GONE TOO SOON:
THE EFFECTS OF PHILADELPHIA’S URBAN GUN VIOLENCE CRISIS

Professional Analysis

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The City of Brotherly Love, the fifth most populated city in the country, Philadelphia, is first for being the country’s most gun violent. Although news is dominated by gun violence in Chicago, persistent gun violence has produced a higher rate of homicide in Philadelphia in 2014. Philadelphia is on pace for a greater annual rate of 14.8 homicides per 100,000, Chicago, 12.6. This is unfortunately a title that Philadelphia also held in 2012-13. As gun violence continually affects Philadelphia, the media market must decide on how to cover crime. Readers would prefer not to be inundated with consistently traumatic imagery, but it is an important topic.


Editors as Gatekeepers

The Philadelphia newspaper market is dominated by The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News. The Inquirer is a broadsheet, which tends to focus on its suburbanite readership and the Daily News is tabloid that will cover more crime and spot news then the Inquirer. The director of Photography, Michael Mercanti, who has worked at the paper since 1993, must make editorial decisions on what images to run.
Mercanti is the director of Photography at the Philadelphia Inquirer and Daily News. These two different newspapers share the same photo staff. Essentially, Mercanti is working the same position for two different news entities.

Jim MacMillan a former newspaper photographer and Pulitzer Prize Winner, who runs an independent news organization, Gun Crisis, is his own editor. MacMillan has the final say on editorial photographic decisions. Gun Crisis attempts to cover every instance of gun violence in Philadelphia: robberies at gun point, shootings that result in injury and shootings that result in death. Some stories are more in-depth than others and some have original photography.

When gun violence occurs in the city these editors must be careful in their decision-making. “We are always concerned about how viewers react to photos. We don't run graphic photos – that’s the domain of European publications,” Mercanti stated. “We are always aware of not only how the readers react, but how's families react.” A common crime scene photograph is of pedestrian reaction to a crime scene, Mercanti and MacMillan said. The pedestrian’s expressive reactions can often tell a story in itself.

Photo editing ethical dilemmas are always a debate whenever a large, newsworthy issue erupts. When editing for GunCrisis.org, Jim MacMillan, always has a few questions, “I guess the question fundamentally is “is the photograph too graphic for your audience?” So the next question is “who is your audience?” In Gun Crisis’s case MacMillan said it is a very local, Philadelphia audience. Most gun violence that receives national media attention is from Chicago. Although more people are murdered in Chicago by gunfire, the population of Chicago is 1.25 million higher than Philadelphia. Per capita, Philadelphia is the highest. Gun Crisis is Philadelphia’s only news resource that covers almost every
single shooting and murder in Philadelphia, both through text posts and crime scene photographs.

Regardless of the scenario, MacMillan believes he cannot sugar coat the reality of Philadelphia’s deadly neighborhoods. “What’s more important? Making a horrible time a little less horrible by editing more delicately or failing to inform the people that make the decisions that could maybe stop this or could slow the violence,” he said. “Make sure they see it.” MacMillan’s experience is on both sides of the lens. His Pulitzer win came from coverage in Iraq and his editing experience at Gun Crisis.

Photojournalism goes through several filters before the audience receives the final product. First, a photographer must make the picture and send it back to the newsroom where editors decide what image to run and what ones to hold. From there the audience views the image. They react based on the picture, never fully understanding the process of how it got to them. In 2007 The Montreal Gazette ran a segment called “You Be the Editor”. Readers were presented with 10 ethical dilemmas and then made a decision. The study showed that in 20 percent of the cases the audience chose differently then the editors.

In MacMillan’s case, photographer Joe Kazemarek photographs and sends his images to Jim, who decides what to run. According to MacMillan, as of the last 2.5 years, 25 percent of shooting incidents in Philadelphia pass with no traditional media coverage whatsoever. However, most homicides get some coverage. The amount of coverage always depends on the newsworthiness of the issue.

“Every picture is a question of identity and mission. Another way to look at the question is “what is too graphic?” MacMillan asked. “What harm can come of this?”
Images on Gun Crisis often depict police investigating a shooting, vigils and funerals with pictures of mourning families. MacMillan must cover an entire city’s gun violence epidemic with one photographer, Kaczmarek. Kaczmarek, who has been honored with a Keystone Press Award as the Distinguished Visual Journalist by the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association, often sells his pictures to the Daily News and Inquirer, too. Mercanti, on the other hand, has a larger staff, but one that has been affected by budget cuts and layoffs. “It fine tunes the amount of coverage,” Mercanti said about working with a smaller staff. “[Years ago] we might have chased 12 stories a day, but we can't do that, we need to be more particular in what we choose.”

After these pictures are published readers must determine if an image is too graphic. In a 2007 article by Andrew Mendelson, the author found that people will respond differently to these pictures based on how “visually oriented” they are. A photographer and photo editor may in fact find it difficult to understand the ordinary observer’s reaction to images. “High visualizers” typically list more ideas and find images more meaningful than others. On the other hand, those who are not as familiar with visuals do not go through the same process. Further, “high visualizers are predisposed to look for meaning in images.” Research has shown that these graphic images have powerful effects on the public because they “increase levels of concerns with the issue being covered.”

**Awards and Recognition for Tragic Photographs**

Presenting an audience with a graphic image always opens up a news agency to criticism. In 1992, Fraser stated that editors wanted to show more pictures of graphic situations and “detailed pictures of people dying,” but at the same time they felt it was
appropriate to filter this images for the viewer and thus “cleaning up events to make them acceptable.” However, “cleaning up” certain graphic situations, would be altering the message to the audience. By not fully presenting an audience with imagery that is true to the graphic event, we are failing our viewers. Most journalists agreed that situations like this must be taken on a case-by-case basis. Images of trauma and destruction are typically images that succeed in prestigious photojournalism contests.

For example, in the 71st Pictures of the Year International Competition (2014), the General News Category had 5 winners. Most of the images were from war zones. First was a photograph of a young boy treated for burns in Aleppo and Award of Excellence was a picture of lifeless, bloody man in Egypt. In World Press Photo’s 2014 General News Category, first place was displaced Syrians, second was a bomb maker in Aleppo and third was a photograph of a man before he was hung and killed. Year after year the best photographs are of the worse possible situations. A photographer’s bravery and dedication to their craft must always be remembered when working in difficult, but important newsworthy events.

Jim MacMillan has won various accolades for his work. MacMillan told the story of a photograph he made at a funeral for a law enforcement officer. As his grieving wife and children proceeded towards the casket MacMillan made an emotional image that ran in the paper the following day. “It certainly did tell the story and inform the public,” he said of the photograph. However, although he received recognition for his award it’s important for the photographer to question himself or herself. “You’ll definitely be challenged. You better have a pretty good argument for public service and why you did it. The next question is why are you bringing yourself attention on this level.” Despite
recognition for such an unfortunate circumstance, MacMillan was shocked by the family’s support. He received a call in the newsroom from the girl’s grandmother who thanked him for the photograph. “The photograph led so many people to sympathize and reach out,” he said.

April Saul has also received a tremendous amount of recognition during her career. She was the first recipient of the Nikon/ NPPA Documentary Sabbatical Grant for her work on Hmong refugees in 1985. Over the last twenty-five years, she has won numerous honors, including the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, the World Press Photo Budapest Award for Humanistic Photography and on various occasions, been named Photographer of the Year by the Northern Short Course, the Pennsylvania Press Photographers Association and the New Jersey Press Photographers Association.

“Winning awards should help enable you to continue to doing work that you feel like is important,” Saul said. Saul’s work in Camden, which in 2012 was not only the poorest city in America, but--following massive public safety layoffs the year before--the most dangerous, was honored in the 70th Pictures of the Year International. The following year, with a body of work and awards to back the project she received the Alicia Patterson Foundation Fellowship grant. “Getting recognition brings attention to the people you deserve and hopefully improve the situation,” she said.

Criticism is unavoidable. Journalists rarely ever explore the subject’s reaction to the images photographer’s make. Photographers typically focus more on the audience that views the pictures, instead of the subjects in the photo. However, how can someone not be angry or upset seeing images of loved ones or countrymen in terrible conditions? According to Lesley Wischmann, a friend of Elaine Miller Holstein, whose image of her
son Jeff Miller’s murder at Kent State was national news, believes Miller’s private death was “stolen.” “It became a commodity to be bought and sold, to confer prizes on, to launch careers with, and to advertise products,” she said.

Journalists should able to articulate what they do and if it is right or wrong, MacMillan believes. “The critic can be misinformed. The journalists have to be able to articulate why they do what they do, right or wrong. It could have a practical value and it’s raising the standards of your profession. But it’s never comfortable. I don’t embrace guilt about it, but I understand the critics.”

Working in traumatic situations

As a massive tragedy hits, journalists run in as others run out. Photojournalists, specifically, use their skill to cover war, death and destruction on American and foreign soil. However, this does not come without criticism. People view these images as exploitative and unnecessary, while others appreciate the images ability to effectively communicate a story that cannot be effectively told in words. The most powerful photos are typically made in the worst situations; however, they are important tools in documenting world history.

Still working on her Camden photograph essay, April Saul’s catalog of images includes moments of grief. Her more recent work is focusing on the youth, their successes and the mentors of Camden. “I’ve covered some murder and this has been an emotional period for me, just it was in 2006 with all those kids dying.” In 2006 Saul documented in words and photos the death of every child by gun in the Philadelphia. The column, published in the Philadelphia Inquirer was called "Kids, Guns and a Deadly
Toll." “My heart is just full all the time in Camden because you just feel like life is so fragile here. There is so much poverty and so much violence.” She believes balance is the most important part of any successful project. “There is a lot of sadness, but there are a lot of beautiful things too. I think the people, when they do triumph, they are so joyful,” she said about making photographs of Camden’s residents.

Saul believes the commitment to her photography subjects is just as important as the act of photographing. “I’m always fearful that people will look at the stories I do about struggling families and judge them and make these cruel comments and not understand the context of what I’m trying to do. There have been times I’ve tried to engender empathy for my subjects and I’ve found none. I can’t seem to get through to them.”
References


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