

## Can pictures ever be objective?

It could be said that citizen taken pictures taken on a mobile phone at a news scene are more objective – it is likely that the photographer involved has had no formal training in photography, composition etc. therefore they are just taking a photograph of what they see.

BUT anyone taking a photo is being subjective in terms of what they choose to photograph and what they don't.

### *Arguments for and against objectivity of citizen journalism*

#### **PROs**

Photographer probably had no formal training in photography, composition etc

At the scene at the time of the incident (if survivor) therefore witnessing events as they happened

Simply showing photos of the scene, are not taking sides

Probably limited amount of time available therefore less likely to be able to pose or compose a scene.

#### **CONs**

People are now more aware than ever of the power of photographs and their use through social networks and online photo-sharing sites

No control over how their photos are used by the news and other media

They are choosing what to photograph and what to omit

Personal selection and bias – not everyone takes photos at the scene of an event such as this. Is the type of person who will photograph such a scene representative of the general population? And if not does that make the photo subjective?

### **Objectivity in Documentary Photography**

I think that a strong argument can be made that there is no such thing as objectivity in documentary photography. I am reminded of the quote by the eminent historian E.H. Carr from his book *What is History* (Carr 1987 p120) "The facts of History cannot be purely objective, since they become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them by the historian". In a similar way a photograph of a news scene or a documentary photograph cannot be objective as it has only been published or displayed as a result of the significance attached to it by an editor or curator.

The photographer is choosing what to include within the photograph, and what to exclude, as well as how to compose the picture and when to press the shutter; all to produce the final effect that they desire.

In post-production there may be manipulation of the image to 'improve' it.

Finally if it is to be used in a publication then there will be a whole series of editorial decisions on how the photos are used, what text accompanies them and what captions are attached to them. If displayed in a gallery then the photographer and curator will discuss how the photos are displayed,

in what order, how they are captioned and what accompanying notes or publicity will be produced. All of these stages introduce elements of subjectivity.

On a previous OCA course I did (The Art of Photography) I went on a study visit to the Press Association images library in Nottingham. There was a fascinating ethical discussion on how a photograph of the Madrid train bombing was treated, the image showed the wreckage of the train and the people being treated on the tracks, but it also showed, quite prominently in the foreground, a severed limb. The photograph was shown front page in Newspapers around the world and it was interesting to see how different papers dealt with it;

- An American paper published it as shot
- A Belgian paper cloned out the severed limb
- The Guardian in the UK published the whole photo but desaturated the severed limb
- Time magazine published the whole photo, but printed their headline at the bottom of the image so that the severed limb was blocked out.

This shows how the photographer may not be able to control how the image is dealt with after it has been taken. Even with the best of intentions and taken as objectively as possible (in the mind of the photographer) an image, and how it is treated, is subjected to many decisions before it is shown to the wider world.

I think the issue is best summed up by (Bate, 2009, p. 53) when he writes “the idea that one picture is more objective than another only really means that one has hidden its ideology within a rhetoric of neutrality and description, while the other flaunts its codes of subjective investment”.

Perhaps the best documentary photographs are those that acknowledge their subjectivity and accommodate it within the work and its display.

## **Bibliography**

Bate, D., 2009. *Photography: The Key Concepts*. New York: Berg.