

GLOBAL

Pictures That Change History: Why the World Needs Photojournalists

It's never been easier to take photos—or harder to capture ones that matter.

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In one of the most widely circulated photographs of 2013, a Turkish riot policeman uses tear gas against a protester in a red dress in Istanbul's Taksim Square. (Reuters/Osman Orsa)

This week, Ron Haviv described to me the first time one of his photographs changed history.

The acclaimed war photographer was surrounded by his life's work, which is now on exhibit in New York's [Anastasia Photo gallery](#). At age 23, Haviv took a photograph of supporters of Panamanian dictator General Manuel Noriega beating the country's recently elected opposition vice president.





Supporters of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega attack elected Vice President Guillermo Ford in Panama City, in 1989. (Ron Haviv)

What is striking about the image is not just the crimson blood covering the man's shirt. It is the Panamanian soldier standing a few feet away—doing nothing to protect him. The photograph appeared on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Months later, President George H.W. Bush cited the riveting image in his speech justifying the U.S. invasion of Panama.

“All of the sudden,” said Haviv, a longtime colleague and friend, “I had this understanding that the work I was doing was going out into the world and creating and causing a reaction. It helped cement my desire to do this for a living.”

A quarter century later, photography is our predominant means of communication. Dizzying technological advances allow a mind-boggling number of images—half-a-billion a day—to be shot and posted online. Yet the emergence of the Web and smartphones has made it harder than ever for photographers to earn a living.

Haviv, a founding member of the photo agency VII, says only a handful of magazines and newspapers now send photographers to cover overseas stories. Haviv fears that iconic images that could trigger the public's conscience are being missed.

“There are eyes missing on major stories,” said Haviv, who has covered most major conflicts over the last 30 years.

Like so many other industries, the Web has had a disorienting and double-edged impact on photography. It has made photography more popular and accessible. It has also, however, undermined photography's traditional source of funding—print advertising. Some news operations are gradually increasing their online revenues but they have been unable to make up for unprecedented losses in print.

This spring, the *Chicago Sun-Times* eliminated its entire 28-person photography department. (Last month, under union pressure, it hired back four of them.) As they shifted to Web-only publications, *U.S. News and World Report* fired its photography staff and *Newsweek* released its contract photographers. Other magazines, newspapers, and news agencies, including



Rwandan Hutu refugees in Zaire, in 1994. (Ron Haviv)

Reuters, have reduced their photography staffs and rates.

Last month, the Pew Research Center found that more news photographers, artists, and videographers have been laid off than any other type of journalist. Nationwide, their numbers decreased by 43 percent, from 6,171 in 2000 to 3,493 in 2012.

Donald R. Winslow, a veteran photographer and editor of *News Photographer* magazine, the trade publication of the National Press Photographers Association, called those cutbacks a strategic mistake.

“We now live in the most visual, literate society America has ever had,” Winslow told me. “As newspapers took their product to the Web, they failed to realize that they needed to add photographs, not reduce them.”

Posting smartphone self-portraits online has become so ubiquitous that the Oxford English Dictionary declared “selfie” the 2013 word of the year. The buzz—and debate—surrounding the practice reached a crescendo when President Barack Obama posed for Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt’s iPhone self-portrait with British Prime Minister David Cameron at Nelson Mandela’s memorial service.

At the same time, the Obama White House, using social media and an in house-photographer, has created an Orwellian system for distributing sanitized images of the president that excludes photojournalists. The administration prohibits the White House press corps from photographing Obama at work in the Oval Office—a long-accepted practice.



The remains of a man who was beheaded and burned during the Kosovo war, in 1999. (Ron Haviv)

“By no stretch of the imagination are these images journalism,” Santiago Lyon, director of photography at the Associated Press, wrote in a scathing op-ed piece in *The New York Times* last week. “Rather, they propagate an idealized portrayal of events on Pennsylvania Avenue.”

Others argue that technological change has irreversibly changed photojournalism.

Professional photographers, they insist, will inevitably join the ranks of toll collectors, telephone switchboard operators, and other jobs rendered obsolete.

Yet photographers are embracing the new realities and—through their images—proving their relevance.

Despite the billions of cell phone images posted on Facebook and Flickr, the vast majority of iconic photographs capturing major events are taken by professional photographers. Nine of the 10 images in *Time* magazine's "Top 10 Photos of 2013," for example, were taken by professional photographers.

"Yes, there are a million images out there," *Time*'s director of photography, Kira Pollack, told me in an interview. "But these journalists' images are the ones that are the most compelling."

Judge for yourself. Here are *Time*'s [top 10](#).

Blogs featuring the work of professional photographers at [Reuters](#), [The Atlantic](#), [The New York Times](#), [Los Angeles Times](#), [Boston Globe](#) and [Denver Post](#), among others, continue to draw high online traffic.

James Estrin, a *New York Times* photographer who co-edits the paper's photography blog, "Lens," with columnist David Gonzalez, said that the explosion in social media imagery is impacting photography in two ways. First, it is creating a vast new audience that appreciates great photography. Second, it is changing the nature of photographs. The vast majority of the imagery we share online is about ourselves, our families, and our friends—not others.

"The photograph is almost always—98 percent—a piece of currency in a social interaction," he said. "The function of a photograph is different."

Estrin said he does not yet know if the changes, on balance, are positive. He worries that today's torrent of images makes it impossible for an iconic photo to emerge—for example, Nick Ut's harrowing photograph of a young Vietnamese girl, who had stripped off her burning clothes, screaming after a napalm attack. He is concerned that photos today may not have the same impact.



Phan Thi Kim Phuc runs from a napalm attack in Vietnam, in 1972. (Nick Ut/AP)

"Are there so many photographs that it's difficult for one to stick out?" Estrin asked. "Even when a photo goes viral, it's only for 24 hours."

Stephen Mayes, the former chief executive officer of VII and a longtime executive at other photo agencies, says photographers must reinvent themselves.

“It’s up to the professionals to prove that we have value,” he said. “The world doesn’t owe us a living because we make great pictures.”

Haviv and others are doing just that. They are developing large social media followings, shooting documentary films, and accepting grants from foundations, non-profits, and the United Nations to support their work. Photo editors say that images taken by amateurs can be powerful, but professional photographers are still needed to compose the deeply-layered images that haunt viewers.

Professional photographers are vital. Without them, the world’s conscience will wither. They bear witness for all of us.

This post originally appeared on Reuters.com, an Atlantic partner site.

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