

An Editorial on Social Photography

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Defining Social Photography

Social photography is a more encompassing form of human rights photography where injustices, illicit activities and other abuses are spot lit for visibility to a larger audience making the continuation of them more difficult. It is a form of pictorial whistle-blowing that attempts to endear others who are in a stronger position to apply corrective leverage.

It is the visual fuel for the engine of altruism to ease the suffering of those less fortunate. It is a branch of photography that enlightens and persuades.

Additionally, it diverges from the journalistic ideal of objectivity. Instead *social photography* embodies a motivating message within its visual collage of images. It is a body of work with the intention to be persuasive and motivating through its portrayals.

History

The beginnings of *social photography* parallels the history of the photography itself. In the 1850s Henry Mayhew illustrated his sociological study titled **London Labour and the London Poor** with woodcuts derived from an early form of photography known as daguerreotypes. Then later in New York in the 1880s a police reporter named Jacob A. Riis depicted life in the slums and immigrant communities where he felt these circumstance lead to criminality. In 1890 Riis used the title **How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York** to motivate the well-to-do and policy makers to first see and then change the living conditions of their fellow humans. Later *social photography* was

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instrumental in bringing forth child labor laws through the portrayal children in textile mills in the US and other industries in the 1900s.

Motivation

Jeffrey Warner who has covered post-war Bosnia prior to issues in Southeast Asia writes:

I am a 'civic journalist,' a global citizen standing along the road holding up a mirror to passersby, who passionately believes that mass media should be used primarily for creating social capital – benefiting and empowering a global society by including all members in the communication process, primarily through humanitarian means.

It is a life philosophy and professional practice. And my task reaches beyond a mere profession serving as a means of earning a living. It is a way of life propelled by an underlying conviction to locate the heart of human experience.

Beyond bringing out the beauty of life and culture, I am committed to seeking out the destitute and giving a voice to those ensnared in the extremes of war, poverty, disease, displacement and social injustice – creating a window through which others can see into their worlds. This, is my purpose...

Jeffrey's motivation is compassionate and purposeful in providing a retinal spotlight of societal issues for the betterment of humanity.

Impact of Technology

While the advances in digital technology make the instantaneous capture and portrayal of social ills easy and readily available to the masses, it also creates a flooded sea of images where the visibility of one issue by the public remains as difficult as ever.



Figure 1. A refugee ekes out a living in a refuse dump in Southeast Asia. Image courtesy of Jeffrey Warner of jeffsjournalism.com. See links at the end of this article.

One pathway that bridges the old technology with the new is emerging for videos that have *gone viral* on youtube. Some videos gain notoriety when they amass a million of hits in a week by being featured as “palate cleanser” at the end of local and national TV news. However, the videos selected by these news directors are either uniquely odd, creative, or entertaining – quite the opposite side of the subject-matter world of *social photography* that focuses on a real concern in the stillness of a captured frame. But what about the audience of *social photography*? How will the concerns of *social photography* become visible?

Of course *social photography* websites continue to populate the internet, but it remains seriously problematic how one draws in and increases their audience. I am reminded of that age old metaphysical question – If a tree falls in the woods and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?

In the old days the problem was gaining access to information, while today’s problem is how to wade through all the scattered sources and sheer volume of data. The gold mine of knowledge served up first by the printing press and later the public library has been replaced with the global internet. It is quite easy to get your concerns onto the internet, while it is quite a another matter to have enough viewers of consequence locate it so that the status quo is pushed off its pedestal of inertia.



Figure 2. 'Living in Sin City's Underground Tunnels' is this image's title by Austin Hargrave on www.environmentalgraffiti.com of people living in the drainage tunnels under the U.S. city of Las Vegas. The sidebar by Karl Fabriclus states: "*The irony is hard to overlook. There are few, if any, cities on earth where the show of wealth and consumption is so shamelessly on display, and yet hidden beneath the surface of Las Vegas, another world exists.*"

How to get a worthy topic noticed by enough of the right people so that an exchange and therefore a change can be made remains the real challenge. I reminded again of my past and a sentence from my lawyer. “It is not a question of being right, it is a question of how to be effective?” *Social photography* already knows what is right, its problem is how to be effective.

Today the internet may or may not be the right medium, but getting the internet to be a *truly compelling medium* for *social photography* instead of disffused and unfocused, remains the obstacle to be overcome. One can imagine a visual wikileaks, becoming a centralized clearing house or the “go to” forum for applying public pressure to improve the state of mankind and animalkind or maybe the likes of facebook will support a *social photography* wall.

Social photography is a thinking man’s photography – a caring man’s photography. How can it be seen in the forest?

Links

Campbell, David

Being Social: Photography and Engagement Today

www.david-campbell.org/2012/05/21/being-social-photography-and-engagement-today/

Collective Lens: Photography for Social Change

www.collectivelens.com

Hargrave, Austin and Karl Fabricius

www.environmentalgraffiti.com

Social Documentary.net

Create and Explore Social Documentary Photography

<http://socialdocumentary.net>

Warner, Jeffrey

Life Amidst the Rubbish: 12-Hour Essay

www.jeffsjournalism.com/rubbish-dump.php