

A SMALL TOWN WITH BIG IDEAS:
EDITING AND DESIGNING THE CUBA MPW 68 PHOTO BOOK
&
HOW VISUAL EDITING AFFECTS THE AUDIENCE'S PERCEPTION OF
PHOTOGRAPHIC CONTENT

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ANALYSIS

The Missouri Photo Workshop was founded in 1949 by Clifton Edom. Since then it has had almost 70 decades worth of workshops, each hosted in a small rural town of Missouri. Although the most recent workshop, MPW 69, was held in Eldon, Mo., participants from the previous year's workshop in 2016, MPW 68, were interviewed about the stories they were a part of.

Each photographer was given 400 frames to tell a documentary photo story in the span of one week. From these frames, they chose the best images to tell the story with the help of professional faculty from a variety of platforms and publications. The stories that went online consisted of about five to ten photographs. The book designed was reedited with about three to seven photographs per story.

Because each photographer is only given a week to tell the stories, the content can be skewed. Photographers do not have enough time or frames to experiment with new ideas, build their relationship with their subject, or attend significant moments in their lives. Although the faculty pushes the participants to do their best to get out of their comfort zones and conserve their frames for ideal moments, this is not always the case.

Most stories tend to be about local business owners or families trying to get by. This workshop was able to get out of this mundane routine by finding stories that would

typically be difficult to cover even with enough time. Stories such as poverty, illness, and loss were covered in this book. These topics and others led to heartfelt stories that tugged at the heartstrings of viewers.

With the rewarding opportunity of helping shape these stories in the form of a book I was able to learn about the principles of editing and the innocent bias that hides inside most photographers and close editors. As a photo editor myself, I love being able to work on other people's stories, to learn about the subjects and familiarize myself with the photographers' editing style. Having to do this with 46 different photographers was a long struggle but well worth the end product. I believe that, after studying photography, editing, and each individual piece of work, that the stories accurately represented the subjects.

The most interesting portion of all this research was the act of editing and designing a comprehensive photo book. Photo editors in my field are familiar with editing for print and online but do not often get the opportunity to create a book curated from a variety of photographers that properly display the lifestyle of a town in that decade. This was the perfect chance to do just that.

Figuring out where to start with the MPW 68 book was by far the most difficult part. Do you begin to select photographs with no knowledge? Do you begin by reading the summary? Should you first start with looking at the official edit chosen? These were all questions that had to be addressed first, in order to have a coherent edit of each story.

This book was not just about each photo story though. Each story combined to tell a complete narrative about the town itself in 2016. The stories had to be compiled into a

cohesive description of who, what, where, and when, in order to give the reader an idea of what life was like in rural Midwestern Cuba, Missouri. Life there is essential to them, so how could I make it important to the reader, this was the main question to ask while creating a book that properly immortalized this small town.

Each picture in a story edit has its own place. That is, every photograph is like a chapter of a book. They are in a certain order for a reason and it is intended to make the audience member feel emotions they may not have if the story had been told differently. This is what it means to be a gatekeeper. Gatekeeping theory is the idea that there is a reason for content publication. Why do we see some images from a story but not others?

Although the term gatekeeping was not associated with journalism until 1950, it has become common practice for photojournalism editors (White, 1950). There are three different categories of bias a gatekeeper must be aware of: distortion, content, and decision-making (Entman, 2007). These all have major influences on how the viewer reacts to a story. This theory is meant to advance the editing decision and influence the differences between print and web. Although gatekeeping is constantly being redefined, it is important to see how our decisions are really impacting the readers.

After reading these theories, I decided to take the concept directly to the characters of these stories. These decisions would directly impact the subjects and I realized it was important to see how they felt their images were portrayed. My answers varied quite a bit. I found it is difficult to evaluate yourself in these situations but can often lead to the most candid answers. Through photo elicitation my audience members were able to give their own perceptions of how they felt they were displayed within the context of a documentary photo story.

The role of a journalist in gatekeeping, editing and curation is crucial. This process can be highly subjective as attitudes and expectations of the public are constantly changing, and through that, our decision making process. How we document history and what pretenses audience members view the content is imperative to the future of the field. This historical linkage is what will solidify the impact of curated images and instill a sense of responsibility on the editors. In order to properly justify the photographs we choose, we must first understand how the audience will receive and analyze them.

Bias will always occur in a photo story. It is something that is unavoidable whether you are a subject photographer, or an editor. "That one is so wide. Period," Chris Spurgeon, an MPW subject said about one of the photographs he was in. "I mean it's just uh looks like someone stomped on my toes. And this one I'd been smoking pretty much all my life and I'm trying to quit and it's very unhealthy and I know what it's doing to me. And I don't, I would prefer not to push that out there for kids to see." It is difficult to evaluate yourself as there are often certain ways you would like to see yourself portrayed that may not always come to fruition.

This came from the act of photo elicitation. The job of a photo editor is typically to sequence photo stories. These are people trained to notice trends and visual significance that would lead to a productive narrative (McDougall, 1990). On occasion, it becomes the photographer's job to create a storyline. In the case of MPW, trained faculty worked with the photographers to create these stories. By showing the stories created from this to the sample audience, their reactions and sensitivities were evaluated and analyzed for attributing characteristics that could be traced as the cause by utilizing the photo elicitation method.

John Collier, photographer and researcher, stated that there is a greater advantage to using visuals to elicit responses than verbal questions (Harper, 2002). This is because photographs stimulate precise, thought out or "encyclopedic" responses, where as verbal interviews are less controlled and often leave the interviewee rambling. This is because "photo elicitation mines deeper shafts in a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews," (Harper, 2002, 22).

Viewers are often compelled to continue viewing a photo story if the first photo is visually intriguing (Lynn, 2013). Without something to draw the audience in, it is difficult to keep them interested in what the photographer intends to show with their story. This is why editing is such an important part to the photo process. Often overlooked, photo editing can be the difference between popular content and a boring display. "As leader of your photo operation, one of your all-important jobs is to see to it that the right pictures are selected and used effectively," (Lynn, 2013, 55).

Sensitivity has developed into an important factor of photo sequencing. As editors, it is their job to understand that the work they do affects people's lives and they are therefore required to correlate with photographs accordingly. It is important to recognize the relationship with the people in your study and understand how these dynamics influence your findings and conclusions (Silverman, 2013). There is more to being an editor than just deciding the order to put photos from a given story.

By understanding the importance of visual variety, which includes points of view and redundancy, an editor is able to create an educated collection of images that make a comprehensive story. It is because all of these factors come into play that people's perceptions of photographic content changes. Smart editing decisions are capable of

influencing the opinions of stories from what they otherwise would have thought.

Through this awareness, the project was looked at with the understanding bias that comes along with not only photography, but also photo editing, which is what is highlighted here.

A photographer, by nature, will be emotionally attached to a subject or story. It is what they have been working towards. They get to know a subject, become close, and after all, that is what helps make a good photo story. By making a person comfortable with you is part of how you gain access to their lives and the raw emotions that often make a good photograph. The photographer becomes attached to the photographs as they begin to form a narrative because they know they put their heart into it and love the content it represents. However, people do not often consider how a photo editor feels about a story.

A photo editor is there to do their job of helping the photographer and the publication they often work for. A photo editor is there for the photographer. They are there to make sure the best photographs are chosen for the story and their outlet and make sure they are sequenced and toned to respectfully represent their medium. But there is so much more to it than many often realize.

The typical photo editor for a publication is there when a photographer leaves for a shoot and returns. They are there to help a photographer choose the best images for a story and usually that may include sequencing. They are there to listen to what the photographer has to say about certain photographs that they may be attached to and explains to and the photographer explains to the photo editor these professional and emotional impulses.

However, in the case of MPW, this feeling an editor has is amplified. The photo editor, or the faculty of the workshop, is helping the photographer every step of the way. Faculty are there to help the photographer find the best angle of the story and they help them to determine the best shots to represent this idea. Because of this, the editors can often be bias themselves. These faculty spend a week with the photographers, getting to know the subjects almost as well as the photographers.

They become attached to certain photographs for many reasons. They see these photos every day while they narrow down the edit, they tell the photographers to shoot that type of photograph to begin with, and they identify with the subject in a way that most readers will not be able to. This creates an unconscious bias that many just relate to the photographer and subject but also exist between the photo editor and subject via the photographer. As an editor, it is hard not to become attached to the story that you have been helping a photographer shoot non-stop for a week. You become invested in the photographer's success and the representation of the story.

Because this connection is not often considered, it is mostly overlooked. There is much analysis on photographer bias but an editor's voice in the selection and sequencing can play an equally important part. While I was designing the book I had to be aware of this bias, not just within the faculty editors, but also within myself. I was not as attached to the stories as others in online edits were, which gave me an advantage at times over the original edits.

Photographers and faculty created the online edits and my professors and myself created the book edits. Because I did not have this bias that others did, I was able to choose some photographs that were overlooked for the online edits. These were photos

that my professors and me felt were essential to the stories despite the fact that they were not included in the stories created by the photographers, who were closer to the concepts.

This taught me that although a photo editor helps keep a photographer in check when dealing with skills and execution, they could often become too attached. This leaves vulnerability in the selection of photographs that could otherwise potentially create a more involved story for viewers. Without having worked on this book it would be difficult to analyze this level of bias that occurs within a photo editor and their relationship to the photographer and the story they have been telling.