



INVESTIGATIVE MANUAL FOR PHOTOJOURNALISM

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INTRODUCTION

This manual provides an introduction to the field of investigative photojournalism and serves as a reference guide in creating images that tell the photo-investigation story. It includes conceptual background, practical guidance, and technical mechanics involved with finding a story, creating a powerful visual narrative and providing clear photographic evidence of an investigation for communication to a broader audience.

This manual has been designed to be used in conjunction with viewing the videos listed and summarized in the video blog, which speak to many of the issues outlined in this manual and provide valuable practical guidance to investigative photojournalism.

WHAT IS INVESTIGATIVE PHOTOJOURNALISM?

The difference between photo-investigations and documentary photo-essays

What is investigative photojournalism? And how does it differ from regular documentary photographic essays?

According to Janis Karklins, assistant director general for communication and information at UNESCO (Hunter, ML. 2011), investigative journalism is ‘the unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a mass of facts and circumstances – and the analysis and exposure of all relevant facts and circumstances.’

Accordingly, an investigative reporter ‘refuses to accept the world as it is. The story is aimed at penetrating or exposing a given situation, in order to reform it, denounce it or, in certain cases, promote an example of a better way’ (Hunter, ML. 2011).

The concepts outlined above can very effectively be applied to investigative photojournalism. Most important is the unveiling of hidden information in order to reform the world, providing an initial broad requirement that the investigative photojournalists’ images need to visually communicate matters that have been deliberately or accidentally concealed from view. This clearly distinguishes photo-investigations from other documentary photo-essays, although they should not be seen as incompatible with one another – both disciplines could comfortably co-exist with each other on one assignment.

It is thus becoming clear to investigators and the organizations to which they are affiliated that the level of research, the level of personal engagement, the verification of information and the protection of sources involved with investigative photojournalism are also clearly distinguishable from those involved with regular documentary photography. The amount of work required for photo-investigation is significantly more than for regular photojournalism, as are the risks involved.

Visual journalists, i.e. Photographers and videographers, face additional challenges when compared with writers in the sense that they need to place themselves in the middle of sensitive or volatile situations in order to get the images they need. It is also usually impossible for them to disguise the fact that they are photographers or videographers. These challenges and the associated risks need to be carefully managed throughout the investigation and this investigative guide should be seen as an introduction to techniques and preparations employed by successful photo-investigators.

HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

The invention of the camera coincided with one of the world's earliest and most important cases of investigative photojournalism. During the early 1900s E.D. Morel uncovered and brought the world's attention to the atrocities being committed in the Congo, which at the time was under the private ownership of Belgium's king Leopold, effectively bringing an end to his reign over the Congo.

Morel's investigation started when, as a clerk in a Liverpool shipping office, he became curious: ships arriving from the Congo were full of highly valuable natural resources such as rubber and ivory, yet returned to the Congo carrying only arms and ammunition.

His investigation resulted in one of the most revealing and effective media campaigns in history uncovering elaborate fraud as well as human rights abuses that included the slaughter and mutilation of millions of Congolese. Reports have since estimated the number killed at between 5 million and 30 million people (Vallely, P. 2006). 'Almost never has one man, possessed of no wealth, no title, or official post, caused so much trouble for the governments of several major countries.' (Hochschild, A. 1999, p.209).

'A master of all the media of the day, Morel made particularly effective use of photography' (Hochschild, A. 1999, p.215). The world had been slow to believe the atrocities, until the invention of the camera. Powerful photographs depicting Africans with severed limbs came back from the Congo forests. 'The pictures, ultimately seen in meetings and the press by millions of people, provided evidence that no propaganda could refute' (Hochschild, A. 1999, p.215).

PROPOSALS:

FINDING STORY IDEAS AND PITCHING THEM

Story based investigative photojournalism

A photographic investigation is always based around a story. Initially this story is often hypothetical and may well be revised or changed substantially as the research and the project unfolds.

The UNESCO manual for investigative journalists calls this central theme of the investigation the 'hypothesis'. The hypothesis 'is a story and a method for testing it' (Hunter, ML. 2011, p.14). The investigative photojournalist's responsibility is to prove or disprove the hypothesis and make the story visually accessible to the general layman through powerful informative photography.

The initial step in a photo-investigation is to find a story, and often the next step is to pitch the story to an editor in order to secure either a commission or a funding grant.

Tips for finding stories and writing successful proposals: communicating a powerful visual investigation

Finding stories worth telling requires creativity and curiosity. Returning to our case study of E.D. Morel: his curiosity was the starting point of his investigation – the fact that vast natural resources were coming out of the Congo and only munitions going back in led him to develop an hypothesis that slavery and other illegal human rights abuses

existed in the Congo for the vast enrichment of one very powerful man. Investigative photojournalists are incessantly curious about everything going on around them, this is often the starting point of any investigation.

Photo-investigation involves finding and breaking stories that no one else is telling, or telling an often-told story in a different way. The UNESCO manual for investigative journalists (Hunter, ML. 2011, p.14) emphasizes that a good pitch is not about a subject (e.g. corruption), but rather a story.

It is important to formulate and present your key questions for testing your hypothesis in your proposal. The photo-investigation will provide clear photographic responses to each of these key questions.

Investigative story ideas need to be stories that the photojournalist cares about in order to convince editors that they are newsworthy stories. Editors are well aware that caring passionately about a story will help in the production of inspiring work and ensure you perform all of the additional work required with an investigation, they will commission assignments accordingly.

Ensure the story is worthy of publication. Good editors will refuse a story if it matters more to you than it does to others. To ensure your story is worth publishing the UNESCO manual (Hunter, ML. 2011, p.12) suggests you analyze: how many people are affected, how powerfully they are affected, whether or not any suffering involved could be avoided as a result of your story, if stories about positive outcomes can be replicated elsewhere, and whether there are wrongdoers in the story that need to be punished so that the situation will not happen again.

As you gain experience, trust your instincts when proposing a story. Ensure that you know the story better than anyone else through in-depth research. If a story that you truly believe in is rejected, use the rejection as an important learning process; take time to analyze where and why your pitch failed to communicate a powerful visual story and then build on your proposal, make it better and try again to communicate your creative vision to the same editor and other editors. This may entail going out on your own and creating an initial set of images on which to build your proposal.

Professional writing skills are more important than ever to all aspects of photojournalism work. In relation to the initial proposal stage a photographer must learn to express his creative vision for a story in words before anyone will commission the project. The art of narrative story telling is critical in all stages of the project, from pitching for commissions or grants to production of the investigative work and final submission, publication and when exhibiting. The best way to learn how to write efficiently and powerfully is by researching and reading prodigiously and constantly practicing proposals.

Self-confidence and eventual success in finding and proposing a story is often the result of dedicated practice and failures along the way.

ON ASSIGNMENT

Preparation and logistics

An investigative assignment begins long before actually arriving on location or taking the first photograph. Thorough research is required, of the story, all key parties involved, and the conditions on the ground. It is also sometimes necessary to hire fixers, translators and drivers.

Fixers provide local knowledge and research, follow leads and provide updates while the photojournalist is outside of the country and ensure that all logistical arrangements are met in carrying out the photo-investigation. They get you into and out of potentially dangerous or sensitive situations, facilitate interviews and photographic opportunities, and explain to subjects and officials the reasons behind the photo-investigation. In other words they can be integral to a photo-investigation and should be treated and compensated as such. Bear in mind that in regions where there is conflict based on tribal lines it is important to hire a fixer from a neutral tribe or a tribe to which officials and militia will be sympathetic (fixer info based on an article which appeared in The British journal of photography 1 Feb 2001, for more information refer: <http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/feature/2104251/intelligence-fixers>).

Fixers often serve as translators, although it may be necessary to hire a specialist translator. A driver will take care of navigation and transportation, sometimes essential during assignments in inaccessible regions with language barriers.

In many instances photojournalists themselves perform the function of fixer and/or driver and/or translator. These skills are essential to the successful completion of the photo-investigation and require years of experience, a thorough knowledge of the investigative angles of the story and careful research of conditions on the ground.

Risk management and safety

Regardless of experience level, it is essential to ensure adequate preparedness and training in terms of assessing the risks unique to each photo-investigation and implementing the necessary mitigating safety measures.

Risk management is not only relevant to the planning stage of an investigation; it should include systems that are in place throughout the assignment and even after the assignment.

A valuable reference in this regard is the CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) journalist security guide (<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2012/04/journalist-security-guide.php>).

The CPJ security guide covers aspects of basic preparedness such as: knowing what questions to ask your editor, ensuring where appropriate you have official press credentials (e.g. unless doing under-cover work), when to wear the press credentials openly, travel and medevac insurance, and whether or not to apply for an official press visa when entering the country of the photo-investigation. In addition the guide covers the assessment and response to the risks on assignment including: armed conflict, captive hostage situations, sexual violence, natural disasters and health epidemics, amongst the many other safety risks that investigative journalists encounter during a 'day in the office'.

INVESTIGATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY: MAKING IMAGES THAT SUPPORT YOUR STORY

Images that tell a story

Photojournalists, in presenting a story-based investigation, adopt one of many possible general methodologies. Perhaps by telling a heavy story in a lighter way it will appeal to a wider audience, by focusing on the positive humane aspects of an inhumane situation. Or finding the underlying reasons for a subject that you are reporting on and making one or more of those underlying reasons your story. Another option is to present the story through the voice of one of your main protagonists.

In addition to having a general methodology, each photograph selected for the final edit in an investigation should itself tell a story related to one of the key questions of the proposal. Together the final selection of images will form a visual narrative of the investigation.

Allowing each photograph to tell a story is mostly about how the photographer arranges the individual elements in the photograph within the frame - the thought process of deciding what to photograph, when to take a picture, which elements to include and which to exclude from the frame. This is where photojournalists spend most of their creative energy and the reason why photographers often run their eye around the borders of the frame just before pressing the shutter.

When the various elements are arranged effectively by the photojournalist the viewer's eye is drawn from one important element in the image to the next and a story will form in the viewer's mind as to how each of those elements relate to each other.

At regular intervals during an assignment go back to your key questions summarized in your proposal. Ensure that you have images that speak to all of your key questions. This will give you direction and also ensure that all necessary pictures are captured. Often it is not possible to go back a second or third time to get the necessary images and they need to all be covered before leaving a location.

Meeting all editorial layout requirements

The final edit of a photo-investigation should include the widest possible selection of photographs from which to make a more specific edit for publication. This is because editors and layout artists will often select completely different images to the ones that the photographer would (photographers are often unsuitable editors of their own work as a result of being too emotionally attached to certain images). Also, as a freelancer you might be contributing to several publications and different publications will require different edits.

Try to provide a variation of horizontal, landscape images with vertical, portrait images.

A cover shot which gives viewers a general overview of the story in one image is normally required. This needs to be an important and well-constructed image that visually summarizes your investigation.

At least one double page spread (DPS) is required, possibly several for longer features. These are powerful horizontal images that can be presented over two pages. For DPS images ensure that critical elements in the photograph are not lost in the fold of the binding when spread over two pages (this is another reason to shy away from placing the main subject of your photograph directly in the center of the frame - in addition to the composition aspects discussed later).

Sometimes the mag will not have room for a DPS and elect a full page spread, requiring vertically captured images or cropped images.

A selection of detailed shots is required. These are normally more close-up images providing very specific evidence.

A selection of images that capture the unusual, the unexpected, help to visually surprise viewers and hook their interest in your story. Most readers are overloaded with imagery all day from all forms of on-line and print media. This element of surprise, combined with powerful subject matter, good composition and lighting, can help in setting your images apart from the many other images that readers have to look at every day.

TECHNICAL PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS: TAKING BETTER PHOTOGRAPHS TO BETTER TELL A STORY

Learning to see light

Learn to see light by looking at it and studying it constantly, not necessarily only when you are taking pictures. Learn to distinguish good light from bad light. As a general rule, good light for photography is normally found during the low light conditions of dusk and dawn. Many outdoor photographers spend the midday hours catching up on post-production or making calls and preparing for the next photographic opportunity.

Of course very often the photo-investigator cannot choose when important events will unfold and are forced to work in harsh light; there are several important techniques for dealing with this – for example, a photojournalist may choose to use a flash to eliminate or reduce harsh shadows produced by harsh light or alternatively choose to photograph in the shade produced by a building.

An important part of learning to see light is to learn to see shadows and distinguish harsh shadows from soft shadows, distinguishing shadows that run directly downwards from shadows that are slanting and long, the latter being more visually appealing.

Shutter speed, Aperture, ISO

Professional photographers often shy away from automatic camera settings and manually set their exposure since this gives them full control over the exposure. Shutter speed, aperture and ISO form the holy trinity for managing your exposure. These three settings should be carefully managed to ensure that you have accurately exposed the most important elements in your images.

The user manual of any SLR (single lens reflex) camera will provide perfectly clear instructions on how to combine these three important settings to provide the correct overall exposure of your image. For further tutoring chat to your colleagues or take a basic photography tutorial. For an on-line basic tutorial on shutter speed, aperture and ISO refer to the Canon Australia learning tutorials: <http://www.canon.com.au/worldofeos/learn/getting-started/Definitions-of-aperture-iso-shutter-speed.aspx>

Shutter speed is the length of time that the shutter is kept open while capturing an image. It should become a priority in the following instances: low ambient light (requires a slower shutter speed), action shots (require a high shutter speed to freeze the motion), whether or not you are using a tripod (higher shutter speeds are required to reduce camera shake when not using a tripod).

Aperture is the size of the opening at the back of the lens through which the light passes during the exposure. Aperture should become a priority in low light levels (requires a wide aperture e.g. f2.8) and where the photographer needs to control the depth of field (i.e. how much of the image he would like to be in sharp focus) – a narrow depth of field blurs out the background elements of the image and relates to a wide aperture (e.g. f2.8) and vice-versa, a high depth of field keeps all elements in sharp focus and relates to a small aperture (e.g. f22).

ISO is the sensitivity of the film or sensor to the light that is coming through the lens during exposure. A high ISO (e.g. ISO 1600) provides more light sensitivity and lower image quality; a low ISO (ISO100) provides less sensitivity and higher image quality.

Composition

The composition of an image involves the arrangement of the content of an image to tell a story. Photographers constantly make decisions regarding the selection and arrangement of elements within the rectangle frame in order to create meaningful and powerful images. An image that is well composed draws the viewer's eye from one element in the photograph to another and a story will form in the viewer's mind as to how those elements relate to each other.

The following are some basic rules of composition. Always remember that rules were meant to be broken under the right circumstances.

The rule of thirds entails mentally splitting the frame into three equal horizontal strips and three equal vertical strips by imagining two horizontal lines and two vertical lines in the frame. Important elements are placed, instead of, for example, directly in the middle of the frame (often a 'dead zone' of an image), but rather at one of the intersections of the imaginary lines or on one of the imaginary lines.

The use of shapes, patterns, and leading lines (e.g. railway tracks, road markings) that occur in the built environment or natural environment create an image that is visually appealing to the eye and lead the eye to the important elements in the image.

Dividing the frame into foreground, middle ground and background leads the viewer's eye deeper into the image and gives a more three dimensional appearance. It is important that the photographer make a conscious decision regarding which of these three parts of the image is to be in sharp focus.

Composition is also about the angle from which the image is captured. Experiment with different angles, move around often, and try different perspectives once the standard 'safe shots' are done.

Choosing a focal length

The choice of lens can make a crucial difference to the way an image appears to the viewer. It is one of the initial decisions taken by a photographer in composing an image. Focal length of lenses can vary from wide angle (e.g. 24mm) to telephoto (e.g. 200mm). The human eye sees things at the approximate equivalent to a 50mm lens.

The choice of lens should be consistent with the photographer's style and approach. Each photojournalist has a personal preference as to how many lenses to carry with them.

Photographing people

When photographing people photojournalists often succeed in becoming 'invisible' to the subject creating imagery that captures reality without intruding or disturbing a scene. This stems from gaining acceptance from the subjects and their community. Acceptance is often gained with thorough pre-production preparation, heightened levels of empathy and interpersonal skills, effective communication of the goals of the photo-investigation, and a certain level of experience commensurate with the situation.

The decisive moment of when to capture an image of a person often presents itself when the all of the following requirements align themselves: composition, posture, light.

Postures of subjects should be examined in minute detail; the smallest of movements can have an important impact. The photojournalist should make a conscious decision about whether or not the subject is to look into the lens or not since this will yield completely different end results.

Soft diffused light that comes from above and the side of the subject is almost always the best light to use for photographing people, creating soft sideways shadows and even skin tones.

Photographing documents

In many instances documents need to be photographed as evidence in the investigation. “The most important thing is that the words are readable and clear as possible” (<http://gijn.org/2013/07/15/investigative-photography-supporting-a-story-with-pictures/>).

Documents are best photographed from directly above, preferably using a tripod in order to prevent camera shake, which would blur the written contents of the document. When investing in a tripod ensure that it is possible to configure the tripod to point the camera directly downwards.

Ensure as far as possible that the edges of the document are lined up parallel with the frame of the viewfinder. This will prevent any distortion by ensuring you have framed squarely from above.

Pay very careful attention to lighting the pages. Ensure, whilst looking through the viewfinder (as opposed to any other angle) that there is no glare obscuring the writing. Where there are curved surfaces such as the folds of the binding ensure that there are no shadows that will be exposed as too dark to be legible.

The use of ambient light is recommended since a softer even light would be preferable to a flash. The use of an undiffused flash against paper may blow out sections of the exposure, the glare making the writing illegible. If possible move the document to a window or other source of ambient light to ensure an even soft light on the entire document. If it is necessary to use a flash due to low ambient light conditions it is important to diffuse the flash using a soft box or reflector.

Photographing weapons

Occasionally firearms and other munitions need to be photographed as evidence in an investigation.

Firstly remember that no firearms or even ammunition should be handled without suitable training.

When necessary, in addition to wider angles incorporating the background and environment around the weapon you may also need to capture close up or even macro photos of serial numbers or other details on the firearm (<http://gijn.org/2013/07/15/investigative-photography-supporting-a-story-with-pictures/>). Considerations like this will ensure that the photo-investigation contains the necessary evidence as well as the story.

When capturing close-up macro detail it is necessary to use a very small aperture to ensure that all detail of the image is in sharp focus. Macro photographs are more sensitive to depth of field and much of the image detail would be blurred out of sharp focus without the use of the smallest possible aperture. In addition a lens with a very close (i.e. smallest possible) focusing distance is required for close-up macro images.

Digital workflow

Keeping your images safe: Backups, and backups of backups

Prior to downloading ensure that all memory cards are kept as safe as possible, from theft, misappropriation by officials or militia, or damage from the elements especially water. Keep as many spare cards handy as possible. If an official seeks to misappropriate a card critical to your investigation, it is sometimes possible to swap it out with a card that contains similar but not critical images.

Download to a laptop as often as possible whilst on assignment. Backing up all data to an external hard drive and making a second backup to a separate hard drive or DVD is a good start. However even this system will not guarantee the safety of your images if the hard drives are all kept in the same location, exposed to the same risks. Store at least one of the hard drives or backup DVDs in a separate location in the event that something catastrophic happens to your equipment or data.

File formats

RAW formats provide the highest quality images, and most flexibility in terms of post-production workflow since they can be processed to any file size (e.g. to low resolution or high resolution). However sometimes photojournalists do not have the necessary time involved with the processing of RAW to more readable files such as TIFFS or JPEGS – and choose to shoot JPEGS. When shooting JPEGS be careful to choose the most relevant resolution: high, medium or low – it is not possible to increase resolution later. The processing of RAW images requires specialized software (this may come with your camera or it may be necessary to purchase a processing program such as Lightroom), which needs to be installed and tested on your laptop before you leave for assignment - avoid installing the processing program whilst on assignment only to discover there is some sort of software clash.

Remember that RAW will provide the highest resolution, critical if necessary to later crop or zoom in on images in post-production to show more detail that might be important evidence.

Archiving systems

Each file name allocated to images by the camera is an original, unique sequentially numbered file name. This is very useful and it is suggested not to overwrite the sequential number. Any post production changes or enhancements can use the original file name with a suffix e.g. (1), _2, etc.

Maintain a consistent filing system by creating a system of folders using a combination of date, location, subject and project.

Pictures used in an investigation should be embedded with comprehensive password-protected metadata containing all relevant information such as: name of photographer, captions, date of capture and keywords. This can be done in Photoshop or Lightroom and enables the photojournalist to search the archive for images based on relevant facts or key words, and it also ensures that anyone examining the image at any later stage will be aware of the facts surrounding the image capture.

Uploading images to your editor

Sending files electronically will require Internet access – an important consideration in your pre-production planning. If you are able to ensure a fast and secure Internet connection there are several options available for sending the files out. It will be possible to email low resolution JPEGS should large files not be required. Heavy high-resolution files can be uploaded to either the publication's FTP server (ensure you have the client's password access codes and also the necessary software such as <https://filezilla-project.org/> before leaving for the assignment), or by using one of the Internet's uploading websites such as www.dropbox.com or www.hightail.com. Test all possible processes before leaving for an assignment.

Ethics: sensitive subjects

The photojournalist is required to perform a thorough analysis of all ethical considerations unique to each assignment. Ethical questions can and will frequently arise whilst on assignment. It is the photojournalist's responsibility to ensure these issues have been addressed in a satisfactory manner.

The following groups of people may be seen as being sensitive subjects and the appropriate care should be taken to protect the privacy and dignity of these photographic subjects: children, tribal cultures, the sick or infirm, and marginalized people. This list is a general starting point for ethical considerations and should not be seen as an exhaustive list, each assignment presents different challenges. For example a photographer revealing the identity of a woman in a strictly religious Islamic culture may place that woman at risk, even if she is not a child, or sick or infirm etc.

The ethics involved with sensitive subjects are based on the principles of informed consent, which require the photographer to obtain permission from the people being photographed (or from their parents if they are minors),

accept any limitations they may stipulate, properly inform them of how they will be portrayed and where the images will be used, and agree to abandon the project should the subject(s) change their mind at a later date regardless of any initial agreements entered into.

Post-production

Image enhancements such as color balancing and curve correction should be distinguished from image manipulation, which will result in an image that does not portray reality. The latter is strictly unethical to the investigative photojournalist (for example digitally manipulating elements, moving elements, or duplicating elements in images used as evidence in a photo-investigation).

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