Opening Up Photojournalism

BY DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

Many visual journalists (photographers and videographers) believe that their craft is not accorded the same respect as word reporting. This is an old prejudice. With the exception of "high art," visual images have long been thought of as a simple and uncomplex mode of communication, or, as the Medieval Pope Gregory the Great put it, "What scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant."[1] Yet, the modern environment is dominated by images which have powerful influences on personal, political and social behavior. The ways in which these images are created, impart meaning and are interpreted by audiences are complicated and little understood. Moreover, not only critical scholars, but many public groups are raising important questions about the objectivity (accuracy and representativeness) and credibility of visual reporting. It is vital for scholars and news professionals to treat the photograph (video or print) as an object worthy of intense inspection and debate. In short, the path to respect begins with "speaking up" about what photojournalism is and what it can be.

THE "INREALITY" OF VISUAL MEANING

For academics who use photography as research tool, the complexity of the image has always been self-evident, but also troubling. Many anthropological researchers avoid using photographs in their work because they feel they have less control over the content of a picture than the product of their pen.[2] Yet, this ambiguity can enrich the appreciation of the importance of images in society and their value as teaching tools. Let me offer two examples from a photographic documentary that I am conducting of a small police department in Hennepin County, Minnesota.

Both photos portray a similar police event; an under-the-influence suspect is searched before being placed in the back of a squad car. Whenever I show these pictures to students, without giving them any site-specific context or captioning, the reaction to each picture is slightly different. The male officer [Fig. 1] is generally taken to be "in control" or to "dominate" the suspect. The female officer [Fig. 2] is seen to be "struggling" or "not in control," that is not dominating the suspect. Now, what is interesting here is that in my estimation, from being there and perhaps also from my own biases, both officers were in equal control of the situation. The search procedure took about the same length of time and was conducted routinely in both cases. That students perceive a difference in what was going on demonstrates that the images contain visual cues that may lead viewers to varying conclusions regardless of the "bias" of the photographer. Certainly, a very simple universal visual cue is present: the male officer is bigger (huge, muscular) than the suspect. He literally towers above him, clamping down his hand in a posture of domination. Also, the male officer's facial expression is blank, betraying no fear or apprehension. The female officer, on the other hand, is small (short, slight-of-build) in relation to the suspect and the car, and people tend to read exertion or struggle into her pose and expression rather than control. The male officer is relatively taller and the female officer is relatively shorter to the observer. The pictures are objective in the sense that they portray events that really happened, the positions and expressions of the subjects at the moment of picture-taking (1/500th of second for the male officer in daylight, 1/250th of second for the female officer with flash), and the relative size relationships between the subjects as measured by a fixed point (my own height). In short, each picture contains a portion of meaning copied from the real world.

However, the interpretation of these pictures must obviously be understood within a social context. Included are traditions of visual representation with which audiences are familiar, wider cultural prejudices and assumptions, and the standardized practices of news image production. First, note that the female officer is in a contorted posture. Likewise, contemporary advertising often shows women bending, or expressing a body cant towards men as an expression of deference.[3] Second, the pictures are interpreted within general social assumptions. Several male students wrote in comments about this picture that it is an "example of how women can't hack it as cops;" other students implied the same point less blatantly. Finally, the standards of news representation must be considered. The second picture is more visually interesting or dynamic than the first by the standards of photo-reportage, largely because of the more dynamic expressions and poses. Hence some of the requirements of accuracy may conflict with the concern of getting interesting pictures.

What can be drawn from these examples is that the "objectivity" of a photograph is highly dependent on many factors, both conventional and universal. Both pictures portray true events; they are not faked in any sense of the word. Nor is there missing visual information: the officers were alone with the suspects (except for the observer). However, in another sense, the second photo is less accurate than the first. I caught the female officer in a fraction of a second's pose that did not correctly portray the emotional and interpersonal attitudes of the situation. I captured the moment; I failed to capture the event. That this was not my intention is relevant; the biases of an audience can often override the intention of the photographer or the circumstances of reality.

A more general point can be drawn: the accuracy of a photograph, especially one used in depicting news, is relative to the event – reality – being pictured. This criterion is worth examining in the contradictions of news coverage of my subjects, the police. Much of their work is not sensational: waiting, form filing, taking reports, just driving around. But in the visual media world realism is typically equated with violence or sensational events. A TV show (e.g., COPS) is considered reality-based if it conspicuously displays action, conflict and confrontation. Visual journalism seeks out, then, not reality, but "inreality," intensified and "interesting" reality, events that really happened but that may not be representative of the greater picture.

THE "OBJECTIVE" PHOTOGRAPH

Of course, such questions cannot be examined solely in relation to a few images, but rather they should be understood within an industrial system of news gathering and through the sociology of human vision.

The idea that news reporting should be "objective" dates back

to the 19th century. Objectivity's rise to the status of industry norm has been explained as being related to economic benefits and costs, innovations in the technology of newspaper production, the requirements of building a professional image and workforce, and social and political struggles.[4] It is no coincidence that the notion of news

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Figure 1

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Figure 2

objectivity developed in the same positivist climate as the invention of photography. Talbot, Wedgewood, Niépce, Daguerre and the

other fathers of "writing with light" sought to copy reality, or as one early reviewer put it, to hold a "mirror up to nature."[5] If journalistic objectivity is defined as "apparent value-free impartial reporting of observable or factual data from a detached, impersonal point of view,"[6] then photographs become the best evidence of the reporter's neutrality, lack of bias, and status as a third person observer who records events without influencing them.

Today, the premise that photography (or any form of visual representation) can project an objective view of reality is in disrepute. The extreme of such a position is best represented by the philosopher Nelson Goodman who holds that, "Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time."[7]

Yet, a case can be made that the discarded ideal of objectivity should be a goal for visual reporting, even if it is not fully identifiable or obtainable. A principle of quasi-objectivity for photojournalism, then, can be developed through three broad arguments. First, experimentation has strongly suggested that visual images can be iconic, that is they can look like what they represent. Second, the camera is capable of conveying visual meanings that mimic the way our brains perceive the visual world. Last, retaining the notion of objectivity serves both as a useful device for critiques of press practices and for public debate. In sum, photojournalists, their critics in the academy, and above all news consumers have much to gain from building a more complex notion of objectivity rather than denying its possibility.

THE CASE FOR REALISM

Images distort sizes, dimensions and colors and are usually two dimensional. However, the skills viewers need to understand pictorial media develop quickly and often appear to differ little from those learned by previous experience in the act of seeing.[8] Naive viewers – people who have never seen pictures – actually have no, or inconsequential, difficulty identifying familiar subject matter in color photographs,[9] and only slight difficulty in understanding the shading codes in black-and-white photographs.[10] In sum, recognition of familiar objects in realistic pictures seems to be an "unlearned ability."

In addition, many conventions of pictures are grounded in universal experience. For example, there is a visual convention that to photograph a character from a low angle is to imply they are powerful ("big"), while to shoot them from a high angle is to imply they are weak ("small").[11] This convention is a common one, though its use and application varies (e.g., to police officers of different sizes). The effect is perhaps dependent on all people spending the early years of their lives being physically smaller and shorter in stature than other people, to whom, in any society, they more or less owe their subsistence and direction: e.g., parents. During the Iran/Contragate Hearings, for example, it was suggested that Oliver North's popularity was assisted by his consistently being pictured from a low angle.[12] This is not to say that the low angle is the only possible visual cue for dominance. In many cultures, the big person image was created by constructing large-scale images of rulers, such as the colossal statuary of ancient kings and modern despots.

Note that neither of these universals (of reading images, of formal structures) undercut ideological critiques of imagery. To some extent
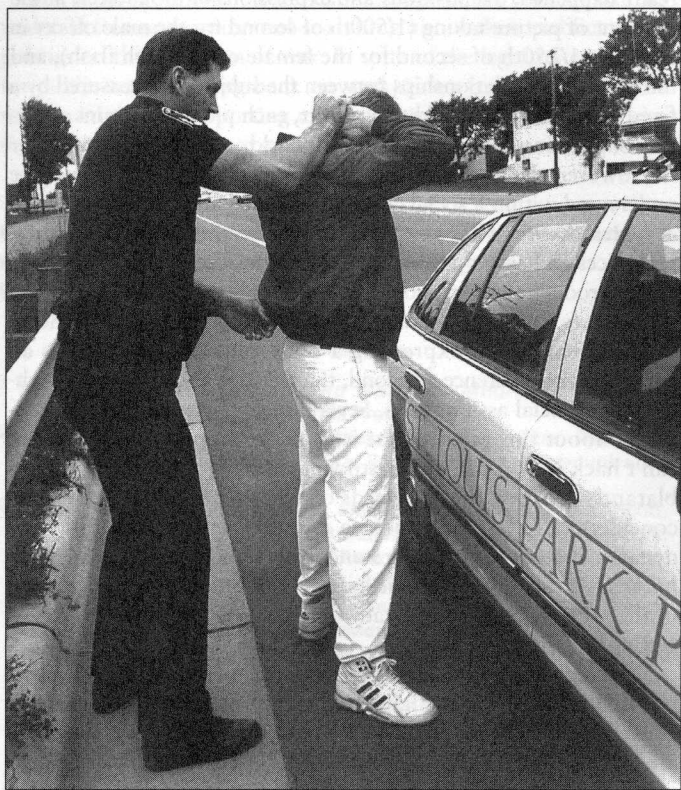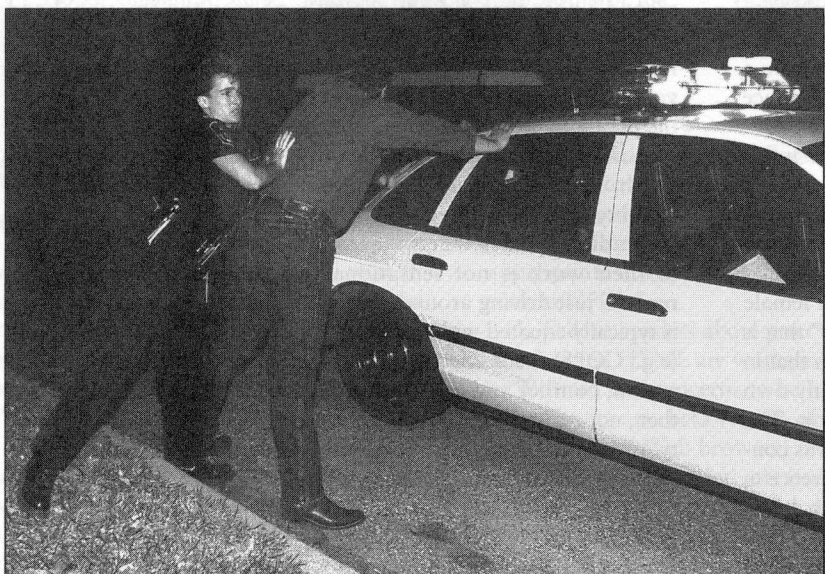
visual images are a constructed social product rather than an idiosyncratic creation, a translation of the world rather than a copy of it, an act of recoding, not recording. However, it adds to our appreciation of the power of photographs in society to understand that some of the power of visual persuasion comes from tapping into an experiential and perhaps hardwired system of representation. It becomes a renewed challenge to scholars and professionals alike to uncover how closely a particular image copies the world, and assess the degree to which its elements form accurate representations of reality. This is the essence of quasi-objectivity; if we deny its possibility then on what basis could we say that any particular image is inaccurate?[13]

CONCLUSIONS

In physics, the "objective" is the lens in a telescope or microscope that is closest to the thing observed. Likewise, the visual journalist, 24mm lens upraised, or videocam balanced on shoulder, is often the closest observer of a news event and can be the most effective translator of that view. But proximity should not be confused with objectivity. The task at hand for newsworkers and scholars is not to jettison objectivity but rather to clarify its general principles and measure its local application. In this light, the reporter's traditional practice of claiming neutrality is dysfunctional. The path to objectivity begins with self-awareness; recognizing and examining one's biases, not feigning their absence or irrelevance; in short, it's time to talk about images. This is especially important for those involved in the creation of communication tools, like images, that have elements of natural realism. It is in the interest of journalists, scholars and the public to assert that there are standards of objectivity to which everyone should be held accountable. It is a major failing of the news industry that those standards are rarely discussed in public. Most people probably know much more about what goes into making sausages or theatrical films, than they know about how (and why) images appear on the pages of their newspaper.

A policy of open disclosure and discussion about news images could take various forms. Photographers can be encouraged to discuss their views of the scene, their expectations, what they were sent to find. Newspapers could print contact sheets; editors might discuss their selection process and why some stories are visually represented while others are not. People could be encouraged to send "photographs to the editor;" stories can begin showing more than one "point-of-view" or "visual side of the story."[14] Such news practices would be radical only in the sense of opening the processes of visual reporting to spirited inspection from within and without. The goal is to create a more aware public, more empowered photojournalists, and a more mature quest for objectivity.

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1 C. Davis-Weyer. Gregory's Epistolae, IX, 209 & XI, 10. *In Early Medieval Art 300-1150: Sources and Documents* (NJ: Englewood Cliffs, 1971).

2 See discussion in J. Collier Jr., "Visual Anthropology's Contribution," *Visual Anthropology*, 1 (1987): 37-46.

3 The late sociologist Erving Goffman called this a "microecological code" of deference: *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976).

4 The origin of the "objectivity" code in journalism has been much debated: W. Blankenburg & R. Walden, "Objectivity, Interpretation and Economy in Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly*, 54(1977): 591-595; J. Carey, "The Communications Revolution and the Professional Communicator," *The Sociological Review Monograph*,13(1969); D. Schiller, "An Historical Approach to Objectivity and Professionalism in American News Reporting," *Journal of Communication*, 29 (1969): 46-57; M. Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of the American Newspaper* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); D. Shaw, "News Bias and the Telegraph: A Study of Historical Change," *Journalism Quarterly*, 44(1967): 3+.

5 V. Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981): pp. 64-65; see also H. Gernsheim, *The Origins of Photography* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1981): pp. 199, 271, 32n.

6 H. Stensaas, "Development of the Objectivity Ethic in U.S. Daily Newspapers," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 2 (1986): 50-60.

7 N. Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1976): p. 37.

8 For a compelling and readable overview of this question, see: P. Messaris, *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, Body* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994). See also experiments with children who have had no experience with pictures or experiments with very young children: M.E. Barrera & D. Maurer, "Recognition of Mother's Photographed Face by the Three-Year Old Infant," *Child Development*, 52(1981): 714-716; J. DeLoache, M.S. Strauss, & J. Maynard, "Picture Perception in Infancy," *Infant Behavior and Development*, 2(1979): 77-89; J. Hochberg & V. Brooks, "Pictorial Recognition as an Unlearned Ability: A Study of One Child's Performance," *American Journal of Psychology*, 75 (1962): 624-628; D. Maurer, "Infant's Perception of Facedness," in T.M. Field and N.A. Fox, eds., *Social Perception in Infants* (Norwood, NJ: J. Erlbaum, 1985): pp. 73-100; R. Olson, A. Yonas, & R. Cooper, "Development of Pictorial Perception," in M.A. Hagen, ed., *The Perception of Pictures*, Vol. 2. (New York: Academic, 1980): pp. 155-192.

9 See J.B. Deregowski, H. Ellis, & J. Shepherd, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Recognition of Pictures of Faces and Cups" *International Journal of Psychology* 8(1973): 269-273; G. Jahoda et al., "Utilization of Pictorial Information in Classroom Learning: A Cross-cultural Study," *AV Communication Review*, 24(1976): 295-315; N. Modinao, P. Moldonado, & B. Villasana, "Accurate Perception of Colored Illustration: Rates of Comprehension in Mexican American Children," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 13(1982): 490-495).

10 B. L. Cook, *Understanding Pictures in Papua New Guinea* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Foundation); D. Fussell & A. Haaland, "Communicating with Pictures in Nepal," *Educational Broadcasting International*, 11 (1978): 25-32; D.A. Walker, *Understanding Pictures* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1979). See also: M.A. Hagan & R.K. Jones, "Cultural Effects on Pictorial Perception: How Many Words is One Picture Really Worth?," in R.D. Walk & H.L. Picks, eds., *Perception and Experience* (New York: Plenum, 1978).

11 See P. Messaris, "Visual 'Manipulation': Visual Means of Affecting Responses to Images," *Communication*,13 (1992): 181-195. See also R.N. Kraft, "The Influence of Camera Angle on Comprehension of Pictorial Events," *Memory and Cognition*, 15 (1987): 291-307; J. Meyers-Levy & L. Peracchio, "Getting an Angle on Advertising: The Effect of Camera Angle on Product Evaluations," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 29(1992): 454-461; H. Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990): pp. 216-291.

12 See P. Messaris, ibid. See also K. Adatto, *Picture Perfect: The Art and Artifice of Public Image Making* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

13 J. Lichtenberg, "In Defense of Objectivity," in J. Curran & M. Gurevitch, eds., *Mass Media and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991): pp. 216-231.

14 See: W. L. Bennet, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1988); M. Gurevitch & J. Blumler, "Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values," in J. Lichtenberg, ed., *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): pp. 269-289.