

Chapter 16

The Future of Photojournalism

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ABSTRACT

It's impossible to talk about the future of photojournalism without first acknowledging the changes that accelerated its arrival, namely, the monumental layoff of 2013. Many highly regarded photojournalists, some the author knew well, fell victim to this layoff and the chaos that came in its wake. They are mentioned in this chapter with their accomplishments and respective experiences that prove things never stay the same. They are photojournalism's stalwarts, people who weathered the industry's changes and pivoted when it seemed technology would upend their job security and economic well-being. This chapter also pushes back against ideas that would frame the everyday citizen, livestreaming content from a smartphone, as the industry's competitor. On the contrary, smartphones and streaming technologies represent a more egalitarian way to capture world events in real-time, and we're seeing photojournalists adopt and apply these technologies in thoughtful and compelling ways. Therefore, any debate surrounding technological advances and the future of photojournalism is simply esoteric when juxtaposed to the visual storyteller's unwavering responsibility to advance justice and humanity.

IMAGINE . . .

September 2, 2039, after dawn, Zoya pressed ahead to fulfill her photography assignment of the newly constructed tollway for autonomous vehicles. It was the first highway of its kind dedicated to driverless cars, delivery drones, and public transportation. The assignment for her media company was to photograph the morning rush hour traffic in Atlanta. She brought two cameras, one with an automatic soft lens that automatically adjusted to light and weather conditions. Meteorologists predicted heavy rain with high humidity. Zoya's other camera was immersive and set up nearby to continuously record a wide range of detail across the highways. It would assume the role of recalculating and recording layers of imagery information based on the speed of cars, and their shapes and vibrations. It would also ensure proper perspective in relation to other cars, the tollway, and the environment within the recreated period. When she returned to the studio, she would have the option to feature several moments of the footage on the news stream.

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In one scenario, Zoya caught a passenger, waving to the camera at 80 miles per hour from her sunroof. What was amazing was the detail of the woman's face, clearly an unusual photo for a woman who was 90 years old, according to the data collected from the facial recognition software. Zoya's editor sent her images to various units of the company to use and edit as they wished. Typically, this process involved several image software adjusters who were proficient with photographic data reconstruction, a different sector within photography. There were some Old Schoolers, as there are in any profession, who refused to trade in their trusty Nikons and Canons, in passive resistance to these new technologies which were arguably too perfect. Having one's image captured in still shots, or video, on every street corner, was generally accepted as a necessary trade-off for safety. Then again, with so many images, nothing really stood out anymore. Even when someone reconstructed a magnificent moment, there appeared to be a lack of appreciation for any artistry in the image.

Of course, some photographers and videographers melded their 'old eyes' to new technologies exceptionally well. The other problem was that many people did not want to be photographed because they feared the photo data information might be used for commercial purposes or stored in government databases. There had been cases where people's images had been appropriated for advertising campaigns, and because they were photographed in public places, they had no grounds on which to complain. Worse, was another scenario in which a man had been filmed near a bank. The bank had been robbed later that morning and the man was held for questioning after the media splashed his face all over the news. Photography had evolved into something that was more of an intrusion than a celebration of life for the average person. Smartphones had advanced to the point that they could easily compete with the most sophisticated high-tech cameras. However, not all photographers wanted to use them, because they were networked automatically to telecommunications companies.

That is not to say the average person did not still post photographs on social media, or capture images with smartphones that contained the latest VR/AR apps. Those trying to stay away from public attention subscribed to social media sites. These sites were legally protected to prevent exploitation. They were, in fact, restricted to one's circle of friends or family members, unless the shooter wanted to submit their work to a gallery or for broader distribution. Stripping the embedded information from photos to prevent them from being used by police, government or corporate databases—especially regarding provocative events, such as protests or anything of a controversial nature—was easy. But for some people, it was too much trouble. Data stripping became not only an art unto itself, but a necessity, as people's trust in the government and each other declined through the decades.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in 360-degree VR, augmented reality, XR, and promises of holographic imagery with sound syncing from a smartphone, surprise us with every tech generation. Already in the works, camera lenses that adjust automatically to weather conditions are being assessed. Probably most alarming, is that images on social media pages already can be used as legal evidence, because timestamps are embedded in them. Other cameras are being developed that will be able to help reenact events or moments, providing layers, and layers, of data upon which to investigate a crime or incident. An image is worth a thousand words; unfortunately, those words can end up in a subpoena or an indictment.

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