Photojournalism

The history of media is extensive and fascinating. Over time media, like everything, adapts and changes to survive in the modern world. One of the aspects of media that I personally find the most interesting is photography, how it has changed and grown from a rare black and white experience to something that dominates American culture and is everywhere we look. Because of this I decided to write about the Pictures of The Year exhibit in the basement of the Newseum, where some of the 2010 winners are displayed. Although this exhibit doesn’t mention the struggle for free press or peoples inability to access unbiased news, it is still just as important to the world as writing, television and radio because of its ability to transcend language barriers, both written and speech.

This exhibit is in the Newseum because photographs have the ability to reach out to people in a unique way that words cannot capture. An illiterate population can still understand what is happening in a picture. A society with a restricted press can still take snapshots of what is happening to understand the whole story. Pictures, while they can be misleading and misconstrued, are unbiased except for angle and timing. Photographs are irrefutable evidence that something indeed has happened, that a written story is not made up. In modern society where more and more people are relying on photographic proof and videos before they believe something, pictures are invaluable tools for sharing news.

The 2010 Pictures of the Year exhibit shows how far photography has come as a source of media and news. Before photography, people read magazines and newspapers and had to accept at face value what they were reading. As photography developed, pictures went from grainy and black and white to color images, slowly coming into focus. With sharpening clarity, the time it took to snap a picture went from many minutes to less than a second and now cameras have shutters that can take photos blindingly fast in quick succession. While people could choose to ignore what they were reading, they now are forced to interpret the story with additional information that the picture adds. The picture backs up the story, adding to its credibility. Even alone, a photograph is a powerful emotional tool that can be used to convey stories and contextual images that words sometimes fail to capture, as well as provide entertainment. The winning pictures in the exhibit eloquently show what is happening in the world today without words, and people can grasp reality, as well as the emotion, without needing to read a newspaper or listen to the radio. People want to be able to see a picture or image to tell them what is going on in the world, and without having to read to get that information they can get faster access to information and a more complete story.

I learned many interesting things from this exhibit, both from the video that was playing and from simply observing the photos and reading the captions. The first, and probably most obvious, is that pictures force people to accept what they are otherwise unwilling to see. You cannot ignore a war when there are pictures of soldiers and civilians dying, and you cannot try to deny a story with photographic proof. The reason I find this so interesting is because in todays society people will believe what they see, not just what they hear. At the same time, the angle, timing and expression of a picture can drastically affect the impact a picture has on the viewers. Even catching people making different facial expressions can make them seem like a dramatically different person. On a photojournalism website the steps are shown in how a picture of the president that largely focuses on the scenery is cropped and enhanced step by step until the viewer’s eye is drawn to the president as the focal point of the photo.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is also true that if too many images are presented, the viewers become immune to the photo, no matter how important it may be. The example used at the Newseum is tigers; even though they are an endangered species, people have seen so many pictures of tigers they no longer care when they see a new one. Photographers go to great efforts to keep this from happening, trying to find new ways to make old photos interesting. Another interesting fact I learned is that photographers also document the side of the story that no one hears about. When the BP oilrig leaked into the Gulf of Mexico last year, the news was very focused on who was to blame, on how inefficient they were trying to stop the leak, and on the damage to wildlife and nature. But what was not shown was the giant explosion and the death of eleven of the workers who were on the rig. On BBC’s website there are many articles about the oil rig explosion, and while many of them do mention in passing the death of 11 crew members, a sentence is devoted to these people in order to put the number out in the middle of the story about whether BP is to blame or Halliburton or someone else. A few of the articles were devoted to the efforts of locals trying to clean up the four million barrels of spilled oil, but the majority spent time pointing fingers instead of addressing the ongoing story. Photos of the incident present the facts, focusing on the event itself.

The use of photography, as an art form, to spread awareness and tell a story, is what makes photojournalism so unique. While it falls into the genre of photography, photojournalism “balances the aesthetics of art with the reporting of journalism, appealing to people as it informs them”. (Newseum exhibit) This definition is probably the most interesting thing I saw at the exhibit, because I hadn’t quite realized how much pictures do affect my opinions and emotions. If the telling of news can be translated into art, then media will never die but keep finding new ways to evolve.



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