



Several years ago, in a dark room where we gathered, a beam of light shone on the man at the podium who predicted a terrible future for us all. The photojournalist of the future will be dispatched to a news event, his high-resolution video camera electronically tethered to an evil picture editor who would be barking instructions for every shot through an earpiece. ➤ pg 39

from
darkness
BY
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into **light**

AT that photojournalism conference, we sank low in our seats in fear. Not possible, we thought. We'll fight. But even then we knew it would come true.

Today the debate about the future of photojournalism is less theoretical and is taking place daily in newsrooms all over the world. The question on publishers' lips is not if, but when.

With the recent purchase of digital cameras at my newspaper, *The Times*, that time is now, and photographers are challenging themselves to think differently about the way pictures are made. It has not been easy. Photography, however, has always been a medium in constant change, and photojournalism has changed with it. We look back on the evolution of film formats, from 4x5" to 120 to 35mm, as trivial adjustments today, but decades ago there was vigorous debate.

Photojournalists have not only always adapted, but have embraced advances in technology and used them to their best advantage. The Leica was at first considered a toy, until it helped define documentary photojournalism as we know it today. By the nature of the business, news photographers are obliged to use the fastest and cheapest technology available for making pictures because the success of any media — newspaper, television or computer web site — depends on its ability to transmit images to its audience efficiently.

Photographers, therefore, are often the technology leaders in their newsrooms because the gathering and reproduction of photographs is one of the most time-consuming and complicated parts of the publishing process. The metamorphosis of film-based photography to digital is a boon to the publishing industry. Despite the new challenges of moving massive amounts of digital information quickly, the basic advantage of digital photography is its speed. Buying a digital camera and laptop computer for *The Times* allowed us to improve our deadline coverage tremendously by transmitting digital photographs from sports events, night meetings and even spot news events. Photographers can edit photos, write captions, transmit and go home, literally leaving our competition behind.

The most recent challenge, and most threatening to some, is the marriage of still and video technology. In 1989, I was given a Canon still video camera to try for daily assignments. The image wasn't sharp, but acceptable if it was reproduced small. It had its place even then as a tool for assignments where a large number of photos were required and high resolution wasn't needed.

National Press Photographers Association President Steve Sweitzer, the news operations director for an Indianapolis, Indiana, television station, takes the change in his stride. "Digital just isn't that big a deal. It's just a new tool. On the TV side, we went through this over 15 years ago as we moved from film to video. Still photographers can learn from our experience."

But Sweitzer does see a change in the culture. "There is a new generation of photojournalists without a particular allegiance to still or TV. These folks won't have much trouble picking up a video camera when it seems to be the best tool for telling the story and they'll be just as comfortable picking up a still camera when it's needed."

Text, sound, video and still pictures will all be a part of news reporting through online services via home computers, as they are in television now. Dismissing any of these forms of communication is self-destructive. Each has its innate power and worth in the storytelling process. To argue one format over the other in the abstract is pointless.

However, photojournalists justifiably fear the loss of creative control when the possibility of the picture editor looking through their lens comes closer to reality. This situation reduces the role of the photojournalist to robot and completely undermines the creative process. Who benefits in that situation? As an editor, I could never presume to know better than a photographer I trust at a news event.

Effective photo editing happens during the everyday normal conversation between picture editor and photographer, no matter what the technology. As a director of photography, I'm always asking questions and challenging photographers to seek a new point of view, to try something they may not have thought of, especially while working on a documentary project. It isn't a confrontational experience. It is necessary to the creation of a good story.

While others may predict the demise of photojournalism, I see the daily multiplication of online newspapers, magazines and television cable outlets, as a growing market for the photojournalists who can think beyond traditional outlets and do what they have been doing for a hundred years: adapt.