MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE:
HOW SUBJECT REACTIVITY INFLUENCES VISUAL JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

People are reactive to cameras and their reactivity seems to increase when they also see the camera operator. This reactivity, as a form of impression management, can cause tension with visual journalism, which aims to convey information authentically and accurately. Six photojournalists at a community newspaper in the Midwest identified a set of 22 variables that have the potential to influence subjects’ reactivity while being photographed. Photojournalists have complete control of only two of these variables, the equipment they bring to produce images and their visibility, such as when they choose to photograph unaware subjects from long distances with telephoto lenses or with remote cameras. Photojournalists can potentially influence 13 of these variables, such as aspects of their appearance, presentation, and knowledge of the subject or issue. They have no control over the remaining seven variables, including the subject’s desire for impression management, demographic characteristics, and prior media exposure. The photographers also reported that, consistent with social constructionism theory, subjects were more comfortable with or afforded better access to journalists who shared traits with them. Journalists can use the variables they have influence over to make up for dissimilar subject-photographer characteristics and improve the interaction.