

Model Minority

The mass media since the last few decades have become both omnipresent and omnipotent. They are ideal vehicles for stereotyping as they frequently churn out raw material for daily conversation. Research has shown that when photographs that were partial to just one side of an issue accompanied a balanced news report, readers developed distorted perceptions of the issue in the direction of the partial images. Research has also shown how bias in pictorially representing a particular ethnic group perpetuated the stereotypes associated that group. For instance, racial images of Blacks helped inform racial stereotypes about Blacks and led to stronger association of Blacks with social problems addressed in the stories. In sum, studies suggest that media often oversimplify news for consumers by rarely placing news events and issues into a broader context.

Photographs have accompanied information contained in news stories since March 4, 1880 when *The Daily Graphic* published the first halftone reproduction of a news photograph. They help readers make sense of a news story before they actually read that story. Recent research has demonstrated that visual images have a great impact on public knowledge. For example, visual aspects of media content have been found to have a long lasting effect on viewers when recalling content and can also have a strong effect on an individual's perception of an issue. The photo story or photo essay came into being over the past 100 years. New publications developed, first in Europe and

then in the USA, to highlight these story types. *National Geographic Magazine* (NGM) was one of them even though it was a text-oriented publication for almost the first two decades since it went into circulation in October 1888, along with *Picture Post*, *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, *Vu*, *Life* and *Look*. The photo story presents a sequence of photographs and a story, which is more than just a mere collection of photos on a topic.

With the impact that photographs, particularly photo stories or photo essays, can have on perpetuating stereotypes, how can photographers working in foreign areas avoid perpetuating stereotypes? For photographers Erika Larsen and Reed Young, the answer boils down to the photographer's intent and a keen awareness of the people they photograph.

Erika Larsen, who is Norwegian, was born and brought up in the US. She got her degree from Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and has photographed various assignments for NGM besides her enormous body of personal work in which the common recurring theme is people's connection with their land. She is "fascinated with the human experience, people in general and what it means to be human." With 'Sami – Walking with Reindeer', and her other personal projects 'Young Blood' and 'The Hunt' she has tried to explore the "primal drive" of the modern day hunter and the way hunters could be immersed in nature for long periods of time. Reed Young, a New York City based photographer, who received his photography education from Brooks Institute of Photography and later at Fabrica, Benetton's research workshop, school and studio in Italy has a totally different approach than that of Larsen's. Young used

to take portraits of people he met on the streets during his time at Fabrica and in the process stumbled upon documentary portraiture by accident. He realized that he could tell each person's story if he interviewed them along with taking their portrait. He says he went from doing single subject stories to focusing on "specific groups of people from different cultures or backgrounds."

Both Larsen and Young are subconsciously aware of stereotyping while working on a story. One way Larsen tackles stereotyping in her work is that she prefers going to a place with an open mind as opposed to reading up everything there is to know about the place and its people. Larsen's interest in the Arctic landscape began with a fascination with how long the Sami had sustained their unique culture; she had been documenting the hunting cultures in Canada and the US for eight years prior to starting her research on the Sami community. The Sami story is one of her most published works; it's a photo essay on the Sami people residing in Kautokeino, Norway. What started as a personal project in 2008 was later published in 2011 by NGM.

The Sami are an original hunter-gatherer pastoral community that still actively hunts in the Nordic region. They are considered semi-nomadic and earn their livelihood through reindeer herding. Larsen worked on this story for around three years and initiated her first contact with the community via email. In 2007, she contacted several Sami women and expressed interest in learning about the "traditional medicine of the arctic landscape" and their role in the community. Laila Spik, a woman from a reindeer herding family in Sweden, invited Larsen to her house. Initially, it was just a two-week visit, but Larsen spent a lot of time

listening to Spik and learning about the Sami way of life. After those two weeks, she knew that in order to truly understand the Sami culture she had to spend a significant amount of time with them.

Larsen mentions that personal interests drive her personal projects and that these projects generally arise from curiosity to learn about a place and its people. In terms of research, she says that the amount of research involved is usually a little less when compared to magazine assignments. “The idea of exploration, the unknown leads me,” she says. Larsen adds no matter what the project is, research takes on different levels at different times – there is research on the front end, during the project and after the project. For example, for the Sami story she had to learn the Sami language and then study about their history and culture. She did not opt for an interpreter on this story as she likes to communicate directly with her subjects and feels having an interpreter around would not allow her to connect with her subjects, which she thinks is very important when working on a photo story.

It was a year into the project, when Spik introduced Larsen to the Gaups, a family of reindeer herders, with five children ranging from teenagers to two adults in their early thirties and with kids of their own. She followed this particular family and they became the focus of a lot of her images. She, in turn, became their *beaga* – a housemaid who traditionally cooks, cleans and helps out with chores in a Sami household. This helped her better understand the Sami customs and culture. She mentions that during her extended stay with the Gaups she never felt unwelcome and that the Gaups were as interested in

Larsen learning the Sami culture as she was. “The Gaups embraced me completely... In time I began to feel like part of the family.” Erika Larsen believes building relationships and a desire to learn new things are a must when working on long-term stories. “I tend to build enough of a relationship even on smaller things,” she says. I go with as much of an open heart as I can for myself to learn about a situation. I believe the only thing I can carry is that I’m there to learn from the land, from the people, from the situation.”

Larsen puts the same patient effort she devotes into learning about her subjects into photographing them. She spends a lot of time observing what is going on around her, and as soon as she sees something that she would like to photograph she says she “almost stops the moment, engages in the moment and makes the portrait.” She does not stage moments but often poses people for a portrait. She makes use of a 4x5 field camera for the most part even though more than half of the pictures taken for the Sami story were shot using a DSLR. She has 15 years of experience using this kind of camera and feels “comfortable” with it. She adds, a 4x5 camera “has a wonderful way of interpreting the moments that I see – the moments between moments, the worlds between the worlds.” Using such a heavy piece of equipment has made her more observant and aware of her surroundings. It also lets her interact with her subjects (even though she does not prefer to talk while actually making a portrait).



© Erika Larsen, *Sami – Walking with Reindeer*

In addition to portraits, Larsen also included still life images and landscape shots in the narrative of the Sami story thanks in part to her habit of shooting with a large format camera. “The still life images tell so much. It’s just a valid way of telling a story,” she says. She feels that the detail shots and landscapes make up the broader scene. “At the end of the day, it’s all about emotional content,” Larsen says. My stuff is extremely simple... it’s the emotional thing I’m trying to tap into.” But she adds that she is human after all. “I have all my background and perspectives and everything that made me who I am,” Larsen says. All that is carried in the bag with me and I can’t strip myself off that. That’s just the way life is.” She feels that the viewer plays a huge role in how her work is perceived. “When you see my picture, you are going to bring all your perspective, all your stereotypes, all your life to your way of viewing my picture. I can’t control that. So, it’s all based on context, who is seeing it and where they are coming from... We just have to be honest to ourselves if we can be.”



© Erika Larsen, *Sami – Walking with Reindeer*

Reed Young also attests to the fact that access and intimacy with the subjects play a key role in the outcome of any story. “When you are doing a story about a place, it is really difficult to avoid (stereotyping) sometimes. When you don’t include some of the stereotypes of the story you risk having a story that isn’t really honest because oftentimes stereotypes or generalizations are quite true... Who I choose to include in the story is how I avoid the stereotype,” says Young. Young did a story in India called *The Seven Percent*. Unlike most Western photographers who visit India in pursuit of a story that depicts the dark side of the country namely poverty, overpopulation, corruption etc., he chose to focus, instead, on the country’s burgeoning upper middle class population.



© Reed Young, *The Seven Percent*

Young also points out how editing a shoot a certain way can have implications on how a particular picture and consequently that body of work is perceived by the audience. “Even the smallest movement of the face can give a completely different sense of who that person is,” Young says. He was actually researching about Tokyo when the idea of doing a story on Sumo wrestlers struck him. As he was researching about the place – *Wikipedia* is one of his favorite research tools – he realized that the Sumo scene in Tokyo was big. Once he had had made up his mind on doing a story on Sumo Wrestlers he wanted to delve a little deeper into the subject. That is when he came to know that a lot of Sumo wrestlers are foreigners. As he started pre-production work on this story, he came to know that the Sumo wrestling community was “closed in terms of letting journalists in.” Having established no contacts and only two weeks left for the trip, Young decided to restrict his story to just retired Sumo wrestlers.



© Reed Young, *The Seven Percent*

Unlike Larsen, all of Young's photo stories are actually portrait series, and he does not spend as much time on his projects as Larsen spends on hers. Young used to spend around two weeks in the field for a story not very long ago and managed about four to six stories a year but has now decided to spend almost a month on a story and is planning to restrict himself to doing just two stories a year from now on. He said this will help him better research the stories and consequently the final product will be much better. Since he shoots only portraits he rarely spends more than an hour or an hour and a half with his subjects as opposed to following a person or a family for an extended period of time, say, a month over even a year. He stages his shots and everything is planned for the most part. For example, Young worked in Rome on a yet to be published story about voice over artists recently. He flew there 10 days before the shoot and chose all the locations himself and then photographed his

subjects, in wardrobe and set that resembled the art direction in Hollywood films that they dub for, at the time of the day that he thought would be ideal for a portrait. He lights all his portraits and has assistants helping him during every shoot. He uses anywhere between four to six strobes if shooting indoors and manages with one or two strobes when shooting outdoors. He also prefers having a writer, usually a friend, on board during the shoot and the writer gets all the back-story on the person who is to be photographed prior to the shoot and helps Young write the captions.

“Being trustworthy and likeable and putting a really good first impression is pretty important,” Young says. If Young encounters any reluctant subjects on a shoot he does not try to push but instead starts making small talk to ease the tension. “Be open about yourself,” he says. “Don’t leave out the embarrassing stuff because then it brings you down to earth and makes them feel like they’re on the same level with you.” He also mentions how showing pictures from the ongoing project to the person whose picture is being taken, goes a long way in connecting with that person. “I’ll put the pictures on my phone from the day before. I’ll be like we photographed your neighbor yesterday and they see a familiar face... I’ve realized that’s a great way to earn trust.”

Thus, both Erika Larsen and Reed Young try their best to stay away from stereotyping but as Young mentions stereotyping could be a positive thing sometimes especially when that stereotype does not carry any negative connotations with it. Also, in this day and age where consumers of mass media, thanks to the internet, have a platform to express their thoughts and concerns the

chances of misinterpretation are high. Therefore, no matter what kind of photography one wants to pursue (newspaper or documentary) or where they are from (East or West), the intent should be to provide a realistic portrayal of the community (and its people) they are photographing. If they simply drop into a region for a few days to make pictures, there is a strong likelihood that no matter how visually striking their images may be, they would have missed out on the opportunity to connect with locals and cultivate any sort of relationship. As a photographer, it becomes imperative for us to understand and document a place and its people holistically, as an evolving community, inclusive of a diversity of people and ideas. When our work is complete, we need to be able to look the person or people or community in the eye and have them be okay with the work we have done. But no one can represent a particular place in its totality. Photography, by its very nature, will ask more questions than provide answers; it enforces subjectivity. But like pieces of a puzzle, when taken together, those individual stories can offer a collective truth.

As we are working in the field, we must actively consider the final picture and its implications. We must take great care to provide reference and circumstance for our pictures. An accurate photograph of any place must be honestly observed and rendered, understanding that both the maker and viewer bring their own biases and filters to the table.