

The Role of Photo Journalist in Local Press: Changes and Approaches in Digital Era

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Abstract: Since the emergence of digitalization, three central elements have formed the foundation of modern photojournalism: digital photo editing, video content for online news, and amateur photography. Together, these elements shape the professional identity of contemporary photojournalists. As highlighted in the literature, journalism in democratic societies is guided by core values such as public service, ethics, objectivity, autonomy, and immediacy, reinforcing the role of journalists as impartial, fair, and trustworthy providers of information. Within this context, photography plays a crucial role in mass media by capturing real-time events and preserving them as historical records with lasting societal impact. However, the role of a press photographer has become increasingly demanding in the digital era, requiring rapid decision-making, adaptability, and technical proficiency. Unlike their analog predecessors, modern photojournalists must navigate a fast-paced media environment while competing with amateur photographers empowered by mobile technology. This study examines the evolving role of photojournalists, the changes within the profession, and the strategies adopted to remain relevant. Using qualitative methods, including observations, interviews, industry experience, and document analysis, the research provides insights into current practices and professional standards. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of press photography as a dynamic communication medium in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Photography, newspaper, digital era, professionalism, photographers photo journalist, news portal, photojournalism, social media, citizen photojournalism.

INTRODUCTION

The role of photojournalists in newspapers is defined as collecting and documenting socio-cultural and current political climates objectively with ethics. The job of the newspaper photographer was to document what had happened at the time. The footage documented is not just meant to be consumed one-off but should be considered as a historical property because it can also have an impact on society. In today's digital age, the professionalism of a press photographer is assessed through 3 key aspects which are digital photography editing, video production, and also content that is evaluated by readers of "user-generated images" in the newspaper.

Challenges facing press photographers in the digital landscape are unlike what their predecessors faced in the past. Current practitioners must be able to think fast and adapt to their surroundings in real-time when dispensing their duties. They need to be sensitive, intelligent, and creative in covering news materials quickly and accurately. This is the difference between regular photographers and visual journalists. Photographers only capture photos and visual reporters are more into the context of the photo. In the pre-digital world, photography harks to the days of bulky mechanical cameras with dark rooms necessary for film and print processing to manual photo editing.

Today, all that magic occurs in a single microprocessor in the mobile phone that allows you to do all that and more. The value of a professional photographer now solely lies as a job description. In truth, when the digital camera was introduced to the market, it brought down a lot of prohibitive barriers that limited this noble profession to a select few. Now, everybody can partake in this profession and the costly inhibitors are all but gone with digital technology. From a tool for professionals, photography has become a mass hobby for the general public.

As mentioned previously, with the availability of digital equipment and techniques, now anybody can become a photographer. Quoting from Susan Sontag's writings in her book, "On Photography" (1997), "Photography which was initially an art activity but a massive shift of technology in the production industry resulted in a pile of amateur photographers (netizens), photography has become an art form for the mass media but most people do not practice it as an art form." Instead, it became a social ritual for weddings or significant events for example. As more people get involved, photography became a popular culture up that up to a point, anybody with basic knowledge of photography can accept photography jobs that previously were reserved for professional photographers.

Due to the abundance of photographers in today's digital world, a press photographer needs to have higher-level credibility as opposed to the amateurs (netizens). In this study, we will discover the current role of press photographers and how they 1) see, 2) overcome and 3) implement their skills in the ever-changing landscape of digital photography.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of the photojournalist in the digital era.

According to Utusan Malaysia Photo Editor, digital era enables press photographers to upload and submit their work wherever they are, compared to before. Before, it takes hours for a photograph to be developed, processed before it could be submitted for approval. Now, the news photographer is at the beck and call of the editor. They are more similar to management due to the constraints of time and pressure of reporting real-time news. As noted by the Photo Editor of The Malaysian Insight, working for a news portal requires fast response and immediate action by its staff because time is money. Any delay could cause a hot story to be old news within minutes. This observation is seconded by the Photo Creative Editor of NSTP. He concurs that despite the ease of technology benefitting the work process, the packed schedule of a press photographer can be very demanding in the digital era. They need to compete with social media where a story could break within a matter of seconds as soon as it occurs as it is immediately picked up by millions globally.

The local newspaper can never compete with such reach, even on their website or news portal. To compete, the press photographer has to rely on the quality of their work. The Assistant Photo Editor of The Star agrees that their photos are uploaded without any digital manipulations. The lenses of their camera tell the story as it is, without any filters. Photojournalists and news agencies to being responsive to the cultural changes in photography. (Kalazic, Z, Horvat, J, MIjoc, J, p194) Djink (2008) states that the use of digital cameras, mobile phone cameras, photo blogs, and any other devices can be used to propagate the role of photographs as the chosen idiom for a new generation.

Academicians debate if photojournalists are actual professionals or just plain photographers (Dueze 2005: Singer 2007). According to the Chief Editor of Malaysia Gazette, photography is a professional occupation because it brings credence to the work captured. Their role is similar to that of news journalists in ethically providing facts. Not only do they capture the subject, but they also need to be part of society so that they can get to the real truth that matters (Singer, 2011). Despite the ethos surrounding the sanctity of the ethics of a photographer, digital technology may cause more harm to the industry when it enables anybody to have the agency to report the news. The paparazzi is one such example where anyone with a functioning camera can take on the role of a reporter to capture and document at will with no disregard to one right to privacy.

From the perspective of a photojournalist, Henri Cartier-Bresson reflects that photography is more akin to a documentary photographer. He emphasizes that photos act as journals of life. Each moment is captured and documented as a still life from an individual's perspective. This is what Nayman (1973) refers to as professionalism in photography where professional conduct, responsibility, autonomy and commitment plays a large part in their job.

From an ethical perspective, Greenwood (1957) posits that social work has 5 main attributes which are i) Systematic Theory, ii) Integrity, iii) Community, iv) Code of Conduct, and v) Culture. Malaysia photojournalists need to comply with the Media Act, notwithstanding the vagueness and inconsistency of the code of ethics that applies to all types of media practitioners Mus Chairil Samani (2000). These principles must be examined and revised to suit current needs. The Emergency Ordinance Special Powers (No.2) 2021 is one such ruling. This ordinance was introduced to stop the spreading of false and fake news. Essentially, it allows the government to suppress fake news and empowers them to determine and decide what entails fake news (Utusan Malaysia, April 2021).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

1) Today's professional press photographer has to face increasing challenges such as time constraints, increasing workload, occupational hazards, and demanding employers that the identity of their profession needs to be reevaluated. (Bock, 2008, 2011: Buehner, 2013: Greenwood and Reinardy, 2011: Mortensen and Keshelashivilli, 2013)

2) With the encroachment of the new media on traditional media's territories, the professionalism of press photographers needs to be examined so that the editorial stance has more integrity, open and holding fast to the ethos of journalism: truth, precise, objective, and neutral. In reality, press photographers in the digital era should not be beholden to archaic principles because they need to move on with the times (Chamil Wariya, 2015)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes the theories of Denzin and Lincoln (1994) in their qualitative study "interpret, understood, experienced and understood". This is in line with the research objective 1) To study the role of a press photographer in the digital era, 2) To analyze the changes affecting the role of press photographers, and 3) To determine the best practice by professional press photographers in today's digital landscape.

Focusing on the descriptive study, this research is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of the analysis of local newspapers, online newspapers, interviews, and correspondence with editors, photojournalists, journalists, academicians, and self-observations.

Among the journalists and editors interviewed are from newspapers and news agencies such as The Star, The New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia, BERNAMA News Agency, and AFP (France-Press Agency). Journalists and editors interviewed from online news portals are The Malaysian Insight, Malaysia Kini, and Malaysia Gazette. According to Faridah, K.E, Chong and J.L 2001 and Nayman 1973, professionalism in journalists consists of the following pillars which are i) expertise, ii) commitment, iii) autonomy, and iv) responsibility.

DISCUSSION

A photographer or press journalist must have strong principles and ethics when discharging their duties because it is the foundation of trust that the public relies on. The digital era ushered in a lot of changes when the speed of content delivery over the news portal outstrips the capabilities of the traditional newspaper. This is where the task of the press photographer becomes subject to the scrutiny of the public eye. Their professionalism is measured by the society based on the quality and integrity of their work. The article furnished below is a good example of how the professionalism currently practiced by the industry is questioned by the general public. Due to their focus on obtaining the best photos, photographers in the mosque failed to follow Covid-19 SOP procedures exemplified by the subject of their focus. This captured moment by a mosque officer naturally became a hot topic in the sphere of public opinion. In Malaysia, the ethics of Malaysian journalists is applied in line with the National Philosophy (Rukun Negara).

MALAYSIAN JOURNALIST CODE OF ETHICS

MAIN PRINCIPLES

Malaysian journalists shall follow the principles and objectives as described in the National Philosophy;

- 1) To realize its role in contributing meaningfully towards the country's nation-building To be fully committed to fostering national harmony among races in Malaysia
- 2) To realize the dangers of communism, racism, and religious zealots towards the stability and safety of the nation

- 3) To realize the importance of liberalism, tolerance, democracy, and the free role of traditional journalism in providing news and facts responsibly and truthfully without fear and favor to the Malaysian public
- 4) To realize that honest journalism is an asset to the nation
- 5) To realize that no one is barred from entry in the profession of journalism

To realize the role of journalists in shaping the formulation of national policy, Therefore, following the Malaysian Journalist Ethics:

1. The task of the journalist is to report the truth and respect for the right of the public to truth
2. In pursuance of this duty the journalist will defend the twin principles: freedom in the honest collection and publications of the news; and the right of fair comment and criticism.
3. The journalist will use only fair methods to obtain news, photographs, and documents.
4. The journalist will do the utmost to rectify and current any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate.
5. The journalist will observe professional secrets regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.
6. The journalist will be honest in discharging his duty and avoid plagiarism, calumny, slander, libel, and unfounded accusations and avoid acceptance of bribery in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.
7. The journalist will avoid reporting news that is racist and extreme that is against the multi-racial community ethics of Malaysia.
8. The journalist recognizes the law and principles of Malaysia that are in the jurisdiction of his profession.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Based on this study, the author can analyze and understand the role of professionalism among press photographers in the digital era. This will help assist them in terms of career commitments by expanding the ideas and creativity of their photography works. The importance of this study also contributes to the meaning and understanding in the field of press photography. In this digital era, a lot of changes have impacted the press photographer, especially in areas of ethics and integrity. The overall impact has affected the media organization, the role of ethics, autonomy of journalists, the background of education, work experience, and commitment of the journalist. (Faraday, 2002).

A new approach to photography in the digital era has made press photographers more sensitive to their surroundings and the demand on their professionalism, They will need to act fast when documenting and uploading news content because of real-time demand. Nevertheless, this does

not prevent them from compromising their credibility and integrity by manipulating the photos. There are no existing guidelines or code of ethics when it comes to digital manipulations of the photo. New press photographers need to be trained in the details of the 'Do's and 'Don'ts' of photo manipulation. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission need to constantly monitor the spread of photography and news that might jeopardize the harmony of this nation. Official acts such as the Sedition Act 1948, Official Secret Act 1972, and Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 were created for such purpose. However, the author believes that professional press photographers in Malaysia will not be led astray if they follow the spirit of Malaysia's National Principles (Rukun Negara) and guidelines set by the Malaysian Journalists Code of Ethics.

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3. CY Leow, 12th April 2017, Former Chief Photo Editor, The Star, NST, The Dominion (New Zealand)
4. Dato' Dr Chamil Wariya, CEO, Malaysian Press Institute, October 2019
5. Glenn Guan, 5th April 2017, Assistant Chief Photographer, Star Media Group, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
6. Jimadie Shah Othman, Editor Malay Desk, March 2017, Malaysia Kini, Petaling Jaya, Selangor
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9. Mohammad Naim Firdaus Abdul Aziz, 17th April 2017, Photographer, Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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