retroactive repositioning of the photographer,” but the act was nevertheless very controversial among the photojournalist community (Ritchin 15). Among the general public, *Time*’s treatment of O.J. Simpson’s mug shot in 1994 was one of the most well-known and contentious manipulations of a photograph. *Time* editors made the picture “darker and out of focus,” bringing to mind “the stereotype of the darker, more sinister African-American as criminal” (Ritchin xiii). Given the already racially-tinged nature of the case, for many onlookers this action confirmed that Simpson’s arrest was the result of racism. As numerous incidents over time have show the difference cropping, manipulating, or otherwise enhancing photographs can make in how they are interpreted, the public no longer sees the authority of the photograph as inviolate.

### **The World Wide Watchdog**

The growth of the Internet has contributed to public skepticism about photojournalism. Numerous online communities, populated by thousands of professionals and amateurs, have sprung up around photoshopping, including Fark.com, Worth1000, Something Awful, and many others. The contests that these communities sponsor, which reward realistic (and surrealistic) photo modifications, have increased public awareness of the power of Photoshop and the unreliability of images.

This skepticism has also found an outlet in the blogosphere, as Internet denizens critique inaccuracies in the mainstream media and out suspect photographs as fakes. One of the most infamous instances of this was the “Burning Building” photograph scandal during the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon conflict. Reuters circulated a photo of Beirut showing thick smoke billowing from “burning buildings destroyed during an overnight Israeli air raid,” according to the caption (Blumer). The problem? The smoke showed a pattern that clearly showed that it had been modified--sloppily--with Photoshop’s

“clone” tool. Some bloggers also pointed out inconsistencies in the arrangement of the buildings on the ground with other Beirut photographs, suggesting that they also had been doctored. After this controversy billowed through the Internet, Reuters issued a “Picture Kill” and took the photograph down. However, the “Burning Building” photograph remained a hot topic as bloggers wondered why such an obviously doctored picture was able to get past the Reuters editors. Was it incompetence? Deadline pressure? Or a sign of the purported left-wing, anti-Israel bias of the media? From an outsider’s perspective, there was no way to tell--short of one’s personal political ideology. Neither conclusion makes mainstream photojournalism look particularly appealing, however.

The long-term effect of the presence of the Internet on the mainstream media’s credibility is unclear. By giving a pulpit to anti-media commentators, it is quite likely to further increase the public’s skepticism. It is all but certain that there will be future cases of photojournalists faking photos and other indiscretions, and each one takes the media’s credibility down a notch. However, one might hope that news outlets, aware that the blogosphere is watching, may tighten up their quality controls so that their photographic work becomes more accurate than before the Internet became popular. While reducing the number of actual photo doctored incidents might not have much effect on audiences’ perception of media bias, it would still be a positive result.

### **Grassroots photojournalism**

The Internet has also facilitated the distribution of ordinary citizens’ photography, creating the possibility that their work may soon compete with traditional media outlets’ photo essays. A myriad of Internet companies offer services allowing users to upload photographs and show them to the public. One of the most popular photo hosting services, Flickr, has an online community-type feature called “pooling” which makes it easy for different users to group photos related to a particular interest or element. This has been used to bring together tens, even hundreds of different users’ photos of events

such as Hurricane Katrina's aftermath<sup>1</sup> or the Day Without an Immigrant protests<sup>2</sup>. This decentralized model allows amateurs to create an exhaustive record of an important event, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, with little effort required from any one user.

Not all amateur photojournalism is this decentralized, of course. The convergence of blogs and digital photography has allowed almost anyone to create and publish his or her own photo essays. Most subjects are personal in nature, such as documentation of a birthday party or family vacation. (One might question calling these "photo essays," but that says more about the topicality restrictions of traditional journalism than about what a photo essay can or cannot be.) However, many photography enthusiasts choose to publish on broader topics with important social implications. One example is Xeni Jardin's blog (<http://www.xeni.net/trek>) which documents culture and politics in Guatemala and the Himalayas. At the far end of the amateur photojournalist centralization scale are institutions such as Indymedia, which is a collaborative, left-wing citizen journalism project contributed to by socially-minded individuals worldwide. Founded to cover WTO protests, Indymedia relies on citizen journalists for its content. Anyone can upload photographs and other media to the Indymedia gallery, along with articles to accompany them, where they are visible to anyone; editors determine which photographs and articles appear on the Indymedia main page. Although decidedly non-mainstream and anti-corporate, Indymedia is respected by many on the left wing, especially for its international and protest movement coverage.

### **From the masses to the mainstream**

In many cases, the mainstream media has also encouraged its audience's participation in photojournalism. This phenomenon became apparent during the July 7 bombings in London when cameraphones "provided some of the most intense and immediate imagery from the scenes" (Dunleavy). Since professional photojournalists had little to no access to the blast sites afterward as security officials fenced them off, many news outlets relied instead on amateurs' images to illustrate news about the

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.flickr.com/groups/45871688@N00/pool/>>.

<sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.flickr.com/groups/daywithoutimmigrants/pool/>>.

attacks. Furthermore, since some of the victims also had cameraphones, they were able to document the moments after the bombing--images a professional photojournalist would never have been able to capture. Some of the bombing witnesses had embraced alternative copyright licensing schemes that gave them an additional advantage over professional photographers: "Stacey's picture was widely distributed, including onto the front pages of many newspapers, in part because he put it out under a Creative Commons license allowing anyone else the right to use it in any way provided they attribute the picture to its creator" (Gilmor). Typically, newspapers cannot use a photograph unless they get explicit permission from the copyright owner, which takes time and money. Because many Internet denizens have an interest in the free culture movement and use Creative Commons licensing, however, they can preemptively state specifically how they want their photographs used and thus quicken the dissemination of their work. All of these factors led to enthusiastic collaboration of mainstream news outlets and cameraphone-wielding citizens in the hours and days after the London bombings.

Since the bombings, increasingly media outlets have explicitly called for viewers to send in photographs or other contributions to stories, especially for breaking news. On the BBC's website, many news articles have a notice at the bottom: "Are you in the area? Have you seen anything? If you have any information you would like to share with the BBC you can do so using the form below..."<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Yahoo has created "You Witness News" to handle user uploads related to sports and entertainment and Reuters is working on a "service devoted entirely to user-submitted photographs and video" which would pay users whose work was distributed to Reuters' clients (Hansell). It is clear that the London bombings will not be the last major event to be covered via cameraphone.

The mass conversion of ordinary citizens into photojournalists, while potentially democratizing, could have some negative consequences. Amateur photographs pose the same credibility hazards as professional photojournalist work; news outlets will have to find ways to accurately determine whether or not a submitted image has been doctored. In addition, amateurs do not share professional

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<sup>1</sup> Example: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/southern\\_counties/6204452.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/southern_counties/6204452.stm)>

photojournalists' code of ethics. While the BBC includes with its request for submissions an admonishment to readers not to "endanger yourself or others, take any unnecessary risks or infringe any laws,"<sup>1</sup> a citizen with a cameraphone is still prone to unthinkingly engage in ethically questionable practices as they document the scene around them. This was seen in the citizen response to the July 7 bombings, when some passerby "vied to try and take pictures of the worst victims" with their cameraphones:

Jardin compared [their] behavior to the paparazzi that chased Princess Diana before her fatal car crash and noted that the ethical issues raised then are now applicable beyond just professional photographers.

"These are ethical issues that we once thought only applied to a certain class of people who had adopted the role of news as a profession," Jardin said. "Now that more of us have the ability to capture and disseminate evidence or documentation of history as a matter of course ... those ethical issues become considerations for all of us." (Glaser)

Unlike the professional paparazzi, there is no financial incentive for citizen journalists to produce gruesome or scandalous content. Nevertheless, like rubberneckers on the highway, it is easy for people to let morbid curiosity get the better of them. Perhaps an unwritten "Golden Rule" regarding appropriate content will develop as more and more amateur ethical breaches become publicized. However, changing societal mores is a much slower process than editing a news organizations' ethics protocol.

The sheer ubiquity of potential photographers, while good for documenting news anywhere as it happens, also poses a general privacy threat. The same technology that allows people to identify criminals or document abuses of authority can be turned on ordinary citizens.

Kids snap cellphone pictures at parties and instantly put them on the Web; fans who nab photos of unsuspecting celebrities share them on celebrity-watch sites. The guy in the car next to you is leaning out of his window, taking a video that he later uploads to a video site where it could be seen by dozens or hundreds of people — maybe even millions.  
(Kornblum)

Amateur photographs of individuals in compromising situations, if released to the Internet and popularized, may do significant harm to their targets. An example is the case of a woman in South Korea

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

now known as “Dog Poop Girl.” Her dog defecated in a subway car and despite another passenger’s offer of a tissue, she refused to clean it up (Wikipedia). This would have been an unextraordinary if antisocial event except that one of the passengers took a picture of the girl on his cameraphone and uploaded it to the Internet. The picture became a sensation in South Korea: “within days, her identity and her past were revealed. Requests for information about her parents and relatives started popping up and people started to recognize her by the dog and the bag she was carrying” (Krim). Eventually the woman was so stigmatized that she withdrew from university. Perhaps most significantly, while most commentators on the incident thought that digging up “Dog Poop Girl”’s personal information was inappropriate, few criticized the act of taking and uploading the photograph itself. It seems that shaming people for bad behavior is an acceptable use of the Internet--in this case it just went too far.

Incidents like these are likely to become more common. Half of the cell phones sold worldwide in 2006 were cameraphones, and analysts predict that cameraphones will make up 95% of the US cell phone market within four years (Corner). This trend could have a devastating effect on those who adhere to a traditional conception of privacy.

Just the knowledge that cameras are everywhere...changes behavior... "It forms an environment in which the assumption that there's a camera around is more and more part of your daily awareness. This assumption you're being watched internalizes surveillance."  
The result: super-self-consciousness. (Kornblum)

Yet it seems that there is a generation gap in how people have been responding to the increasing omnipresence of cameras. While older people are more likely to cover their faces or respond negatively when a camera is present, young people typically “wave, (flash) a peace sign, stick out their tongue or just yell 'Hey’” (Kornblum). Many experts attribute young people’s comfort with being photographed to their adolescent desire for attention and self-expression. However, since for people this age ubiquitous cameraphones and security cameras are the norm, it is unclear whether they will develop the same kind of privacy concerns as previous generations when they grow older. If not, the proliferation of amateur photographers will not have such a self-conscious, chilling effect; people will still do embarrassing

things and just care less who is watching.

## **Conclusion**

Generally speaking the public has the upper hand in getting pictures of news events, particularly ones that are fast-breaking or in restricted locations, because photojournalists simply can't be everywhere all the time. At the same time, the affordability of high quality digital cameras and web publishing has made it easier for aspiring photobloggers to produce artistic, narrative-style photo essays as well. So what is left for a professional photojournalist to do?

First, it should be noted that the emergence of the Internet and technological innovations has benefited professional photojournalists, too. Digital photography allows, for example, "a newspaper photographer to stay until the end of a baseball game...since there is no need to develop film" and to take plenty of pictures without "the limitation of film roll length" (Ritchin 57, Wikipedia). Whether through a satellite link, cell phone, or laptop, photojournalists can use the Internet to "send a high-quality image in minutes, even seconds after an event occurs" while on the go, making it easier to meet deadlines (Wikipedia). Furthermore, the line between photoblogger and photojournalist is rather blurry. Many photojournalists, especially freelancers, have embraced the Internet as a place to promote themselves and post the photographs that didn't make it into newspapers. One example is Martin Fuchs' "Journal of a Photographer" (<http://www.journalofaphotographer.com/>). He describes the site as "a resource for photographers," "[a] tutorial...on my workflow," and "[his] personal endeavor...to write about [his] own experiences." The site discusses the personal and business sides of working in photojournalism, with galleries of the photographer's work for self-promotion and sharing with the world. This seems to have worked; aside of any professional benefit to his online presence, soon after starting the site, he got an equipment sponsorship from Canon Europe. He has subsequently received sponsorships from Lexar, ColorVision, and Digital Railroad. Clearly, the tools and users of the Internet are not strictly anti-photojournalist--they can be used to support traditional, professional

photojournalism.

Second, it should be accepted that odds are, in the current social and economic environment most professional photojournalism is likely to go the way of the dodo. Newspapers and other news organizations are under a lot of budget pressure and already are cutting back staff. As they build ties with online communities and realize the wealth of photographic content available, staff photojournalists will probably be cut, too.

Remember, there was once a fairly healthy community of portrait painters. When photography came along, a lot of them had to find other work; or at least their ranks were not refilled when they retired. Professional portrait photographers, similarly, are less in demand today than a generation ago. But portraits have survived — and thrived. (Gillmor)

What individual photojournalists will have to do, in order to compete with amateurs, is specialize and focus on quality. “Great feature photography is a special skill that amateurs won’t match anytime soon”-no matter how many megapixels your cameraphone has, it can’t tell you how to frame a shot or tell a story (Gillmor). As news organizations start paying citizen photographers for their photo submissions, the difference between a professional freelancer and an amateur photobug will all but disappear. If a skilled freelance photojournalist can effectively compete nowadays, one can expect that the cream of the photojournalism crop will be likely to remain so even as news outlets embrace the photography of the masses.

On balance, the Internet and related technological innovations seem a positive development for photojournalism. The problem of photoshopping will still exist, just as it does now, but between the possible technological solution sought by news agencies to detect image manipulation and the critical thinking offered by the blogosphere and other online communities, the deceptive power of such “faux-tographs” will hopefully be minimized. What photojournalism on the Internet means is a greater depth of material taken from many different points of view for easily-accessible events, and a few photographs of extraordinary circumstances when before there could be none. It means changing public expectations of privacy--though whether this is good or bad depends on one’s age and perspective, the trend seems

inevitable. And finally it means a democratization of news production and consumption. The click of anyone's cameraphone could be "the photograph heard around the world."

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