

Exploratory view of the synergy between photojournalism and fine-art photography

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Abstract

Photojournalism uses images to tell stories and report events, while fine-art photography aims to express creative ideas and messages also through images. Although both fields express socio-political and religious ideas and reflect the past through pictures, they differ in approach. Photojournalism portrays events as they are using pictorial representations, without imputing the opinion of the journalist; fine art projects such events also pictorially, but from the vision of the artist. Thus both photojournalism and fine-art photography use photographs as a medium of expression. However, while photojournalism fosters a deep appreciation of works of art by projecting artistic images via communication media, which ultimately informs the psyche of the audience, fine-art photography expresses the emotions and viewpoints of the artist through photographs. This study, therefore, uses documentary evidence to determine the interface between photojournalism and fine-art photography.

Keywords: *Communication, Fine-art photography, Photography art, Photojournalism, Press photography*

Introduction

"a picture is worth a thousand words."

The above quote is commonly used amongst photojournalists.

"Photojournalism is the practice of conveying the urgency of current news stories through pictures" (Seiferle, 2022, p.3). It is seen as one of the most effective tools of communication since it conveys meaning most attractively and undoubtedly. Thus a common adage amongst photojournalists is that "a picture is worth a thousand words." Consequently, a news story, features, or news analysis that has no picture casts doubt on the information presented; stories with pictures appear more convincing than those without them. Thus a professional photojournalist has been described as "a visual reporter of facts. . ." (Akhter, 2009, p. 1), whom the public trusts and expects to tell the truth. Sometimes a photojournalistic image can be left to speak for itself, but it is often more intelligible if the written text is used to explain the image. The photojournalist projects events and makes creative works vividly newsworthy. Indeed, photojournalists are doing a great job across the world for humanity: they work for peace and human rights, and bring the problems and issues of

humanity to the front burner, raising awareness about them and so on. This way photojournalism as a field has become helpful in conveying social, cultural and political issues to the general populace. A significant benefit of photojournalism is its ability to convey social issues to a mass audience through magazines, newspapers, and visual documentation of events, as in television and motion pictures. These social issues range from education, fashion, health, sports, and carnivals to exhibits and other activities. Photojournalism, therefore, provides a documentary visual account of specific subjects and events, literally representing objective reality (Industrywired, 2017).

On the other hand, fine-art photography or photography art is a form of visual art that "aims to express a creative idea, message, or emotion unique to the artist" (Gallery, 2021, p. 1). Indeed, photography arts are photographs that are created to be seen as artworks: they are developed specially for creative expressions. In other words, photography created in accordance with the vision of the artist as a photographer is fine-art photography. They "are rare and collectible and can be exhibited like other forms of artwork" (Gallery, 2021, p. 1). The exhibits could be in the form of

gallery and museum exhibits that are done to showcase the works of artists. Photography art images come in a variety of shapes, colours, and formats, with varied intentions, such as providing information, making formal statements, selling ideas of products, or analyzing political and cultural events.

Although it is argued that photojournalism is a kind of art since it is involved in producing "saleable art objects", the majority of those in the arts seem not to recognise its value and contribution to the discipline. Despite that they use photos to show their artworks, it must be stressed that photography ordinarily is distinct from photojournalism. This is because the latter transcends the confines of ordinary photos to give comprehensive accounts of events, persons, and surroundings within the ethical considerations of journalistic practice. In other words, photojournalism is distinguished from other related branches of photography (like documentary photography, social documentary photography, street photography or celebrity photography) because it complies with a rigid ethical framework which demands that the work be both honest and impartial whilst telling the story in strictly journalistic terms. It then behaves photojournalists

and art photographers to create a mutually beneficial platform where they can add value to each other.

This paper, therefore, explores how the strengths of photojournalism and photographic arts can be harnessed for mutual benefits. Using documentary information and other literary sources to examine their relationship, the paper tends to recommend the way forward for the two disciplines.

Photojournalism and photography art: a conceptual discourse

Photojournalism is the art of reporting events with photographs, and is one of the most universal forms of mass communication (Knight, 2011; Okoro, 2013; Okoro & Odii, 2013; Okoro & Nnadiukwu, 2000). It is described by Campbell et al. in Okoro (2013) as the use of photos to document events and people's lives. "Photojournalism integrates words and photographs, [and] attempts to explain people's behaviour and the nature of the world" (Folkerts et al, 1998, p. 129 as cited in Okoro, 2013, p. 329). It can be expressed as the use of photographs in the narration, description, explanation or illustration of what has happened, is happening or is about to happen (Okoro & Nnadiukwu, 2000, p. 73). It is a shorthand expression of media

information because it employs images in collecting, editing and presenting news materials for publication.

"Photojournalism provides visual support for a written piece and its main focus is content, its main purpose to convey information to the viewer" (Prati, n.d, p. 6).

Danny Schechter in Nnanyelugo Okoro (2013) noted that "photojournalism has always had an edge in shaping how we understand world events: impactful images become the private movie we screen in our mind to help us extract meaning from what we see" (p. 328). Essentially, it is an image that bears witness, since the images it presents help readers or viewers better understand the presenter's report. For instance, Ansel Adams used the camera and pictures respectively to show the beauty of the wilderness and the values of national parks in the preservation of landscapes. Lewis Hines used the camera to portray the suffering of numerous children in America forced to work in factories, which subsequently ended the menace. Many others have used the camera to document events and happenstances that changed the world. Thus photojournalism deals with the important or newsworthy subject matter; it has world events and social injustice as its two overarching

themes. It is predicated on the unwritten code of practice which states that – if it is to adhere to the very highest standards of journalistic objectivity – the image must not be staged or manipulated (Seiferle, 2022). According to Palmer (2017), an image can only become photojournalistic if it is

produced by a photographer employed or under contract with an established journalistic organization such as a newspaper, magazine, or photo agency; if it provides documentary coverage or extended storytelling of newsworthy events; if it derives from enterprising coverage that fulfils an investigative or narrative approach, rather than a simple illustration of text-based stories and if it aspires to directly fulfil the role of the news institution in serving the larger needs of the community. . . (p. 199)

Digital technologies like digital photo editing and online news videos may influence the way photojournalists generate and portray photos for news; however, ethical consideration and commitment to public service (Mäenpää, 2014, p. 92) must be prioritised to ensure

that photojournalistic images are not manipulative but presented to tell the stories as they are. As Khelef (2008) avers, photojournalism works within the same ethical approaches to objectivity that are applied by other journalists, noting that photojournalists have the responsibility to document society and preserve its history through images. Unlike photography and other forms of visual communication, photojournalism embraces ethics and journalistic news values like timeliness, proximity, impact, human interest and prominence. What this means is that the ethical approaches to objectivity in journalism are invaluable to the photojournalist if their work must be seen as credible by the public.

Fine-art photography can be described as photographs that embody the visions of the artist, being far more than snapshots and created as carefully as paintings, thus standing out because of the details, compositions, and meanings (Ivanova, 2022). "Fine-art photos are photographs created purely for their aesthetic and imaginative qualities. Fine-art photographers create work that goes beyond merely capturing what is in front of the camera" (Gallery, 2021, p. 2). It is the best way for photographers to express ideas, messages and emotions (Format, 2022). Sometimes, a fine-art

photograph could focus on a simple object with a lot of interesting details, and the artist expects the viewer to share in their feeling. In photographic art, the most important communication is emotion, for it displays what we may call the emotional or intellectual truth. According to Giulia Prati, ". . . fine-art photography, though it can also be informational, requires content to be fused with style. The photograph must be the result of a series of conscious, compositional decisions and must establish a strong connection with the viewer by evoking powerful emotions in him/her" (n.d, p. 6). This lends credence to Ivanova's opinion (2022) that what makes photography art is the imagination, dedication, and time put into the process. Art photography, therefore, represents "the idea that photographs could capture more than just surface appearances" (Thomas & Mackenzie, 2020, p. 63).

Art photography appears to be "a niche market when compared to traditional fine-art painting and sculpture; however, it has now been established as an important and innovative medium of contemporary art" (Fine Art Photography, n.d, p. 1). It is now considered an art form that is as valid as any other, with multiple museums and galleries exhibiting photographic works.

Many well-known and respected museums have sections dedicated solely to photographic art; just as several museums and galleries are dedicated specifically to photography.

Payne (2018) summed up the discussions about photography as art, stating that "the question is not whether photography is fine-art per se – neither painting nor sculpture can make that claim – but whether it is capable of artistic expression; whether in the hands of a true artist its productions become works of art" (p. 1). A French naturalist, Louis Figuier (Cooks, 2020, p. 2), also made an accurate observation about photography and fine arts: "Until now, the artist has had the brush, the pencil and the burin; now, in addition, he has the photographic lens. The lens is an instrument like the pencil and the brush, and photography is a process like engraving and drawing, for what makes an artist is not the process but the feeling" (p. 2). Thomas and Mackenzie (2020) concluded that "Photography is more than a documentation process, it is more, it is an art form and should be treated with the same respect as painting, sculpture, and the other well-known art forms" (p. 65).

Nevertheless, both photojournalism and photography art belong to a larger

family of photography which is in itself a tool of visual communication. A very thin line indeed runs between these two kinds of photography. While photojournalism is about the chronicle of events, photography art deals with creative expressions. "The photojournalist has to convey both the message and the real incident that has happened which they cannot capture according to their own intent" (Dhanda, 2021, p. 4). The photographic artist will capture the emotions of a specific snap and provide the information or message that he intends for the recipient. "The main difference that has to be noted between press photography (photojournalism) and art photography is that the former type depends upon the events that happen in the world, and the message to be delivered cannot be modified according to the photojournalist's interest. Whereas, in the latter type, the information that has to reach the people can be decided by the photographer" (Dhanda, 2021, p. 4). The key phrases that some authors (CareerIgniter, 2022; News around us, 2016; Porter, 2009; Schmidt, 2015) have used to describe the differences between photojournalism and photography art are: accurately portrays an event or scene, tells a story,

conveys a message of truth, informative purpose, a lesser art form, time limitation or quicker pace, capture devastation and dramatics of a situation, etc for photojournalism; and control what the viewer sees, manipulate the scene, artistic angle, creative documentation, complex storytelling/details, skill and care, use photo editing system to alter the reality of photo, etc for photography art. As can be seen from the point of view of the above scholars, the summary is that a photojournalist must accurately portray an event or scene while maintaining a fascinating composition, and trying to capture an image that will accurately tell a story and convey a message of truth. On the other hand, the art photographer tries to stage photos and manipulate the scene, while adding creativity and control to what the viewer sees.

The above excursion serves to help us reflect on the diverse views expressed by scholars on the subject matter and how difficult it has been to provide a generalized description of photography art and photojournalism. However, the main concern here is to examine the relationship between photojournalism and fine-art photography, elaborating on

their communication powers and how they can be harnessed for better appreciation by the wider public.

The Interface

Photojournalism appears to be gaining increasing acceptance in fine arts for the last three decades following the prominence of gallery shows and museum exhibitions. In recent times, it is not uncommon for photojournalists to focus on the artistic and emotional impact of their images, and not just on the reality of the scene. They want to create visual narratives, which stir viewers' emotions. It is on record that "over the past 10 years, photojournalists have increasingly captured the attention of the art world as their powerfully affecting images cross over from news agencies to gallery and museum walls" (Holmes, 2014, p. 3). As Hassan (2001) thoughtfully remarked,

photography has been highly influential in the most revolutionary transformations of art in the 20th century (propelling the transition from pictorialism to idea-based-image making...); photography has provided artists with profound possibilities for experimenting with, and the greatest means of appropriating, reality and critiquing traditional

artistic conventions and practices. With the dissolution of boundaries among the different media, photography has come to define our understanding of artistic expression. In many ways, photography has become the tool *par excellence* for contemporary artistic creation. In contemporary art practice, photographic records of site-specific installation or performances involved in the making of artwork become valuable artworks. . . (p. 2)

Photography continues to play a prominent role as a medium for preserving art, culture and history (Panke, 2016). A classic example is the documentation of Nigeria's evolutionary history and growth as an independent nation in a massive pictorial exhibition mounted by the National Gallery of Art-NGA, Abuja, in October 2010, as part of the celebrations of Nigeria at 50. The exhibition not only captured diverse spheres of cultural, industrial, agricultural, sports, political, religious and infrastructural activities but also "provided the most appropriate platform to visually assess and appreciate Nigeria's steady journey of progress and development since her independence

from Britain in 1960" (Brown, 2013, p. 572). The documentation of the conditions during and after the apartheid in over 1100 exhibit prints by over 50 South African photographers is also an example. The images documented include events like rallies, protests, forced removals, funerals, social gatherings and leisure pursuits, violence between Africans, and labour strikes and meetings. Many of the portraits also depicted migrant workers, farm labourers, HIV-positive individuals, affluent South Africans, domestic workers, and well-known activists and politicians of all races and parties (Harris & Weinberg, 2021). Thus photojournalistic photography played a crucial role in informing the international community about the injustice and inhumanity of apartheid and intensified international pressure against the Nationalists (SAHO, 2020). A further example was the classic pictorial representation at the National Museum, Lagos of the triumph and golden laurel won by Nigeria's football team during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, United States of America. These exhibitions practically demonstrate the time-tested adage that a photograph is well worth a thousand words.

There appears to be an entangled relationship between photojournalism and art photography (Dhanda, 2021). "Like all journalists, photographers are driven by the desire to tell people the truth, as quickly as possible" (Alton 2007, as cited in Ballenger, 2014). Both forms of photography can "record and document, promote change and challenge the way people perceive the world" (Ballenger, 2014, p. 32). Images help to recollect and can be used to uncover injustices in society (Panke, 2016). Although both aim at exposing social and/or humanitarian injustices, photojournalism, however, tends to be investigative and unrehearsed, and relies much on an opportunistic snapshot principle for its effect, whereas art photography is more typically the result of planning and considered composition (Seiferle, 2022). Ballenger (2014) made a distinction between photographers from the two disciplines - "those who aim to purely capture form and an aesthetic appeal and . . . those who seek to convey a message or record an event" (p. 31). "Artistic photography focuses on the beautiful art form, colour, location, view and all the remaining necessities where it can be interpreted into different meanings by different people. But, in photojournalism, the photojournalist has

to provide the people with valid information regarding the happening and information nailed perfectly to the point through their photograph" (Dhanda, 2021, p. 3). In describing photojournalism, Troy (2010, as cited in Ballenger, 2014, p. 32) noted that, "photojournalism excludes set-up images, and defined a set-up shot as something that probably would not have occurred had a photographer not been present". Also, a photojournalistic image reflects a real story, therefore, stories that are made up are not considered photojournalist work. Photographic manipulation is also deemed inappropriate for photojournalistic works, as "photojournalists are limited to simple corrections that bring the subject back to what was seen when the photo was taken" (Troy, 2010, p. 37). To an extent, photojournalism requires a high degree of ethical honesty. In Troy's opinion, which also represented the belief of the Photographic Society of America, any digital manipulating techniques "well beyond the accepted darkroom practices of cropping or lightening and darkening" are not accepted for photojournalistic works (as cited in Ballenger, 2014, p. 32). Photojournalists do not venture into the manipulated image; they use the camera as a tool to bring back images that communicate a story. However, fine-art

photography, according to Ballenger (2014, p. 33), might be manipulated, staged, or have deliberately manipulated compositions before the final version is attained. He believes that art photography for social justice may not entail work in the raw or immediate, but can include staged, predetermined and manipulated processes.

In her case study of Don Bartletti's prize-winning photo essay on the human toll of immigration, Prati (n.d) argued that there is an indistinct boundary between photojournalism and fine art. She noted that both genres explore means to communicate reality. In photojournalism, emphasis is on the story line the journalist intends to present using images, but which must be guided by the journalistic codes of objectivity, truth, and accuracy. This practice may be laced with aesthetics, which is not taken as the main essence. The strength of fine-art photography, on the other hand, lies in its lasting effect on the audience or viewers because it touches on human emotions and sensibilities. It is aesthetically alluring and provokes emotional feelings. Further examination of Bartletti's work (Prati, n.d, p.16) showed that his collection of photographs conveyed both journalistic objectivity and artistic interpretation. She noted that while

Bartletti's photographs loyally depict facts (making his work objective), they do not fail to show his filter of perception and his decisions regarding how he took the picture. In other words, both photojournalism and photography art deploy artistic expressions, implicitly and explicitly, respectively. "The photojournalist always makes calculated decisions regarding what is in or out of view. The photo, then, is not a thin slice of external reality, but a constructed reality" (Bowers, 2008, p. 6).

Indeed, Bartletti's work shows, in a more pragmatic form, the interface between photojournalism and art photography. His study revealed three basic characteristics of a fine-art photo which thinly differentiate it from photojournalism. The first is human involvement with his subjects in which dexterity, planning, time, and energy are required to produce art of any kind, including art photography. Even the development of more technologically advanced cameras does not diminish this fact because human intention and thoughts still go into the production of an image. The second is the emotional content of the images. This includes a smile, hug, cry, sweating, labouring, anger etc which the art photographer may portray in his image(s) as the case may be. The third is

a careful balance between form and content in his photographs. The art photographer attempts to strike a balance between the visual quality (form) of an image and its social relevance (content) to ensure a visually compelling and lasting memory of his message. Elements of the above characteristics can also be found in photojournalism even if the journalist intends to portray the happenstances as they are.

Bowers (2008) also argues that the relationship between photojournalism and photography art is essentially symbiotic. While the artist uses exhibitions and art galleries to present his story, the photojournalist uses communication media of all sorts including newspapers, magazines, television, and social media to present in a lucid form the stories behind images and art objects. However, the photojournalist operates in a broader context than the photographic artist. The former sees artworks as part of his stories, which include events of all sorts, peoples and places that are captured in pictorial forms to portray saleable content to the deserving audience, while the latter views artworks and the stories behind them as his core activity, which he documents in his exhibition catalogues and presents in galleries and

museums. Bowers (2008) captures the symmetry between arts and photojournalism thus: "Photojournalism bears crucial resemblance to the artistic in three essential ways... First, both art photography and photojournalism engage in the very explicit positioning of shots" (p. 10). Second, the photojournalist is sensitive to the elements of composition. In fact, line, texture, and light are central to both the photojournalist and the art photographer (Careerigniter, 2022). Thus through the interplay of shadow and light, photojournalists and artists are empowered "to make meaning, to evoke emotion in the viewer by creating mood and drama" (Bowers, 2008, p. 12). Third, photojournalism makes explicit reference to paintings, in theme and content. This is not only remarkable but also portrays "their common visual heritage and the photojournalist's implicit desire for his or her own artistic expression [or techniques]" (Bowers, 2008, p. 14). Another area where perceived similarity exists between photojournalism and photographic art is in their use of colour. Much of the beauty in photojournalistic works is laced with colour. And like the award-winning writer Barbara Andrews wrote in her work "A Walk in the Park", it takes the eye of an artist to arrange colours . . . that will awaken the senses

and inspire the observer (as cited in Bowers, 2008, p. 16).

In summary, the synergy between the two fields lies in their ability to stir up a meaningful reflection in the viewers. Both fine-art photography and photojournalism use images; however, artists need to create awareness about their works if they must have any impact, and this is where photojournalism comes in handy. Photojournalists use the far-reaching medium available to them to create awareness and project photographic artworks. Both areas of endeavour deploy colour, staging, and composition, though in varying degrees, to deliver their message. Indeed, the synergy between photojournalism and art photography is simple: Art provides the tools; photojournalism creates awareness, projects the works and calls for deeper reflection and appreciation from the audience. As Bowers (2008) writes, "photojournalists must mine their artistic side . . . in order to make some kind of meaning out of the world they see. The painter paints for the same reason the photographer shoots: to evoke emotion, to move us, and to bring a moral message about the fragility of life, the plight of our fellow human beings" (p. 20). Iris Murdoch (1970, as

cited in Bowers, 2008) notes that art enables the steady contemplation of the human condition. The journalistic technique of "putting a human face on a social issues" (p. 21) is also a thin guise for a deeper, more emotional and artistic enterprise. Thus the relationship between the two subjects is a mutually beneficial one. While the artists provide the tools, the journalists ensure deeper appreciation by creating further awareness of the images.

Conclusion

Photojournalism when blended with art photography will provide a more effective and lasting impression on the audience. The interplay between objectivity and empathy when laced with the high aesthetic appeal will command greater attention from the viewers and/or audience. It is, therefore, encouraged that scholars in both disciplines collaborate to harness the intrinsic values and strengths of each discipline for the greater good. This then calls for a more balanced and closer relationship between photojournalism and photography art: one using visual language to facilitate better appreciation by projecting images through the media and the other providing the tools necessary for such appreciation.

Since both photojournalism and photography art play complementary roles, it is recommended that:

- Fine-art photographers should liaise with photojournalists to make them understand their works and what they hope to achieve through such works. This will enhance the sense of co-operation and promote greater awareness.
- Photographic artists should be engaged to teach some aspects of photojournalism courses in schools. Alternatively, students of communication should take photography course(s) in Creative Arts departments to enable them to perfect the art of picture news presentation.
- The collaboration can be better managed for efficiency if a unit, designed for the benefits of both the artists and photojournalists, is developed and made active. This will enable photojournalism to achieve a wider audience just as fine-art photographers will flourish and gain more traction.
- Government always has a huge role to play. Given the importance of arts to heritage preservation and enhancement (Okpoko et al., 2021), it must, as the machinery through which the operations of the state are carried out, pay attention to artworks and offer incentives to bolster artistic productions and encourage collaboration between both fields.

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