

OPENING DOORS: HOW INDEPENDENT PHOTOJOURNALISTS GAIN ACCESS TO SENSITIVE STORIES

Justin L. Stewart

Jackie Bell, Project Chair

ANALYSIS

As a young independent photojournalist who wants to work on stories of weight, I decided to seek out the advice of those that have gone before me. I wanted to know how people working independent of well-known magazines and newspapers gained the trust of subjects in volatile situations in order to document them and share their struggles. Without the power of saying that they work for someone like *The New York Times*, how did their subjects trust them to be credible caretakers of their stories?

For these purposes, I interviewed three respected independent photojournalists known for working on difficult stories regarding topics such as sexual assault, AIDS, and prostitution to better understand how photographers working independent of publications are able to tell personal stories on sensitive topics.

Tim Matsui has worked on stories involving human trafficking, sexual assault, and prostitution. Darcy Padilla is best known for the 21 years she spent documenting a family affected by AIDS and has also worked on stories of the homeless and imprisoned. Mary F. Calvert documented multiple stories regarding sexual assault and other sensitive topics. Each of these photographers received numerous awards for their work, including recognition from the World Press Photo Awards and Pictures of the Year International.

Each person sees their title and style of work slightly different from one another — Padilla being more apt to call herself a documentary photographer, Matsui a multimedia or visual journalist, and Calvert the most likely to claim the title of

photojournalist — but all their work share the common themes of telling independently produced and difficult stories.

Publications Help, But Aren't Everything

When asked about the difficulties of gaining access and permission to photograph, Matsui and Padilla agreed that it's nice to have the backing of a publication when approaching institutions like a hospital or prison. While it can be helpful, Padilla said it has never hindered her. "In my head it's just never mattered to me, which is possibly why it's never mattered to the people I've asked permission for to document them or to get access to a hospital for my purposes," Padilla said.

As an undergraduate student at San Francisco State University, Darcy Padilla tried to gain access to photograph in a prison in Vacaville, California where there was an AIDS ward separating HIV positive inmates from the rest. Padilla described calling the public information officer at first, asking for access that was denied due to some sort of construction that put the facilities on lockdown. She said she gave the officer weekly calls after that, checking in on how he was and asking again if there was an opportunity to come photograph. "And this goes on for six months. He's had TV crews go in and other photographers who had credentials, who had people behind them. And so finally I called one day and he said, 'Look Darcy, I really want to be able to let you come in and do this project, but I just need this from you. I need to say that you work for someone.'" Padilla solved this issue by approaching an editor at the United Press International wire service, Terry Smith, whom had published "one to two" of her photographs before. She told Smith about the project she wanted to do and the stipulation of needing to say she was

working for someone, even just as an independent photographer. “So he writes me a letter that says I’m great, I work for him all the time, do whatever you can to help her, we’re interested in this story... And that’s the letter that gets me access.”

Asked about whether she thought having a publication backing your work made it easier to gain access, Calvert said she doesn’t think it really matters. The only difference she pointed out was how it’s easier for independent photographers to photograph their own projects than it is for staff photographers, being unburdened by daily assignments. Staff photographers, though, she said, have a simpler path to getting their work published because they already have a publication.

Matsui said, “Yeah it’s nice to have that, ‘Hey! I’m working for *The New York Times*’ or *Newsweek* or whatever, to be able to say I’m with something, that I’m with some institution is nice. It gives you credibility right off the bat. Now I can say, ‘Yeah, I’m shopping this around. I have interest from X, Y, and Z. I’ve worked for A, B, and C. Here’s my website. Here’s my clips. Here’s my resume.’”

Prior Work As Assurance

All of the photographers recognized that their websites and previous work served as part of their credibility when working independently. Working on her story about sexual assault in the military, Calvert would approach potential subjects after their hearings on Capital Hill regarding the assaults. Calvert was straightforward with the women, describing her project and what she was asking of them. She’d give them her business card and if they weren’t interested, she’d leave it at that and move on to the next person.

Matsui admitted that younger photographers might not have the portfolio to back themselves up, and that's where research comes in handy. "So now I have that, but before I didn't. It came down to me basically doing the research, asking for the time and knowledge of experts so I could bone up on things. Then, walking in to a situation saying 'Look, I know all these things about what you're doing and this is the vision I have for the story. Can you help me with this?'" He also spoke to the importance of taking the time to get to know subjects and letting them know that you are helping them share their story.

Personal Investment

The photographers also agreed on the importance of being invested in the story one is trying to tell. "You have to have the desire to tell an important story, you have to care about that story, and then you have to have patience to find the right person or people that you're going to follow," Padilla said.

Calvert pointed to her "Missing in Action: Homeless Women Veterans" project as an instance where going to events led to connections that would make for more personal introductions, avoiding the possibility of being another email lost in some organization's inbox. Calvert said she worries that younger photojournalists may depend too heavily on texts and emails in this digital age, missing out on more effective opportunities made possible through direct contact with people.

Matsui's interest in sexual violence came after he was asked to help with an outdoor program after a teacher being investigated for inappropriate conduct with a student died of suicide. "I found a polarized, traumatized community. And that opened

my eyes to something. I started talking about it with my peers and after I had that interview with that director, I had a greater context and understanding of what these students had been going through. That changed my language when I was talking about the issue with my peers, such that I became basically like a lighthouse. I became a safe person to disclose to. So I started to learn how many of my friends had been raped or abused or assaulted as children. It was through that that I formed a personal interest because I was going through a transformation. And I think that you'll find people who are deeply invested in projects, they've got something in their life that gives them a personal meaning.”

Innate Quality Or Insider Status

None of the photographers felt that they had any sort of innate quality or insider status that made their subjects more apt to work with them. Calvert said that maybe the fact that she was a woman made some of her sexual abuse subjects more comfortable working with her, as some would close off when around men.

Matsui didn't feel that he had any specific characteristic that made people likely to work with him, but his extensive knowledge about the topics, specifically sexual abuse, was an aid in both proving that he cared about the topic and being knowledgeable enough to not accidentally retraumatize his subjects while interviewing them.

Before working on her 21 year-long story, “Family Love,” Padilla was following a team of doctors for a year working at a hotel full of people suffering from AIDS, the hotel where Padilla would meet the family she documented. Padilla found that her path of following these doctors opened a door for her into this whole other world, where she

gained some degree of credibility through being associated with the doctors, occasionally visiting the hotel without them. “That’s a great way to have access to a story that you care about, working with people who are working already in that environment. It’s almost presumptuous to think that you could just knock on the front door of a hotel and walk in and do it. I’m sure people did but, I think it’s always really respectful to go the route of somebody who is already a part of that world in some capacity, whether it be a social worker, a nurse, a doctor, somebody who works there. You need somebody to vouch for you. I think when you’re a journalist, you have *The New York Times* to vouch for you or a great newspaper behind you. But when you’re a documentary photographer, you really need different kinds of acceptance and you’re constantly explaining to people what you’re doing. And the irony of all this is that stories change, so you hope that that’s what you end up doing.”

Why?

I chose to interview independent photographers specifically because it’s the field of photojournalism that’s growing. Newspapers have been dramatically reducing staffs for years and photo staffs have borne the brunt of those reductions according to a report from the Pew Research Center, published at the end of 2013. A 2015 study done by World Press Photo, the University of Stirling and Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of 1,556 photographers from over 100 countries showed that 60% of the respondents were independently employed and 84% worked in some sort of documentary role. Even the President of the NPPA, Melissa Lyttle, is an independent photographer.

Publications like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* regularly utilize independent photographers, with the Post even creating their own “Talent Network” to find independent reporters and photographers across the country. Those are two of the numerous publications dotting the US and the world looking for independent contributors using various tools, including Blink, the phone application that connects photographers with companies through geolocation.

There are loads of young photojournalists vying for the chance to learn at newspapers and limited opportunities. As a student, I’ve submitted over 40 applications to various newspaper internship programs over the past few years without earning the opportunity to interview for one. There are loads of young photojournalists vying for the chance to learn at newspapers and limited opportunities. Maybe someone who doesn’t get one of those opportunities, or even the fortune of studying journalism at a university, can read this and learn something that helps them tell an important story.

I want to end with a thought from Padilla that applies to all of us working to share people’s experiences and lives with others:

“I’m looking through the camera because that person said yes; that person wants me to see their world. They want you to see their world, they want whoever I share it with - because they understand the importance of that... I think it’s important to remember as a photographer when you’re working on a longterm project that you’re at the mercy of the people you want to photograph. In the end, it’s their story and they get to decide if you’re going to be there to see it.”