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Bearing witness in the digital age

Photojournalists reflect on the impact of technological and digital advancements within their profession

Maria Lundin Osvalds

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About the author: Maria Lundin Osvalds is a Swedish freelance multimedia journalist based in the UK. Most of Maria's work focuses on socio-economic issues and how different forms of journalism and storytelling function within the changing digital and visual media environment.



Preface

This paper examines the impact of technological and digital advances on photojournalism. Through a series of in-depth interviews it seeks to discover how today's changing media environment affects a photographer's technique, professional role, ethical and moral understanding, and training.

The author is Maria Lundin Osvalds, a Swedish photojournalist currently based in the UK. This report is the outcome of a research fellowship at the LSE supported by the Swedish Journalistfonden. It was edited by Professor Charlie Beckett, director of Polis, the LSE's international journalism think-tank. The views are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinion of Polis or the LSE.

Here are the key findings:

- 1** The changing media environment has a significant impact on a photographer's professional role and practice. The interviews reveal many examples of how photographers experience this impact. One is advances in photography equipment or 'gear', meaning photographers can do their work more efficiently and effectively. For example, some cameras can capture information in almost pitch-black conditions.
- 2** Digital platforms and social media channels change how and what images are published, influencing the professional workload of several of the participants and their communication with their audience.
- 3** Participants were concerned about credibility. They said that most photographers understand that an image is an interpretation of an event rather than a true and objective representation of reality. However, there is concern that the public considers images as objective representations of reality. Participants reflect on the tensions between these differing views and how this affects photojournalism. In the light of this complexity of perceptions, participants point to how important it is for them to give their own interpretation of reality. With the tools at their disposal - technology and their presence on site - they seek to "bear witness."
- 4** The relationship between the photographer and those being photographed is changing. Many participants see positive changes, such as a different power dynamic, and others mention people's concerns about having images published on digital channels.
- 5** A common thread in the interviews, albeit often implicit and interwoven in participants' reflections, relates to moral approaches regarding their professional role and the public. The complex and changing nature of society, including technological advances, suggests that photojournalists must redefine their practice. The report identifies some of the necessary themes that should be discussed during the training of photojournalists and within the industry.
- 6** Participants said that the very definition of photography is being challenged as our visual culture and communication methods develop.



1 Introduction

On March 20th, 2023 images of former US president Donald Trump being arrested were posted on Twitter. Within two days, the photos had been shared across the web and viewed over 5 million times¹.

The images were fake. They were posted on Twitter by Eliot Higgins, founder of the investigative outlet Bellingcat². They were created with the Artificial Intelligence (AI)-image software Midjourney³ as a response to Trump's announcement the previous day about his upcoming arrest. The images were created using prompts like "Donald Trump falls down while being arrested" and posted with the caption: "Making pictures of Trump getting arrested while waiting for Trump's arrest."

Several of the images posted had visible flaws, such as too many or too few limbs and fingers. But, for the not familiar, instead of clearly indicating an AI-image, the pictures could appear as just poorly photographed or a chaotic captured moment. In the following days, the images sparked a debate on the use of AI. For instance, *The Washington Post* commented that the event "makes evident the absence of corporate standards or government regulation addressing the use of AI to create and spread falsehoods."⁴ The use of AI-images is just one of many technological and digital advancements affecting visual information. What impact does the changing media environment have on photojournalism?

The role of journalism in a democracy has been widely researched⁵ as one of the most important ways for people to get information. However, as our culture becomes increasingly visual, journalism faces challenges. Technological achievements and digitalisation have made photography and visual media more obtainable. Today, almost anyone can produce and consume visual content. For example, people aged 16-24 in the United Kingdom now use the image-based social network Instagram as their primary news source⁶. Different forms of media have become essential tools to spread information but also misinformation, often fuelling social conflict.

1 Lasarte 2023.

2 Bellingcat 2023.

3 First page on Midjourney the 29th of March 2023: "Join the Midjourney community on Discord or the Web, where thousands collaborate to create new worlds, fantastic characters, and unique imagery from short text descriptions (Midjourney 2023)"

4 Nix, Naomi and Stanley-Becker 2023.

5 Cf. McNair, B., 2009.

6 Ofcom, 2022.



1.1 About the project

This research project set out to examine and discuss how digital and technological advancements impact today's photojournalism - and how it affects photojournalists in terms of their profession, ethics and education. The aim is to further the discussion on this issue. The project gives an insight into how professionals adapt, act and react to the changing media environment.

The research was carried out through semi-structured interviews conducted with photojournalists and documentary photographers in the UK during the spring of 2023. The aim was to reach individuals working in different geographical locations, freelancer and staff photographers, of varied age groups, gender and ethnic backgrounds⁷. Interviews were conducted in person and remotely with:

- Greg Martin - a photojournalist at *Devon and Cornwall Live*, based in Cornwall.⁸
- Laura El-Tantawy - a British/Egyptian documentary photographer, book maker and educator.⁹
- Simon Townsley - a photojournalist, born in New Zealand, today based in the UK currently working with the Telegraph Media Group Global Health Security Team.¹⁰
- The visual research collective Rake - photographers and multimedia artists Nancy Hurman (UK), Vera Zurbrügg (Switzerland) and Nuno Guerreiro de Sousa (Portugal).¹¹

The report is broken down into three different themes: the role of the photographer today, general (such as social media) and specific (such as AI-imagery) digital and technological changes, and the future of photojournalism. However many of the discussions in each part are linked and contribute to common insights.

7 How is a photojournalist defined within this project? World Press Photo Contest asked their contestants to specify their role: 40 percent said photojournalists, 30 percent said documentary photographers, and 24 percent said news photographers (Cambell, Hadland and Lambert 2015). In this project, participants are not only defined as photojournalist and or press photographer but also documentary photographers. Participants in this project define themselves as some of these roles, within, as the project will show, other roles such as artist and photographer. Participants, especially in the case of RAKE Collective, also have different professional identities within different projects and or assignments. The fluidity of the term used to understand photojournalism thus also reflects the professional sector. In this report, the term photojournalist is most frequently used.

8 Cornwall Live 2023.

9 Laura El-Tantawy 2023.

10 Simon Townsley 2023.

11 Rake Collective 2023. Multimedia artist Flora Thomas is also part of the collective but is not taking part in the interview.



2 The role of the photographer

2.1 Identity and profession

The interviewees come from different backgrounds and work in different fields of photography. Their views on what a photographer is, especially concerning identity and professionalism, share similarities but also differences. For instance, Greg Martin is employed at *Cornwall and Devon Live* and defines himself as a photojournalist or press photographer. Others, such as the participants from Rake Collective, have different professional roles: for example, Nancy Hurman works as a picture editor, but also as a photographer within the documentary collective. For freelancer Simon Townsley, shifting between different roles allows different approaches and types of work:

“ Photojournalists have to follow journalistic rules: who, what, when, where and why. Photojournalists are restricted in terms of their interpretation, whilst as a photographer you are not required to strive to tell a balanced story. A photographer allows you to explore the aesthetics, the storytelling. So sometimes I’m a photographer, sometimes I’m a photojournalist. ”

For Laura El-Tantawy, being a photographer is more an identity than a profession. The work provides financial security and an income. She believes all work is personal and it is most important to be authentic. But, as she says, it is also a way of understanding oneself, which in turn affects which stories to tell and how to tell them:

“ Because the decisions that we make about the people that we choose to photograph, the issues that we choose to highlight, they’re all related to our own interests, and issues that we care about and issues that we don’t care about, that we’re not really interested in exploring. ”

The participants believe that part of the role of the photographer is to bear witness. They argue that photography has for a long time been about bringing testimony to the public in order to keep them informed. Greg Martin says that there is still a great need for news or press photography as a way of showing that someone was there and witnessed what actually happened. Further, El-Tantawy points out that society is now reaching a crossroads:

“ I think with technology, we’re reaching a point where the audience now bears the responsibility of actually questioning what they’re seeing. So, it’s not about trusting the story or trusting what you see, you really have to do your own research. And you have to go on and investigate further. ”

Nancy Hurman, Vera Zurbrügg and Nuno Guerreiro de Sousa also see new possibilities with technology. Their collective Rake is a great example of how technological and digital advancements push the very definition of documentary photography. They point to how they use different approaches in their work, which means they don’t always use cameras to take photographs, but also use screen-shots. Our understanding and interest in the visual are changing. When technology gets cheaper it opens up new ways of storytelling, as Rake illustrates. Even though they are not always using a camera, they still see themselves as photographers. In that sense, technology extends the very idea of photography.

2.2 Truth, interpretation and credibility

The interviewees’ concerns about the relationship between new technology and their own professional roles, relates to one of the most discussed questions within the field of photography and journalism – the idea of ‘truth’. All participants agreed that photography is only an interpretation of an event. Photography can never make claims to tell the whole truth. Additionally, they all wonder how technological and digital advancements can change the interpretational and visual understanding of both the public and the photographer. Technological advancements have, they argue, already affected the visual: how we tell visual stories and how they are visually accessible. The participants said this brings up questions of what an image is.

For Laura El-Tantawy, technological advances in camera gear have had a great positive impact. She often shoots in low light, which was almost impossible in the past. Today cameras can capture images and find information in almost pitch-black conditions:

“ Technology, in that sense, is something I really welcome because it gives me that sense of possibility that I can do things I didn’t do before. ”

For Simon Townsley, a photojournalist’s job is to give an honest interpretation of an event. A photograph, he states, is a two-dimensional image and thus an interpretation of reality. Technological advancements, such as post-production, can help present an image more honestly – more like how it was interpreted when the photo was taken:

“ The smells, the sounds. You know, they didn’t exist in your photographs, so you had to bring them out somehow. ”

Townsley compares post-production to editing a written article. If the copy is bad, you change it. In the same way, enhancing an image in post-production can make it more visually accessible:

“ Because just as you put in an adjective and adverbs and you structure your intro and you finish the article in a powerful way. The same with a photograph. You don't just make it boring. Just because that's more accurate. Accurate doesn't mean honest. If I photograph something and then there's a distracting detail in it, a bright yellow object, I will saturate that. And that doesn't change the reality, the honesty of the experience, unless the story is about that bright yellow object. ”

He also suggests that our expectations from visuals are higher – we expect to get the truth. Vera Zurbrugg from Rake Collective is also concerned about ideas of authenticity. For her, it is a problem if we believe that photography is always neutral.

Greg Martin said that it is getting harder to gain credibility in the community as a photographer. He is out and about most within the *Devon and Cornwall* editorial team. For journalists, it is often more time effective to do interviews over the phone or online rather than leave the newsroom. However, the presence of images online effects photojournalists' credibility with the public:

“ The last couple of years, the awareness or scariness of having an image out on social media and the internet has become bigger. People feel like they don't know what is going to happen to the image. And also, what are people going to say about the image and their story? ”

He explains that most of the people he photographs have never featured in the media before. People don't always trust what is going to happen to a picture after it is published. Additionally, he is concerned about how some news outlets steer away from reporting on issues that divide people. Martin mentions some of the stories he covered of the Black Lives Movement during 2020. Following publication, the comment sections were rife with racist slurs. He believes there should be an extensive discussion on how to manage and handle images and life stories online - as this affects the credibility of photojournalists and means some journalists stay away from certain news stories as they fear a negative reaction.

Laura El-Tantawy also sees a shift in the interaction between the photographer and the community, especially the power relation between a photographer and the person being photographed. The photographer has long been the one with the power to represent. But recent years have seen an increasing discussion about representation, highlighting moral and ethical concerns regarding the power dynamics of photography. For instance, there is a greater awareness of how societal structures, such as racial inequalities, influence photographic practice. El-Tantawy points to how this greater awareness changes how some agencies and photographers work. For instance, fewer agencies and news outlets parachute (a term used to describe when a photographer or journalist gets sent from another country to get information and then leaves quickly) photojournalists into communities, opting to hire local photographers. However, she believes there are still problems and worries concerning power dynamics that the industry must handle. For instance, when photographing people from disadvantaged communities:

“ I think there’s a whole shift around the language being used, and the way different roles are being played and the power dynamics, but I think it’s a really healthy shift that should have happened much, much earlier. And I think that with the technology changing, and that idea of responsibility and authenticity, and what’s fake and what’s not fake, it may impact that. I don’t know how yet, because I think we’re at that moment. Now we’re in that shift. ”



3 Digital and technological changes

3.1 Digital publication

For Rake Collective, the Covid-19 pandemic pushed boundaries regarding how to collaborate and how to show work. The possibilities of showing work digitally changed because of necessity, which in turn suited the collective. Showing work online was always something the collective was thinking about because it allows more accessibility.

For Simon Townsley, one of the biggest changes has been how much more material can be published on online platforms, compared to how it used to be in print. Beforehand, much effort and time went into an output of maybe one or two images. Today, he says, interested people can see dozens of photos.

Greg Martin, who is part of a large news organisation, knows his images can be used by all other departments within the company around the country, and in different newspapers. He notices that an abundance of imagery does not always have an impact on what gets published:

“ After a job I often upload a set of eight to ten photos depending on the story. In the past I didn't think about the order of the upload. But after a while I realised that it was mostly the first images uploaded that were used. I think that when choosing photos, editors or journalists struggle with time constraints and quickly choose the first photos they see. ”

He supplies a larger number of photos when working for primarily online news sources. However, he feels that the selection of pictures published are not always chosen to build the best narrative, but due to other factors such as time constraints. For Martin, social media channels such as Facebook are a place where photographs can be published in addition to those chosen by reporters or editors. Social media has, according to all participants, been one of the biggest digital changes that has affected their practice.

3.2 The role of social media

All the photographers have at least one social media account. For some, social media has changed the work they are asked to produce by editors. Martin says that both social media and the move from a newspaper focus to websites has also made video more important. He is often asked to do livestreams when he is out on a job, and then he puts his phone on top of the camera when taking photographs. But, for him, it does not add value:

“ ‘Instead of producing a 100 percent great photography and okay video’ he tells, ‘my efforts get divided 50/50 between photography and video’. ”

During the pandemic, Martin started to rethink how he used Facebook. He says that it is complicated: he is a photojournalist so he should share all sorts of work, but what is his responsibility?

“ Social media is a feed. Without seeking out specific information you follow an account like mine, that posts a lot of different stories and images. During the pandemic, suddenly a lot of people got upset that I published stories that were sad or about disease or people dying. And everything that the pandemic was. I have started to reflect on how I use Facebook since. I don’t have an answer yet, other than that I am more aware of what I publish. ”

Similarly, El-Tantawy mentions that when using social media, it is necessary to think about who and what you are showing:

“ Who are you on social media? As a photographer, what aspects of my work do I want to present? Do I want to showcase every image that I take? Or do I want to showcase the images that only have been selected for publication or in my books, or do I want to show images that didn’t make it and tell the story of why? ”

Social media is important for her as it opens up new forms of communication with the audience:

“ There’s an immediacy to it. So things don’t take time anymore to get from point A to point B and people can engage with it. So I think it’s removed a lot of filters. ”

Nancy Hurman, Vera Zurbrügg and Nuno Guerreiro de Sousa from Rake Collective worry that social media can be an echo chamber, where content is being reposted by individuals or organisations that share the same views. Even though digital has made work more accessible, there are still barriers in place.

3.3 AI-images and journalism

While research was being carried out for this article, free use of AI-image software like Midjourney became available online. Some of the participants, like Rake, knew more about Artificial Intelligence (AI) than others. No-one had, however, missed the debate on it. For many of the participants, AI raises questions around its influence on photography, credibility, and visual literacy. Many worried about issues of authenticity. The interview with Laura El-Tantawy took place a couple of days after an AI-image of the pope wearing a Balenciaga coat had gone viral. As a photographer, looking quickly at the image, she didn't see at first any signs the image was not real:¹²

“ If me as a photographer can't see them, how can we expect people who engage on different platforms and see these images to be able to see these things? ”

Rake Collective points to the wide-ranging ethical considerations involved. Nancy Hurman, Vera Zurbrügg and Nuno Guerreiro de Sousa discuss how machine learning tools, like AI, learn from data that can be biased and the result can then perpetuate those biases.¹³ Additionally, Rake points to the importance of educating the public to understand AI. But this does not mean that we should be afraid of generated images. Instead, education around AI-imagery is part of a larger need for better visual literacy, according to Hurman:

“ For a lot of people working with photography, like us who have an education within it, we know that an image is never the truth – it is constructed. We've learnt to be critical towards images. But I think that now, the population is too used to seeing images and taking them at face value. ”

AI-imagery highlights the wider issue of a lack of visual literacy among the public, and a need for a larger discussion about photography as an interpretation of events, and not a true representation of reality. So, what does this mean for the future of photojournalism?

¹² For this particular image, looking at the Pope holding a coffee cup, his hands are distorted. See for instance: *How to Spot an AI-Generated Image Like the 'Balenciaga Pope'* (Perrigo 2023).

¹³ Biases such as racial inequality.

4 Looking to the future of photojournalism

Where do changing media environments, technological advancements and digital innovations leave photojournalism? El-Tantawy said that even when studying photography at university, professors would say: “journalism is dead, photography is dead.” But journalism and photography is still alive and she believes that is because “practitioners keep redefining what photography is.”:

“ Are photographers going to continue to prove that technology can never do what we do with the same sense of authenticity and truthfulness? The only way to really authenticate something is to have an actual human there as a witness, someone who is documenting the moment and comes back with those images. ”

Whether it should be people who handle photography, or machines, is a recurring reflection. Simon Townsley wonders if certain forms of photography are going to survive the current shifts. Will photographers themselves use their own archives to generate new AI-images to sell? Townsley feels it is critical that people understand that they have to get their news and information from a verifiable source. Overall, he sees a great opportunity for photojournalism to “provide honest interpretations of what’s going on.”





5 Conclusion

This paper set out to examine digital and technological impacts on photojournalism. What conclusions can be considered concerning a photojournalist's profession, education, and ethics?¹⁴

Firstly, digital and technological advancements lead to social changes. In terms of photojournalism, both photographers and the public are affected, and our behaviour changes because of these advances. Secondly, these changes are complex. There are possibilities as well as challenges. Participants in this project all agree that a photograph can't capture the whole truth of an event but it is a representation of how they interpret what they see. These interpretations can, however, on a personal level be understood as "authentic" or "honest", to use two of the participants' terms. When technology changes how images are produced, for instance, with AI, most participants insist on the need to provide their own individual interpretations and moral perceptions to verify and bear witness to an event. In a time when the credibility of the visual is being questioned, it is essential to further the visual literacy of both the photographer and the public. Many participants stressed the importance of guidelines from organisations, governments, and employers concerning technological advancements such as AI.

Finally, all participants discussed the changing digital behaviours around producing and publishing work. This relates to the fact that there is a growing awareness and knowledge among the public concerning the life of an image online, and how people interact on social media. Many photographers see and welcome a shift in the power dynamic between the photographer and the person being photographed. Social media outlets lead to new forms of communication and interactions, which have positive and negative implications for photographers.

¹⁴ Due to the project's limitations, such as time, number of participants and geographical location, these conclusions are not a size fits all and aim to bring about a discussion rather than provide guidelines.



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Polis

Department of Media and
Communications
The London School of Economics
and Political Science Houghton
Street London WC2A 2AE

Email: polis@lse.ac.uk

Telephone: 020 7107 5176

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/

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