Photojournalism in the 21st century: responsibility without sovereignty

IN THIS YEAR’S WORLD PRESS PHOTO SEM PRESSER LECTURE, DAVID CAMPBELL ASKED WHETHER, IN TODAY’S MEDIA CLIMATE, PHOTOJOURNALISM CAN STILL SERVE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION.

Can photojournalism still be a powerful force for improving the world? In his lecture during the World Press Photo Awards Days, David Campbell argued that the profession has a particular responsibility and opportunity both to represent the world better and to make better worlds imaginable. At the same time, he saw serious threats to photography’s humanitarian ethos, in light of the context in which it is reproduced and of the new ways war photography is managed by the media and the military. Posing questions rather than offering answers, he wondered what resistance photojournalists can offer.

Relativism versus objectivity

The last 50 years, Campbell argued, have seen the demise of objectivity as the guardian of truth. While we are tempted to think that photography simply “shows what is there”, we have to be aware that every image is constructed and objectivity no longer secures the meaning of photography. Campbell reminded his audience of the numerous moments of mediation involved in transforming an infinitely ambiguous reality into a fixed commodity. Moreover, these constructed images help construct events. An event is not just what happens, anthropologist Allen Feldman observed, but what can be narrated, and images are key instruments of narration.

But if photography can’t be objective, if it doesn’t correspond one-to-one with reality, does it have no responsibility to truth? Some fear that objectivity will be replaced by what the new Pope, Benedict XVI, called “a dictatorship of relativism ... that recognizes nothing definite and leaves only one’s own ego and one’s own desires as the final measure”. If we accept that objectivity is impossible, however, that doesn’t mean we have to accept the other extreme: that it’s all right to falsify events. Campbell insisted on limits. A defining quality of photography, he said, is that it “has a connection to the world outside imagination. Photography may not be a foundation for truth, but it nonetheless offers limits on lies.”

Information war

The greater danger is that photography, whatever its truth, can be co-opted, repressed or simply ignored. This brought Campbell to what he believes is a threat to photojournalism. In our “current global context ... of permanent war, an ongoing state of emergency and seemingly endless humanitarian crises ... a combination of military strategy and media corporatisation has meant that the image of conflict available to us is being severely restricted”. In the US and the UK, television broadcasts 40 percent less international news than it did when the Berlin wall came down, with similar trends in print media.

The news that is published is increasingly a product of what James Der Derian has called “MIME-Net” (the Military Industrial Media Entertainment Network). Campbell showed slides of a briefing at the Coalition Media Center in the Persian Gulf, where the invasion force had its public relations HQ, and of embedded photojournalists waiting outside the Kuwait Hilton. Controlling and manipulating the media is no longer just propaganda, but is at the heart of Western military strategy. According to Der Derian, “the new wars are fought in the same manner as they are represented, by military simulations and public dissimulations, by real-time surveillance and TV live feeds. Virtuality collapses distance, between here and there, fact and fiction.” Because of this, Campbell argued, “we’re not just talking about the military managing the media anymore. The media is being incorporated into military strategy. This is the notion of ‘information war’ ... a fundamental challenge to all of us. In the context of this military strategy, how can photojournalism still make a progressive political point?

Humanitarian ethos

To illustrate the humanitarian ethos central to photojournalism’s history, Campbell showed a series of 19th- and 20th-century American photographs that had been used as tools of social reform. Jacob Riis’s portrayals of New York slums led to housing reform, Lewis Hine’s portraits of children at work were successfully used to lobby for child labor laws, and Dorothea Lange’s famous pictures of impoverished farm workers were taken on assignment for the US Farm Security Administration to help draw attention to and improve their condition.

Campbell’s hope is that photojournalism, with its reformist roots, can help “punctuate the de-humanizing logic” of this new military/media coalition. He argued that while photojournalists are no longer likely to get the news first, “the immediacy and ubiquity of TV reporting now means that the still image has what Susan Sontag called a ‘deeper bite’ with respect to understanding and memory.” He acknowledged that the current political climate also challenges photography: “Despite the many successes of post-WWII photojournalism, the focus on liberal causes and social reformism has to a large extent been given way to a fascination with the everyday and its appearances, which is not inconsistent with today’s consumer culture.” He argued that photography cannot always resist this change, partly because of its dependence on the context in which it is published and partly because of its propensity “to show the individual rather than the collective”.

For example, how can we picture a conflict like Darfur? Can we get beyond the clichés of Africa as a place of poverty and war? Campbell argued that stereotypical photographs of refugees, which work well for NGO fundraising, do not disclose the political and social context of conflicts. He then showed some recent “best-selling” photographs from Darfur of battle casualties and refugees, taken by Panos photographers Sven Torfinn, Dieter Telemann and Joeres Oerlemans.

Problem of context

Although the Darfur photographs shown by Campbell were powerful, he argued that they can nonetheless...
have their specificity undermined by the context in which they are published. For example, when one of Oorlemans’ images of refugees in a truck was published on the front page of The Guardian in 2004, the story’s headline was: “90 days to stop another disaster in Africa”. Campbell’s analysis: “We’ve gone from something that’s very context-specific to ‘just another disaster in Africa’. And this appeared in a left-of-center newspaper. … The way it is used here undermines the humanitarian ethos of the image. … I think this constant foregrounding of the individual and the association with a cliché about Africa implicitly decontextualizes and depoliticizes the situation.”

To further illustrate the problem of context, he showed 19th-century anthropologists’ photographs of “natives” that were used to measure and codify peoples. Such images were central to the power relations of the colonial era. But how different is contemporary photojournalism? Campbell asked: “Can we say that photography has become post-colonial? Or is it still replicating colonial relations of power?”

**Difference and indifference**

Photography’s news context and the context of society’s indifference to others — especially if they are culturally, racially or geographically foreign — are further limitations on photography’s humanitarian ethos. Given that photojournalists only have direct control over the image’s internal qualities of form, structure and content, what can they do to overcome these limits?

Campbell left his audience with a final question. How can photographers be allies in a revived humanitarian ethos?

David Campbell is Professor of Cultural and Political Geography at Durham University in the UK, and Associate Director of the Durham Centre for Advanced Photography Studies. His research addresses the visual culture of international politics, especially the pictorial representation of atrocity, famine and war.

**AUDIENCE FEEDBACK**

After David Campbell’s lecture, members of the audience gave their comments.

Stephen Mayes, the British, New York-based secretary of the World Press Photo jury, found the lecture very interesting. “In some ways it was an abstract survey, but Campbell did a good job in connecting it to the real world: real photographs, real solutions. I found myself asking what the purpose of photography is. To create an understanding of the world? Or to generate action? If the purpose is political action — fundraising for example — he described a machine which works very efficiently. If the purpose is understanding, I wonder: Was photography ever successful? How would it be more successful? How do you measure success? Is it action, or knowledge? I thought it was a great lecture because it raised all those questions for me.”

Hungarian photographer, former Joop Swart Masterclass participant and World Press Photo award winner Balazs Gardi responded: “To me it’s obvious that pictures must have the right context, and that you don’t have control unless you publish your own books and curate your own exhibitions. A more interesting question is how you visualize a problem. Some photographers go to Darfur, for example, just to feed the newspapers with sexy photos. They merely scratch the surface, and most of the time their editors like their work. For many, making a picture look good is enough. The rest of us have to remind ourselves that we have to think about the way we look at a problem. We are authors and filters. For me, the lecture didn’t go far enough.”

David Gross is an American photographer and former award winner based in Istanbul. “I wanted to hear if Campbell had any ideas about solving some of the problems he brought up,” he said. “It wasn’t clear that he has an understanding of what we do, of how a photographer can tell a story. It’s not the person in the foreground, it’s the big picture that’s the abstraction. He seemed to be complaining about something that’s intrinsic to photography. Photos are the experience of a single person. Campbell would like a photograph to be something it isn’t. It’s a very incomplete medium with its own limitations. Photographs don’t have words, but he wanted them to speak.”

“I liked it when he said: ‘An event is something that is narrated’. He brought in traditional art criticism, and I like to be reminded of that. Sometimes we forget.”

South African photographer Jodi Bieber has also won World Press Photo awards and participated in the Joop Swart Masterclass. She agreed with Gardi: “What Campbell said about our lack of control was quite obvious and very true. As soon as you hand over your work, it’s not yours anymore. Campbell didn’t speak much about the Internet. Now that you can literally buy one image and get one free from big agencies like Corbis, photographers have even less control. It’s becoming harder and harder to publish concerned work. I believe that, if you want your work to be seen, you have to find other avenues besides magazines.”

Julie Phillips