

# **The Future of Photojournalism**

## **Qualitative Research Paper**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative research project explores perceptions on the future of photojournalism. Through a series of one-on-one interviews, 12 current photojournalists from traditional and new media, print and internet news organizations in the United States will be interviewed about their profession - now and in the future. The study will also include 12 interviews with students enrolled in several schools or programs of photojournalism across the country. Results will describe general and specific concerns and realities from working professionals and compare and contrast with the expectations, concerns and hopes expressed by photojournalist students. We expect to present results, insights, similarities, and contrasts between the two groups and suggest general trends in the field. This research is expected to be conducted in the summer and Fall of 2016.

## Introduction

**"Photojournalism is Dead!"** So writes Neil Burgess in a 2010 article entitled "For God's sake, somebody call it!" Neil, who runs his own picture agency, NB Pictures has spent more than 25 years in photojournalism (Burgess, 2010).

**"Photojournalism is a fool's game"**, says legendary veteran photojournalist Tim Page of more than 40 years (Zillman, 2015). And that's his reason so many students continue to pursue careers in the increasingly contracting medium. "I tell them it's a fool's game and most won't make it."

**"Photojournalism as a trade died the minute Nikon brought out the first useable digital SLR."** Decades spent as a photojournalist, Mark Doyle (2013) writes on the future of photojournalism. "As soon as that happened, photojournalism as full time payed employment died too. It's been dying a slow death ever since."

**"When everybody is a photographer nobody can be a professional photographer,"** Roberto Koch (2015) declares on the future of photojournalism. He has 40 years in the profession and is founder of the photo agency Contrasto. "They are facing the toughest difficulties ever, since it seems that the market does not have a place for professional photojournalism."

While such declarations of death and demise have regularly proved premature, photojournalists, photographers and photography face abundant challenges in our day. But these

pessimistic thoughts and concerns from working photojournalists are not small in number. The World Press Photo organization's recent study on "The State of News Photography" (Hadland, 2016) confirms significant agreement.

## **Significance of this Study**

The purpose of this study, like others previous to it, is to take yet another current and future pulse of the profession from those in it. And although there is significant value in studying and hearing concerns about any profession's prospects from the individuals on the front lines, unique to this proposed research is the value found in measuring the current thoughts, concerns and realities of the profession as expressed by both the working professionals and the rising future professionals - the students. Herein lies the possibility that there are variances in those perspectives.

Little has been researched on the concerns and realities as viewed and understood by both the working professionals and soon to be professionals now in school. This is a significant topic in this age of evolving technology for young people, or anyone who is considering a career or staying in photojournalism. The goal is to give insight and understanding on the state of the profession, and offer some possibilities for its future transformation(s).

## Background

In recent years, there is a trend toward downsizing within the journalism field. This has been particularly more pronounced among photojournalists. There are many contributing factors in play. One consistent threat to photojournalism is, rather paradoxically, photography itself, and the ubiquity of everyone now having a camera as close as their phone - the idea that this abundance somehow undermines the intrinsic value of all photographs, this fear of the flood of images is one which seems to arise in almost every generation (Lippman, 1922). And while Walter Lippman's *"Public Opinion"*, still resonates with journalists today (Brennen, 2015) it is but one of numerous contributors to this downsizing.

Another factor is the explosion of amateur or citizen-produced content (both photo and video) appearing in mainstream media outlets. Terms such as convergent journalism, citizen journalism and user-generated journalism are all widely used in an attempt to define this growing phenomenon.

The participation of amateurs in the production of news has been widely noted as a growing phenomenon. The sourcing of amateur photographs is not explicitly disruptive; rather it blends with the existing processes of professional news media practice. It questions claims that the rise of the amateur would lead to fundamental changes in media and society. And exactly how has it affecting the professional culture of photojournalism? This was a major focus in Andén-Papadopoulos book *"Amateur Images and Global News"* (2011).

Other factors are many including the fact that the media industry has been going through tremendous changes for the last 30+ years. Add the tremendous cost reductions and mind-boggling technological improvements such as high speed internet, wireless capabilities, faster computer processing, and you have a society where nearly anyone can access just about anything real time from the convenience of a PC, Mac, iPhone, iPad, smartphone or tablet. Someone can likely access almost any newspaper website in the world with a few clicks on any of these devices. In such a world, the newspapers of yesterday are struggling to maintain both their relevance in the lives of their readers as well as the attention of the advertising community. And they now have to compete with one another and a host of new entrants in what could be classified more broadly as the “information business.” (Vishneski, 2013).

Mortensen (2014, 721) reports that the quality of photojournalism is affected and that professional photographers are laid off because of these trends as well as displaced work opportunities for established professional editorial photographers (Rustad, 2006)

The future of photojournalism is obviously tied to the future of journalism, journalists and newspapers. There is much literature that target their future (Divine, 2004; John, 2015; Mitchell & Matsa, 2015; Saperstein, 2014). Of course, journalism encompasses both the writing and the photographic side of news gathering and reporting and likely there will always be some form of journalism. We know the need to report facts, figures, and events will always be necessary. As Emma Daly (2014) states, “We won’t learn about the horrors in Syria, the crackdown in Russia, or the mass surveillance by the US, unless journalists can do their jobs.”

We will always need journalism to help us navigate through uncertainty – to make sense of our world, providing the news and information we need to be free and self-governing (Holdman, 2013). What we don't know is the form our notion of journalism evolves into, but it will survive.

But for this study, the focus is on photojournalists who have additional factors that complicate their future and lead to a more uncertain career path.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

As expressed in the opening statements from the introduction, one might easily assume that the profession's outlook is fairly bleak. That is certainly where one could hypothesize. Originally, I had thought to title this research "The demise of photojournalism as a profession," as the majority of preliminary literature suggested this to be the case. And though it could still show evidences in that direction, I also must also collect, analyze and interpret these finding with systematic doubt and let the data emerge, embracing the messiness (Wakefield, 2016).

I do propose this journey could ultimately lead to the profession's death as a full-time occupation. Some of these factors, drawn from the literature suggest reasons that are obvious and direct - like the bottom line economics of newsrooms (and online equivalents) today, the low wages, decreasing fulltime positions, and the devaluing of photography in general in society.

Indirectly, there are many more causes that subtly undermine the profession as a viable career choice. (Zillman, 2015) For example, additional income via photography moonlighting has taken significant hits including stock photo prices are at an all-time low; most independent photo studios are closing; images are literally stolen online; and copyright issues complicate the waters in terms of photojournalists making a decent living wage. (EPUK, 2013)

Meanwhile, photojournalist professionals take refuge behind a wall of denial that the vocation's ideological concepts of ethics, quality, and professionalism will save them and the industry (Mäenpää, 2014). But statistics and surveys show the obvious decline of such ethical behavior, disregard for quality and a lack of professional standard keeping (Donadio, 2015; Lavoie, 2010; Lester, 2015). There is also data to confirm the decrease of hiring professional photojournalists and the increased use of citizen photojournalist's images (Brennen, 2015). Implications are that anyone with a camera phone may well be the next generation of media content creators. The news participant can now also be the photo source.

## Theory

Some of the theories I think are related to this study, or which may be alluded to include 'Uses and Gratifications Theory'. As the well-known UGT focuses on "What do people do with media?" we see that the 'millennial' and 'born digital' generations are less concerned with issues of quality and professionalism, less informed or cultured on the art of storytelling or discerning between professional and non-professional images so long as it fits their needs.

Clayton M. Christensen beginning in 1995 and later in his book "The innovator's dilemma: when new technologies cause great firms to fail" (2013), described the 'Theory of Disruptive Innovation' in which an innovation that creates a new market and value network eventually disrupts an existing market and value network. More recent sources also include "significant societal impact" as an aspect of this disruptive innovation (Assink, 2006). Thus, as chemical photography is replaced by digital photography, so too are professional photojournalists being replaced by the growing tide of amateur photojournalists.

## Research Questions

As I will be conducting one-on-one interviews and phone interviews. There are several pages of questions to be noted later. But generally there are half a dozen larger overall important and larger scope questions that we are mostly concerned with.

They are:

**RQ1 - What is the future of photojournalism look like from the working professional's perspective?**

**RQ2 - What is the future of photojournalism look like from the photojournalist student's perspective?**

**RQ3 - How are these perspectives similar or dissimilar?**

**RQ4 - What can be learned from those perspectives?**

**RQ5 - What is the combined perceived future of photojournalism?**

**RQ6 - How will or could photojournalism evolve or transform?**

## Qualitative Methodology

Those comments in the opening introduction to this paper - "Photojournalism is dead", "Photojournalism is a fool's game." They are strong, unique, and impactful. They reflect the type of responses that come not from a Likert scale answer but from real conversations. I believe the research I am after requires answers that speak to the passions of the profession and its professionals rather than their levels of agreement or disagreement. There is also a need to hear, document and measure the unknowns - the words and phrases that we can't predict, neither those that would place the future in a nice, compact and conventional, generic box. I am after levels of interest and passion as well as descriptive answers that enlighten, describe and inform more than just confirm or deny preconceived responses.

I believe this satisfies the need to use the qualitative approach. We are not trying to gather numerical data or data that can be transformed into useable statistics. We are looking to use exploratory research and gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations - gathering data in the language of the informant (Minichiello, 1990). This will provide insights into the problem or help to develop ideas or hypotheses. We'd also like to uncover trends in thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem(s) the profession faces currently and as it moves forward.

## Research Design

Specifically, here's what I am attempting to do. Original qualitative research work will be conducted through a series of interviews with 12 photojournalists and 12 students of photojournalism. Initial thoughts are to contact a cross section of idealists (those who are confirmed in their conviction that photojournalists have a promising future), non-idealists (who think just the opposite - Tim Page, Eliane Laffont, Roberto Koch, among them) and many others who may lean one way or the other – Jeff Allred and Clark Gilbertson of the Deseret News. We are looking at a group of photojournalists and students from across the U.S and representative of large and small news outlets, print and online.

We'd also like to try and find some balance and variance within our sampling between males and females, old and young, variances in the number of years for the professionals but require that the students are at least a junior or senior in any photojournalism program We also want to insure there is some racially diversity but we are not going to set any quotas. We also don't want to be lacking in diversity.

For the group of students, we are looking to interview students from large and small programs of journalism/photojournalism across the country. Tentatively thinking of Boston University, Brigham Young University, Kent State, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Miami, Western Kentucky University.

Due to time restrictions and no budget, we are utilizing a small sample size of respondents. Currently, thinking of expanding the initial sample to 25 students and professionals but settle with a lesser amount (no less than 12 each) in anticipation of incomplete, complications and lack of time. We'd like to have an equal number and balance between the working professionals and the students.

Ideally, we plan on doing some travel and actually visiting the students and professionals one-on-one at their campus or place of business and record the interviews at least on audio and possibly on video. A backup plan is to do phone call interviews, also recorded. Likely, there will be a mix of both and some thought needs to go into the variances this mixed form of interview may bring to the results.

Each interview is expected to last no longer than 1 hour. Subjects will not be paid or reimbursed. IRB permissions from BYU will be investigated. Releases will be created and need to be signed even though it is not expected that personal or embarrassing content would be acquired. We do not yet know if the data will be kept anonymous yet.

Interviews will be conducted by one individual, myself. As much as possible, I hope to employ some sense of consistency. Keep to the same questions as well as the order and tone. There should be no preexisting relationship with informants. We expect to be completely neutral and objective to their answers and responses. I will obtain my subjects by directly contacting the professionals by phone and email and contact the various school programs first to gain their permission and then make email and phone connections with the students.

## Interview Questions

The interviews themselves will be crafted with questions about their experience and opinions of the current state of the profession, future impressions of where the profession is going and questions specifically targeted to the ideological concepts of ethics, professionalism, storytelling and quality - the pillars of the profession (Mäenpää, 2014).

These are still initial questions that are still being developed. They are based on trying to answer the larger research questions. This is not a complete list and will continue to change until after we perform a pilot study of a few more interviews.

Date

Name

Age

Current Title

Can you give me a brief understanding of your years and experience in photojournalism?

Why did you choose Photography?

What are your professional aspirations? What do you hope to do workwise within the profession?

How do you view the profession's future?

Jobs wise, is the profession on the increase or decline?

What observations make you inclined to think this?

(If decline) Is this a concern for you? If so or not, why?

How do you differentiate a professional from an amateur?

What are your concerns with the profession?

How do you think technology may affect your profession?

Do you use a smart phone for the capture of photos? Predominately?

Is video a part of your training, background or expertise?

Do you think this an import aspect to learn or develop as part of the profession?

Why or why not?

What is your perspective or view of that segment of the profession?

Traditionally, photographers have had to wear several hats to make a sufficient income.

(i.e. day job, weddings, stock images, freelance, video)

What is your perspective on this?

Do you expect to make enough money with a single photojournalist job?

Do you have a backup plan? Explain?

## Other Research Options

I am also looking into getting survey data from or developing a survey in conjunction with the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA). Again, the purpose is to focus in on voices from within the profession to quantify thesis assumptions.

Additional surveys and data sets exist that may be used to support the thesis. For example, the World Press Foundation also surveyed photographers who entered their 2015 photojournalist contest (Weber, 2015). The 63-question online survey was completed by 1,549 of the 5,158 entrants. About half of the respondents were from Europe, and 9.2 percent were from North America. One of the most disturbing findings was that more than half of the news photographers who replied said they sometimes staged photos — with 12 percent saying they did so at least half the time. And while all of the major wire services and newspapers in the United States forbid staging news photos, this data addresses unethical behavior in the field.

## Analyzing Results

*NOTE: Much of what follows may be too much detail of the general process and may not be specific to the uniqueness of my research. As much of this is inconsequential to research not yet conducted, it may be unnecessary for this paper but I wanted to include it as a way of expressing my knowledge of what these steps are. I have tried to predict or customized the formulaic process with information specific to my thesis but in some ways I still believe I am probably just regurgitating steps you may know quite well and could apply to any qualitative research. Being my first serious qualitative study, I can't be sure where the formulas begin and the realities take over.*

Much of the plan and formula that here follows comes from our two textbooks Qualitative Communication Research Methods (Lindlof, 2010), Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies ( Brennan, 2012), as well as Social Research Methods (Bryman, 2015) and Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing (Kvale, 2009).

The larger initial task will be to make sense of a lot of unstructured data within the interviews / recording. I have listed the following in outline form.

- First off, we will be making transcripts. There are many services like TranscribeMe on the web (which supposedly is promoted and very compatible with Nvivo), but likely I'll be doing my own transcriptions.

- Reading the Transcripts.
  - Browse through all the transcripts as a whole.
  - Make notes manually on first impressions. Marking the text by underlining, circling or highlighting with marginal notes or annotations.
  - Reread the transcripts one by one, carefully line by line and...
- Incorporate interviews and possible open-ended survey documents into Nvivo 11.
  - I currently plan on using this software in order save time analyzing and finding insights that I might miss by manually coding.
- Coding / Indexing / Themes (whether manually or with software)
  - Label (or via Nvivo, create nodes related to) relevant words, phrases, sentences or sections. Linking chunks of data (text) as representative of the same phenomena, not necessarily to count them. Looking for actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions, processes and whatever I think is relevant (Bryman, 2015).
  - Looking for relevance because it is repeated in several places, or because it surprises me or because the interviewee explicitly states that it is important, or because I have read something similar in previously published reports or articles. Lastly, it may remind me of a theory or concept.
  - Haven't yet decided on using specific theories or concepts or possibly aiming for a conceptualization of underlying patterns.
  - Overall goal - stay unbiased, honest, accurate and close to the data (transcripts) and not to hesitate to code plenty of phenomena.
  - Categorize codes by deciding which are most important and create categories by bringing several together. Do this by:

- Reread all the codes created in the previous step. Combining two or more of those I believe important, not worrying about using all the codes previously created.
- Category examples I expect to see:
  - Future trends in the profession
    - Positive
    - Negative
  - Thoughts / Impressions on amateur used photojournalism
  - Additional income sources
  - Professionalism
  - Ethics
  - Quality
  - Storytelling
  - Worries / Concerns
  - Control over employment
  - Adaptation
  - Male vs Female
  - Novice vs experienced professionals
  - Differences between amateur and professional photojournalists
  - Backup plans for their careers

This based upon knowing what questions I currently plan on asking. It is the surprises and unintended responses that will expand the categories.

- I don't expect to see categories of the same type - rather they might relate to objects, processes, differences or whatever. Trying to be more general and thinking abstractly, I want to mostly conceptualize the data.
  - Label the categories.
  - Describe the connections between them.
  - These categories and connections will become the main result / core of my study. It is the new knowledge about the photojournalist world, from the perspective of working photojournalists.
- Options include deciding if there is a hierarchy among the categories, which I suspect there will be. As I hypothesize on the future, I had already determined that there would be direct and indirect influences on the profession. Not only are these two groupings but the direct factors are more important.

## **Results / Research Findings**

Writing up the results will be done by describing the categories and how they are interconnected as well as identifying significance for the respondents. I will also express the relationship of codes to the research questions and the research literature. Voice will be neutral without interpretation. I may also attempt to do some graphs, figures or charts to summarize my results.

I had hoped to include some results here from a pilot series of interviews I have been conducting with just a couple photojournalists and photo students so far but I don't feel these few interviews are significant enough. Though they have been very helpful in tweaking the research and interview questions as well as having been eye opening in my initial fumbling's with qualitative interviews with this proposed study.

## **Conclusions / Discussion**

This is where I may write out my interpretations and discuss the results. Those interpretations may be in light of similar, previous studies published in relevant communication journals, theories or concepts from the journalism field. I may describe how my literature review has influenced the way I approached the research. This is also where I will summarize relevant personal and professional experiences, disclose findings and my hunches and describe the procedures I will use to remain “open” to unexpected information.

Finally discuss the limitations of my study in the context of the limitations of all similar studies. And should there be some ideas for future research, I can write it up here. And when it is all completed, of course the goal is to publish.

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