EDITORIAL PHOTOGRAPHS AND PATTERNS OF PRACTICE

Dr Louise Grayson

This paper proposes a new theoretical method to analyse patterns of photographic practice of editorial photography—using an ‘action genre’ approach (Lemke, 1995: 32). That is, rather than taking final photographic forms as being definitive of genre, this new method identifies patterns of ‘activity types’ involved in the production of editorial photography to be identified (1995: 32). While there has been much written on editorial photography, there is no organised body of scholarship that distinguishes between different modes of presenting patterns of photographic practice. Claims about the degree of influence of visual images and their ability to drive public opinion have not sufficiently considered the full impact of photographic production processes. Although patterns of activity in the image-making process are not directly evident in the published photograph, the process does impact upon the resulting meanings made.

KEY WORDS: Action genre; activity types; editorial photography; narrative; photojournalism; photo production processes.

Introduction

This paper introduces the theoretical structure of how an action genre approach (Lemke 1995) can be used to explore narrative potential within editorial photographs. It is the contention of this research that the scholarship of editorial photography has not given sufficient consideration to the full impact of photographic production processes. Although patterns of activity that comprise action genres are not necessarily evident in published photographs, production processes do impact upon the resulting meanings made.

The study of genre is typically limited to ‘text type’ (Lemke 1995, 32) – that is, analysis that uses the final form of a text to situate it within one or more presentational genres (e.g. Barthes 1977; Bergin 1984; Sontag 2000). However, the final form of a photograph is less informative about its narrative potential than is the activity type, or action genre, within which it is produced (Lemke 1995, 32). Therefore, any critical analysis of editorial photography needs to begin with an understanding of action genre in addition to text type.

Lemke’s (1995) action genre offers an approach to analysis that helps us to understand the difference between the discourse of a photographic text and the broader conditions that shape its creation; the communities of practice in which it was produced; and the forces that led to the editorial choice of a particular text:

Our discourse, what we mean by saying and doing, deploys the meaning-making resources of our communities: the grammar and lexicon of a language, the conventions of gesture and depiction, the symbolic and functional values of actions, the typical patterns of action that other members of our community will recognise and respond to … (1995, 19)

Activity genres exemplify links between actions (social practices) and patterns of relations and actions (cultural formations) (Lemke 1995, 102–3). Results indicate that the actions of photographers undertaking editorial projects do not all have an equal claim to the role of ‘storyteller’, with some generic actions inevitably leading to the
functional role of mere illustration, description or, in some cases, aesthetic support for editorial intent. From an action genre perspective, the narrative potential of photography is shaped by the actions of photographers, who in turn are influenced to differing degrees at all stages of production by an array of forces with significant and often hidden cultural, economic and technical influence.

By narrative potential, I mean the potential of photographic works to be considered legitimate, convincing, and authoritative accounts of reality. Of course, such evaluations are culturally specific, institutionally legitimated, and ultimately unstable. Focusing on the narrative potential of photographic works within the framework of action genre theory helps to categorise works more accurately into genres because it is the actions of photographers in creating images that most strongly impact upon the final form of published works.

Photographers’ actions reflect the social and political environment in which they are working, and those of the client or employer for whom they work. This new theoretical approach suggests that recognisable patterns of activity that comprise the genres of editorial photography are based on the personal attitudes of photographers and their client expectations (pre-production), technical approach to the medium and context (production), and publication influences, image choice, and layout (post-production). The strength of this approach is that it allows me to describe the field of editorial photography in a way that reveals how external factors and the practices of photographers’ impact upon the final product published in influential publications, including popular press, books, and magazines, as well as internet publications. Put simply, this paper is focused on what practitioners do rather than the photographs they are known to produce.

The focus of this research project is professional editorial photography. While I recognise the emergence of new forms of editorial photography, such as the explosion in the use of amateur photography and the ‘produser’ (Bruns 2006), editorial photography is defined here as photographs created by professional photographers that appear in popular press, magazine, internet publications and photographic exhibitions.

The meaning of photographic genres arises from the ‘joint action’ of all involved in the production of editorial photographs, including editors, subjects, institutions, peers, and the final use of the image in a publication (Becker 1998, 94). Therefore, an ‘action genre’ approach offers a useful means of exploring and defining photographic genres because it is concerned first with the activities, relationships, pressures, and expectations of entire networks of people and organisations that feed into the final form of published photographs.

Editorial photographs have long been recognised as critical components in the mass influence of feelings and opinions that has led to political power-holders and commentators being very conscious about the effects of published photographs (Perlmutter 2004, 131). Unsurprisingly, therefore, scholarly studies of photography typically have focused on assessing the content of published images using content-analysis methods (Barthes 1984; Benjamin 1979; Van Leeuwen and Kress 2002), or on public reactions to photography using audience studies focused on the influences of layout, design, politics, values, and so on (Hartley 1992; Ritchin 1990; Domke, Perlmutter & Spratt 2002). There has also been considerable research conducted on aspects of the photographer’s ‘gaze’, and on the photographer’s personal influence on photographs (cf. Schwartz 2003; Sekula 1982; Sontag 2000).

One of the most widely used approaches to photographic analysis is semiotics, the ‘science of signs’ that was first used for the analysis of photography during the
1950s and 1960s (Barthes 1977; Bergin 1984; Van Leeuwen and Kress 2002). Semiotics analyses photographs as culturally embedded systems of signs and signifiers, examining formal structure in relation to culture, and focusing on how meaning is produced from the interactions of these factors (Wells 2003, 110; for an overview of approaches, cf. Stillar 1998; Danesi 1999). A semiotic approach acknowledges that photographs are not merely symbolic, but represent more abstract social and cultural complexes (Flusser 2000, 15).

Such approaches, however, concentrate on the finished visual product, with only passing regard to influences upon the choices made by photographers during production, or upon the editorial processes that ultimately frame the publication of photographs. Scholars agree that photographic analyses are necessarily interpretive and subjective. However, such claims again focus on analysis of the final photograph itself, not on the actions of the photographer during their assignment, or on their experience of the cultural and economic forces that shape their practices and that determine the final form of publication. This paper seeks to remedy this gap in research by suggesting a new theoretical approach for highlighting the similarities and differences in the patterned forms of activity that produce editorial photography. The approach pays special attention to the cultural, institutional, and technical forces impacting upon the photographer during the phases of pre-production, production, and post-production.

Production processes

Historically, research that attempts to distinguish between photographic genres has been carried out with a focus on the degree to which an editorial photograph has the potential for neutrality, objectivity, or realism (Barthes 1984; Ritchin 1990; Schwartz 2003; Sekula 1992; Sontag 2000; Taylor 2005). These issues concern practitioners as well as scholars. As Susan Sontag notes, ‘even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience’ (2000, 3).

Accepting that perceived neutrality in any form is varied, subjective, and problematic, this research moves past attempts to codify neutrality, objectivity, or realism. Rather, I begin with the photographer’s attitude and ethical approach to the medium, and extend the investigation into the effects of related institutions based on what photographers actually do in the field and how their actions are affected by the organisational, artistic, and commercial factors they experience in their work. An action genre study focuses on how photographers are influenced by external factors, and shows how these issues affect the narrative potential of their published images.

A focus on the production phase explores the actions of photographers in the field. This includes how the camera (as apparatus) is physically used during the image-making process, and how external influences impact upon these moments.

Some scholars argue that photographs used to authenticate verbal accounts of an event are themselves the products of an eyewitness and reproduce what the photographer sees (Taylor 2005, 39). The audience is left to trust the personal integrity of the photographer rather than question the mechanical properties of the camera (Wells 1998, 66). It is commonly agreed that the photographer holds the ultimate power in the image-making process, choosing the exact moment to press the shutter (Wells 1998; Sekula 1978). However, the moment of capture is as much a product of generic external influences as the final framing of a photograph in a publication.
Post-production factors bring further influences to bear on photographers. For example, publishers have discovered that photographs work differently depending on the context in which they are placed. Therefore, the design and layout of a publication are significant (Barthes 1985; Benjamin 1979; Woodburn 1947). As Ritchin demonstrates, photography is ‘highly interpretive, ambiguous, culturally specific and heavily dependent upon contextualisation by text and layout’ (1990: 81). Editors take this into account when designing and laying out the pages of newspapers and magazines – all post-production activities. Photographers are also aware of post-production conventions, which vary widely throughout the field of publication (issues here include ‘airbrushing’, ‘photoshopping’ and otherwise altering photographs, but more importantly for this project are image choice, verbal choices, and other layout choices made by editorial staff). There is little research about how such knowledge affects the actions of the photographer sent to produce images that will be suitable for the various contexts the photographer is employed to service.

Photographs, in their final form, offer different narratives to different viewers. These can be unlocked to a certain degree using content-analysis tools. Sekula (1982) discusses how the ways in which different audiences read a photograph are influenced by whoever is delivering the image, or how it is delivered: the photographic image is a sign of someone’s investment in the sending of a message (1982, 87). So an understanding of the photographic sign production system, as well as the various institutional investments that underpin it, is necessary to gain an understanding of photographic communication (Lemke 1999, 9). Wells (1998) explains that, as spectators, we are positioned as the ‘eye’ of the camera, and while ‘we gaze upon an apparently natural and unmediated scene’, our acts of looking are not considered to be ‘disinterestedly innocent’ (1998, 95). There is a belief that photographs merely interact with existing individual understandings of the world, and photographs may prompt individuals to draw upon already developed considerations (Domke et al. 2002; Ritchin 1990; Zaller 1992). Furthermore, editors bend the reality of photographs, and later viewers accept the claims made by texts that they are proof of ‘what has been’ (Barthes 1984, 34). There is a close and mutually influential connection between producer and consumer because the ‘articulation and understanding of social meanings in images derives from the visual articulation of social meanings in face-to-face interaction’ (Van Leeuwen and Kress 1996, 119). The connection between producer and consumer could interpret a photograph differently from what the photographer intended, and may confine its actual meaning:

The focus on the active consumer as a maker of meanings and as a producer of consumer practices has obscured the central fact of the consumer as chooser, as one who selects from an array of predetermined choices amongst highly structured objects and experiences. (Lister 1995, 143)

Therefore, the connection can be problematic due to issues of potential image manipulation and the resulting impact on audience interpretation. The 1990s saw the widespread application of digital technologies to image-making, and this has raised once again issues of image truth-values and how new technology will impact upon them (Wells 1998, 257). While there is growing critical literature about photography and new image technologies (Ritchin 1990; Rosler 1992), it is not possible to delve deeply into these issues within a paper of this size. Here, I merely wish to allude to the impact of image manipulation on audience interpretation of visual images. However, having reviewed the historical issues of manipulation, I see very little evidence of the ‘demise of photographic truth’ as one of the initial responses to digital imaging technology (Wells 1998, 279). There is a long list of image manipulation
examples, from the fake portrait of Lincoln in 1860 to Stalin’s famous airbrushing of enemies out of his photos on the front covers of magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* (Farid 2006, 162). Although Ritchin (1990) believes the new malleability of the image may eventually ‘lead to a profound undermining of photography’s status as an inherently truthful pictorial form’ (1990, 28), I concur with Rosler (1991) that photographic history shows ‘manipulation is integral to photography’ (1991, 53), and that it has been in existence since the beginning of photography.

Scholars have raised many relevant questions surrounding the narrative potential of editorial images. While they offer us a record of what has happened, they are highly flexible in nature. Photographs record what we have seen, and therefore act as an analogue of reality (Barthes 1972, 4). When these images reach their audience, they are further affected by existing knowledge held by the viewer. Therefore, if the meaning potential of photographs relies heavily on interpretive processes, I propose we now look at the actions of the photographer in the field and examine how these further increase the interpretive nature of texts:

If one observes the movements of a human being in possession of a camera (or of a camera in possession of a human being), the impression given is of someone lying in wait. This is the ancient art of stalking which goes back to the Palaeolithic hunter in the tundra. Yet photographers are not pursuing their game in the open savanna but in the jungle of cultural objects, and their tracks can be traced through this artificial forest. The acts of resistance on the part of culture, the cultural conditionality of things, can be seen in the act of photography, and this can, in theory, be read off from photographs themselves. (Flusser 1983, 33)

Flusser encapsulates issues pertaining to influences on photographs and how they are ‘read’. Yet I question his belief that one can read so much from the image in its final form. I propose the necessity of augmenting this with a review of actions of the image creator.

**Towards an action genre analysis of editorial photography**

In this paper, I introduce a new perspective on analysis: action genre theory. The ‘actions’ of the photographer are essential to the process of the audience becoming more fully literate in the reading of the narrative within editorial photographs. In this approach to analysis, it is important to examine the three key stages of editorial photographic work: pre-production, production, and post-production. This section considers the three stages in turn, and highlights how this approach can be used to identify various external influences experienced by photographers who are creating images for a variety of publication outcomes.

**Pre-production**

Editorial photographs have a questionable ability to stand as a ‘testimonial to truth’ (Roberts 2009), or to have the potential for political and ideological neutrality or objectivity (Barthes 1984; Ritchin 1990; Schwartz 2003; Sekula 1992; Sontag 2000; Taylor 2005). Despite arguments identifying the fallibilities of photography as a medium of objectivity, there is a tendency for audiences to treat the photographer as a witness (Tirohl 2000, 335). This tendency is because photography is a medium that ‘provides us with a record of something that was actually there, in front of the camera, so we turn with sometimes misguided confidence to photographs to show us what existed in the past’ (Jussim 1989, 49). When photography first emerged, the general assumption was that, being mechanical, it was free from the biases of human
intervention – biases that would compromises the truth-value of other non-mechanical pictorial media (Schwartz 2003, 28). Despite evidence confounding its claim to truth, photography’s evidentiary status held sway through the early 1920s:

Even the abundant use of photographic fabrications such as the ‘composographs’ that had appeared in tabloid newspapers since the early 1920s did not dislodge photojournalism credibility, and the privileged status of news photographs has endured intact until recently. (Schwartz 2003, 29)

When it became clear that the technologies of photography were not ‘automatic transcribers of the world’, other questions about the nature of authenticity began to be raised, and ‘other guarantors of photography’s fidelity were advanced’ (Wells 1998, 67). It soon became evident that, ‘even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience’ (Sontag 2000, 3):

Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are. (Sontag 2000, 4)

In other words, photography’s various methods of representation are ‘not merely complex, varying from one genre to another, but remain linked to the culture from which the photograph is made’ (Ritchin 1990, 99). A photograph is a ‘manifestation of conditions that both constrain and convey its meaning, and determine its semantic target’ (Sekula 1982, 85). In other words, the meaning potential of any photographic text is necessarily determined by context. This is vital in the analysis of photographs because, despite rising levels of critical and visual literacy, the editorial photograph ‘typically, culturally, and historically continues to assert itself as natural and objective’, so a type of myth has been established around photographic ‘truth’ (Sekula 1982, 86).

I take this long discussion about the ‘witness bearing’ role of the photograph a step further, and suggest that it is vital to take into account how these issues impact upon the image-maker. I suggest that it is essential to understand the role of the photographer’s personal beliefs about the medium and its social role when undertaking editorial photographic projects. In order to do this, a focus on pre-production influences is necessary. This includes ethical viewpoints held by the photographer, their personal understanding of what editorial photography means to them, and their perceptions about being linked to commercial and other institutional concerns.

Pre-production incorporates ethics in relation to photographers’ choices at the time editorial photos are captured. The many ethical issues that arise from the belief of ‘freedom of speech and expression’ have been complicated in the modern media arena. While most working photographers should be aware of the consequences of ethical breaches, there is no ‘photojournalist’s Hippocratic oath’, no common Ten Commandments of ethics in photojournalism, nor are there standard ‘punishments’ for ethical violations (Bersak 2003, 28). Photographers must work to their personal ethics and/or those held by the organisation for which they are working. This can impact on how they work in the field, as outlined by one photographer:

Had I refused to shoot pictures because of my own thoughts or feelings, I would have denied the editor the chance to review the image. It is almost impossible for one person to make complex ethical decisions in real time in the field. The better option is always for the photographer to do the photographing and the editor to do the editing. If an image does turn out to be too graphic, or too intrusive, or too upsetting, the simple solution is to not publish it. (Bersak 2003, 41)
Visual reporters seek, document and present moments of time to multiple viewers. As human beings, visual reporters possess varying degrees of skill and talent, preparation and luck, resources and integrity (Newton 2005, 88). Their behaviour has consequences beyond those of many other professionals’ actions because of what we see when the image is published.

Photographers face constant pressure to make aesthetically outstanding photographs that contain the content demanded by their editors. Often, editors see images from events on television and want to know why the photographers from their publications don’t have the same images (Langton 2009, 143). News ownership and top editors demand that photographers maintain high ethical standards because they know that the trust of news consumers is critical to the life of the business (Langton 2009, 141). Each publication and news organisation sets its own ethical standards, which may simply come down to what it will tolerate, or what will sell more papers, in terms of pushing the ethical envelope (Bersak 2003, 28). With regard to the dissemination of information in the form of news, the media are committed, by their own internal professional ethical code, to ‘the fundamental principle that the public has a right to know and be informed on matters of public interest truthfully, in an unbiased, balanced and fair manner’ (Spence 2009, 4). A responsibility also lies with the photographer to ensure the integrity of photographs by ensuring that they are put into context:

Photographers should be able to get a sense of the situation, the moment, the mood, and then be able to convey the sense to the photo editors. And, photo editors are required to discuss the assignments with the photographers to gather information that will provide context. (Langton 2009, 142)

Photographers need personal values such as accuracy, honesty, fairness and inclusiveness to build credibility. While they work to various external pressures when at work, Langton (2009) suggests that they test conventional thinking to explore innovative storytelling to help changing audiences understand an increasingly complex world (2009, 165).

**Production: The role of the photographer**

I use the term ‘production influences’ to mean the influences impacting upon the photographer at the moment the photograph is actually taken. These include issues such as time constraints, the tension between personal and organisational expectations, and the relationship of the photographer with the subject-matter. Photographs used to authenticate accounts are themselves the products of an eyewitness and are subjective representations (Taylor 2000: 39). Therefore, issues around the personal integrity of the photographer are relevant:

Increasingly the ‘reality’ revealed by the camera’s lens was regarded as being to some extent a product of the personality, sensitivity or creativity of the photographer. The camera would provide not the objective facts … but accounts of the work in which ‘truth’ was achieved through the power of the image-maker. (Wells 1998, 66)

Practitioners are as aware as their critics of the power of their medium and of ‘their responsibilities to society’ (Mich 1992, 23). Photographers know it is in their own interest to report ‘fairly and accurately; to avoid fakery and misrepresentation; to refrain from undue invasion of privacy and unwarranted ridicule of the individual; to hit hard, with all the visual impact at the command of the camera’ (Mich 1992, 23). Industry associations have been established to offer ethical guidelines for photographers in dealing with these issues in the field (Brennan 1999; Lewis 1991). Photographers hold the ultimate power in the image-making process – choosing the
moment to press the shutter (Wells 1998; Sekula 1978). Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson famously described it as ‘the decisive moment’ (Bruno 2004; Zichittella 1998). This term has been adopted to describe a style of photography that exemplifies a relationship to place and also to a time:

Henri Cartier-Bresson’s aesthetic of the ‘decisive moment’ relied on his ability to see and record an event literally taking form. Cartier-Bresson, not the camera, was able to create order out of chaos with intricate precision and style. (Zichittella 1998, 63)

This differs from the practice of ‘setting up’ photos that is employed by some photographers. Perhaps the simplest and most obvious test of authenticity in photography that claims to be an ‘unmediated transcription of reality’ is to ask whether what is in front of the lens to be photographed has been tampered with, set up, or otherwise altered by the photographer (Wells 1998, 64). This is a production phase during which we can see differences in production practices of photographers in the field. For example, photographs produced in the US Farm Security Administration (FSA) project are often called documentary photographs, and it is commonly known that photographers took considerable pains to control the nature of a scene – albeit without making any obvious change to it (Wells 1998, 91). By contrast, photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson ‘lay in wait for all the messy contingency of the world to compose itself into an image which he judged to be both productive of visual information and aesthetically pleasing’ (Wells 1998, 91).

How a photographer chooses to compose a photograph is impacted by various external factors. Issues challenging the practice of visual news work today include budget restrictions, limited access to public spaces, meetings, news events and tight timelines (Laurent 2009; Newton 2001). The digital environment of the editorial photographic industry demands immediate images to be produced constantly. Previously, magazines such as Time would send three photographers unilaterally without restrictions, and they were able to send their pictures whenever they wanted (Laurent 2009). Now there can be three deadlines a day, limiting a photographer’s ability to ‘disappear into a story’ (Laurent 2009).

To meet these new tight deadlines, most editorial photographers use digital cameras that allow them to capture an image, view it immediately on a computer monitor and send it to a client – all within moments. This digitalisation of image-making impacts on the production processes of photographers by making electricity and power even more critical to our work. As the job of a photographer becomes more remote, it becomes necessary to not only learn the technology, but the equipment that will run the technology (Kawamoto 2003, 96). Photographers working on editorial projects are required to embrace the ever-increasing selection of tools that make the trade more transportable and diverse to include the use of still photography, audio and video (2003, 96). Budget restraints can be one reason for the photographer to embrace a more diverse approach to their work because, as media organisations build ties with online communities and realise the wealth of photographic content available, staff photojournalists might be cut too (Rustad 2006).

Citizen photographers can often get access to locations that are becoming more and more difficult for professionals to access. For example, there is a growing concern amongst photographers working in Australia that our freedom to record life in public areas is being restricted. Recently, a group of photographers calling themselves Arts Freedom Australia held a rally in Sydney to protest at what they feel are ‘increasing erosions of the right to record whatever is happening in a public place – a right that is supposedly enshrined in law’.

GENRES OF EDITORIAL PHOTOGRAPHS
Although for most Australians the beach is our hallowed ground, where we display and preen semi-naked, photographing these cultural rituals now leads to even more suspicion. (Strong 2010)

Politicians have also been blamed for restricting access, especially to war zones (Evans 2007, 32). Some access issues can be overcome by building relationships with non-government organisations (NGOs), allowing photographers to undertake commercially viable projects. Some agencies are developing ties with NGOs to fund photographic projects (Laurent 2009). Photographers are commissioned to fit the needs of organisations with a political or humanitarian agenda, but then get published across different multimedia outlets around the world (Laurent 2009). For some photographers, NGOs also offer a way to get into the field for a longer time, to undertake a more in-depth body of work. Alternatively, photographers often have to self-fund their projects. As Laurent explains: ‘You need to be able to work for nine months, set aside a few thousand dollars and then spend the money on a project for three months.’ (2009, 18) This is part of the balancing act photographers must undertake to earn a living while wanting to create images that are meaningful to them. Often, it is the relationships built between photographers and their subjects that determine the quality of images produced. These relationships can also be influenced by the time permitted to build them. Ultimately, it is up to photographers in the field to work with subjects in a manner that ensures images are about the subjects and not just about the photographer.

*Post-production: Image choice, design and layout*

The post-production phase of editorial photography is the most written about aspect of the profession (Bersak 2003, 11). However, most of the literature – from the ‘composograph’ scandals of the early twentieth to the most recent outrage about ‘doctored’ or ‘photoshopped’ pictures of the war in Iraq (Bersak 2003, 31) – is concerned with outright technical fabrication of images that have been altered to explicitly misrepresent reality (Bersak 2003; Kobre 2008; Langton 2008). There is little or no disagreement among professionals that such practices contravene all ethical standards and have no place in the field (Langton 2009 143). What is overlooked, on the other hand, are the kinds of post-production issues that influence and affect professional photographers, such as image choice (what kinds of image is the editor most likely to choose?), publication layout (where will my photograph appear and with what will it be surrounded by?) and the ability of the photographer to influence these critical aspects of publication. These post-production issues are influenced by the growing importance of visual images within commercial contexts, and an awareness of how they can be used in such contexts.

Editorial photographs function as an integral part of journalism, by influencing people’s feelings and opinions towards important issues of the day (Perlmutter 1998, 132). In a word-based press industry that is heavily dependent upon the readership appeal of pictures, editorial photographs are seen as an important tool of communication and persuasion (Hartley 1992, 28). They can also be used to create an environment conducive to attracting advertising revenue to publications by reinforcing consumer values reflective of particular advertisers (Ritchin 1990, 42). This can strongly impact what photographs an editor will choose to publish:

As photographs were found to liven the personality of publications and attract advertisers, editors began to select images that appeared more sophisticated, more the work of specialists, and more about the unattainable. Readers and advertisers were
made to think they were getting something special – and the exotic could be
reinvented. (Ritchin 1990, 44)

With this aim in mind, publishers have discovered that photographs work differently in different print contexts, and therefore design and layout have increased in importance (Barthes 1985; Benjamin 1979; Woodburn 1947). Photographs adopt and adapt to the attributes of the domains in which they are published (Zelizer 2006, 5). This includes how design and image type can impact upon reader interpretation (Perlmutter 1994; Woodburn 1947). For example, surveys show that newspaper pictures stop readers, and that readership of pictures is high compared with other elements of a newspaper (Woodburn 1947; Cope et al. n.d.). These aspects are important for publishers looking to attract strong readership. In addition to attracting an audience, interpretation of photography is ‘heavily dependent upon contextualisation by text and layout’ (Ritchin 1990, 81). Editors take this into account when designing and laying out the pages of newspapers and magazines – all post-production activities.

The picture editor is the voyeurs’ voyeur – the ‘person who sees what the photographers themselves have seen but in the bloodless realm of contact sheets, proof sheets, yellow boxes of slides, and now pixels on the screen’ (Morris 2002, 32). Picture editors find the representative picture, the image that will be seen by others – perhaps around the world. They are the unwitting (or witting, as the case may be) tastemakers, the unappointed guardians of morality, the talent brokers, the accomplices to celebrity (Morris 2002, 32). Today, it is more often the editor and not the photographer who makes the selection of photographs, and it is the editor who decides whether a story is to be published. The choice of image is not simply about what will draw readers into a newspaper and increase readership. Image choice and placement are important influences on editorial photographs. A publication’s choice of what photograph to highlight on the front page or cover conveys a clear message about which story the reader is supposed to accept. At the very least, such a layout decision tells audiences which images are deemed more credible by the publication in question. It also prioritises the information conveyed by the image as the most important to the story (Messaris 1997). The process by which one of the thousands of images in the global news stream is favoured over the others is partly an aesthetic one; yet it is also, to a large extent, a politically motivated process of manufacture and spin, not a natural selection (Perlmutter 2004, 104). In addition to heralding the significance of an image, editors can grant a picture a prominent position and repetitive appearances in their publications.

In today’s newsroom, the digital workflow has changed the ethical landscape, especially as technology enables more portable devices such as mobile phones. Sorting out the ethics of the ‘citizen photojournalist’ phenomenon is one of the challenges facing the photojournalism community in the future. Since the non-professional is not bound by a code of ethics (and may compromise the integrity of an image without even knowing it), newsrooms must be cautious when using images that were taken by the general public. No longer is the conversation in journalism one about whether citizen-produced material will be used; rather, it now focuses on how it will be used (Lyon 2005, 16). Most importantly, editorial standards need to be upheld. Once these issues have been addressed to everyone’s satisfaction, there is no reason why citizens cannot offer their perspectives on global events (Lyon 2005, 16). Editors will have to sort through an increasing number of images from people who are not professional journalists. The challenge is to find ways in newsrooms to sift through
the millions of images that people take on their cell-phone cameras every day, and to determine what meets the standards of journalism (Lyon 2005, 16).

Media ownership has also had an impact on post-production influences on editorial photography in the context of opportunities for publication of hard news photographs in the modern media. The global market for news and editorial images has been changing in significant ways over the past few years, with much less demand for daily spot news and ‘hard news’ (Dorfman 2002, 60). As a result, the line between journalism and entertainment is blurred:

Most – thankfully, not all – American newspapers are more and more insular, ignoring the world. Fewer than half the pages in most publications inform the reader; the majority are there to sell something. Only National Geographic, among major magazines, runs picture stories unbroken by advertising. (Morris 2002, 37)

Modern photographers have had to change their actions to augment these changes and face a changing work environment. Many professional photographers have begun publishing their work in books and exhibitions, due to the lack of serious publication opportunities remaining in the mass media (Morris 2002, 37). There has been a decline in revenues for newspapers and magazines, the main source of funding for photographs undertaking photojournalism projects (Laurent 2009, 18). The internet offers another opportunity. 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 (Rustad 2006). The online environment offers the opportunity to publish works without the influence of a picture editor or publication ideology.

Photographs can be shaped by the economic and ideological constraints of the magazines in which they are published. Picture editors are an important element in the creative process, increasingly becoming responsible for selecting which photographs are published (Langton 2009, 28). How photographs are selected, arranged, and captioned by magazine editors can also construct and amplify meaning in different photographic discourses (Flamiano 2010, 33).

It is the contention of this paper that such post-production issues influence the photographer producing images under these situations. The influence of post-production elements incorporates issues about how expectations about publication affect the actions and attitudes of photographers.

Conclusion

This article proposes a new approach to editorial photographic study that explores how photographers deal in practice with personal beliefs, while working within the constraints of various publication expectations. Within this, the three stages of pre-production, production, and post-production with their different contexts and constraints must be distinguished. Analysis of these provides a link to external influences on photographers’ actions in the field.

I have explained the need to identify the extent to which the narrative potential of a photograph is affected by external influences that pertain to professional editorial photography. The conceptual approach developed here reveals the multi-faceted influences experienced by photographers who are creating images that, in turn, are part of constructing and presenting the narrative potential of editorial photographs. It foregrounds the relationship of professional photographers with technical, cultural, economic and institutional forces that impinge upon all stages of production and publication.
The framework I provide can be used to reveal the multi-faceted forces experienced by photographers whose work is involved intensely in the construction and presentation of important narratives. Research projects on editorial photography can build on this framework to generate new knowledge about photographic professionalism activities, and about the deep relationship of these practices with commercial, cultural, and institutional forces at play during all stages of production and publication. For example, future research will enable an action genre approach to define the three traditional forms of editorial photography: press photography, photojournalism and documentary photography. Despite decades of professional and scholarly argument, there remains little agreement on what, if anything, constitutes and defines these very distinct approaches to photographic practice. This action genre theory can also be tested on the genre of citizen photojournalism and in providing greater understanding of new genres constantly emerging in this time of amateurs posting photographs online in various contexts.

To understand the true meanings inherent in these different genres of photography we cannot look merely at the end result. It is essential to keep looking at the actions of practitioners, and the influences upon them, to determine how changing action genres affect the meaning potential of editorial photographs. Therefore, it has been the contention of this paper that traditional image analysis of editorial photographs needs to be augmented with an account of activity and lived experience on the part of photographers. This theoretical approach makes it possible to identify the extent to which the narrative – or storytelling – function of a photograph is affected by the institutional forces that pertain to each genre.

This enables us to move past debates which only consider the final form of photographs to focus on the actions of photographers at all stages of production, and on the directions given at each stage. The most influential editorial photographs are presented within popular press publications, and influence the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of millions of people, so there is a compelling case to pay closer attention to the complex processes of production that underwrite the publication of such photographs. This is not just about investigating practices of representation: the aim here is to develop a far more rich and comprehensive understanding of production processes in contemporary editorial photography.
References

Cope, Jay; Fifrick, Andeellynn; Holl, Douglas; Martin, Marlon; Nunnally, David; Preston, Donald; Roszkowski, Paul; Schiess, Amy; Tedesco, Allison (n.d.) Impact in print media: a study of how pictures influence news consumers. Retrieved 20 December 2010 from http://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/05B/paper.pdf.


Author
Dr Louise Grayson
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
AUSTRALIA

Postal address:
Level 5, Building Z6
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
Musk Ave, Kelvin Grove
Australia

Email: l.grayson@qut.edu.au
Phone: 61 412 377 736

Dr Louise Grayson is currently a journalism lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia. A former newspaper journalist, she has traveled to more than 20 countries undertaking photojournalism and documentary photographic projects. This practice informs her research in the area of visual journalism.