Photography and Social Reform in the Digital Epoch.

The use of documentary photography to inform the powerful about the powerless in an effort to address social issues is a long established tradition that can be dated back to the flash powder lit exposures of Jacob Riis. What Riis did was to take his camera into the slum communities of New York City. He documented the conditions in which many of the migratory workers were forced to live in as a result of low wages and lack of proper housing. Although Riis could do little directly about their plight, it remained a consequence of the centralisation of production, he was able to write about and eventually photograph the situation informing the more affluent members of society about the human costs of their wealth and lifestyle. The example that Riis set remains for many the crux of documentary photographic practice.

This chapter introduces examples of social reformation that have been made possible through the use of digital photographic images. Due to the formless nature of the digital image, it can be transmitted at great distances simultaneously to a much wider audience than a traditional photograph. On 21st July 1969 the world gathered around television sets in order to see the images of the first manned moon landing which were being broadcast to a global audience. The images were recorded digitally from the moon and sent via radio back to Earth. For one moment in 1969 the entire world was united whilst watching digital images of the first human to walk on another world. The feeling of social unity first made possible through the digital images and television broadcasting has continued to evolve with the development of the Internet.

Unlike television, the World Wide Web has no target audience as such although certain sites may tailor information towards a particular demographic most of the images uploaded on-line are unmediated. Documentary images and the information they provide are not only broadcast directly to the viewer. They are also networked and shared by viewers who re-posts information on blogs and social networking sites.
The viewer has become an active participant in the dissemination of documentary images. They inform on conditions and situations that may require an intervention in order to ensure a better standard of life for people affected. It is the notion of global unity, that everyone is connected and communicating, that has led to the social empowerment of smaller marginalised communities. These vulnerable communities are now able to share digital images and information particular to their situation with others who may also be experiencing similar social issues. This process allows communities to combine their voices in order to shout louder and longer until their message is seen or heard by those in a position to help. The global system of digital image dissemination is something many governments are keen to control and mediate.

In a world of edge-in communications, the tools of media creation and distribution are being democratized in powerful ways. For companies as well as governments, the implications of this sea of change are only just becoming clear, and the people who are accustomed to being in control are starting to get worried (Gillmor, 2006 p.31-32).

Much of the information on the Internet is considered to be beyond the control of world governments. Information shared though websites such as Wikileaks provides an interesting counterpoint to the image of events created by the elite corporate media (Chomsky 2009). With digital imaging technology coming of age during the first US Gulf
War in 1991, the world audience became accustomed to digital media images being used overtly as propaganda by world governments and their allies. When on September 11th 2001, American Airlines flight 11 crashed into the World Trade Centre, the mechanisms of media dissemination became the latest weapon in an underground guerrilla war. Within minutes of the crash, images were being shared on-line and screened on every TV news channel. A quarter of an hour later and the second plane, flight 175, crashed into the second tower live in front of millions of witnesses.

The theatrical timing of the attacks was intended to allow time for images of the first crash to be broadcast worldwide and then, as viewers tuned in, the second plane crash provided the live encore. As Strauss (2003) noted, there were more Internet searches for images of the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001 than for pornography for the first and only time [so far] in the history of the Internet. With regards the effects on society Strauss writes:

I have argued elsewhere that the attack on the Twin Towers, the most photographed event in history, effectively reset the clock on documentary images, clearing away years of accumulated censure. The affective unreality of the event cried out for representation, and most people experienced it as an image. Photography’s special capacity as a medium for mourning brought us close to it again and made us realize how much we need public, shared images to make sense of such events (Strauss 2007).

The images of the 9/11 attacks acted like ripples in the public psyche, the after effects of which are still being felt. From that day forth it became apparent how widespread digital photography had become. Hundreds of thousands of images of the attack were created and shared on-line. The world then searched this vast archive of images that were taken from almost every angle, trying to find some trace of veracity amongst the unbelievable images that offered themselves as witness. It could be suggested that the 9/11 attacks helped to substantiate crowd sourced digital photographic images as a verifiable source of truth. In response to 9/11, Iraq was subsequently invaded. This led to the use of mobile phone cameras on the front-line of conflict for the first time as soldiers on service in Iraq could send images to their families and friends back home. However some of the graphic images they sent back were not kept private as intended and they were released on to the Internet, only to receive a shocked and appalled public reception.
Abu Ghraib became a well-known example of how digital camera phone images can serve as testimony. The images of human rights violations at Abu Ghraib caused widespread concern, eventually resulting in a criminal trial and custodial punishment. Today, the digital photograph is permissible as evidence in court. However, it must be printed or ‘fixed’. Furthermore, the party attempting to admit the photograph into evidence must be prepared to offer testimony that the photograph is an accurate representation of the scene. The acceptance of the digital photograph as evidence into the public psyche can be related to increased concerns around privacy and personal freedom.

The recording of digital images in public places via CCTV and camera phone images can now be used in conjunction with face recognition software to monitor an individual’s movement within public spaces. The use of digital images in passports and on ID cards means that it is impossible to live in a modern state controlled society without obligatory submission to the digital photograph. The discourse concerning the use of photography as a mechanism of control by the state, as suggested by Tagg (1988), has remained fundamentally unchanged by the introduction of digital photography into documentation and state records. One of the main concerns about the use of on-line digital photographic records is that it permits almost anyone to peer into private lives and monitor social interactions.

The discourse around personal privacy on-line is explored in Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost’s 2010 movie *Catfish*. The film follows the relationship between Nev, Ariel’s photographer brother and Abby, a young girl who paints from Nev’s photos. Their relationship is established through an on-line exchange of photographs and video supposedly taken by Abby and her family. However, it is revealed that the images Nev is sent are, in fact, pictures of random people found on-line through Facebook. Their profile images have been appropriated in order to construct an illusionary vision of Abby and her family. Despite the concerns around privacy, the use of digital photography within the social record continues to develop and grow.

With the increased accessibility offered by digital photography, society is changing the way it creates its social records. The current social history of humanity exists virtually within a lexicon of on-line digital images. The recording of personal histories and social events has facilitated the need to carry a camera everywhere. The camera has become an essential accessory to modern living. An important effect of this distinctly 21st century phenomenon
has been the rise of what has come to be known as citizen journalism. Ritchens (2009) suggests that the bombing of the London transport system in 2005 was the first example of everyday citizens publishing their accounts on-line:

Pedestrians who were caught in the violence created “History’s New First Draft,” as Newsweek online put it. “Through photo sharing Web sites flickr.com and individual and group blogs, the citizen journalist played a vital role in disseminating information this week as any brand-name media outlet” (Ritchen, 2009 p.158).

The London bombings saw mobile phone images being used as photographic reportage. The images were printed in newspapers and broadcast on television. Unlike the Abu Ghraib images, these images were not posed. The crudely photographic vernacular of the pixilated, badly lit and poorly composed mobile phone image became associated to a new citizen journalism. The increased use of digital camera phones to report news is not limited to events in developed nations with hi-tech infrastructures. The increasing use and availability of mobile phones in developing nations and in what are considered Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) is allowing for a social revolution on a global scale.

The social revolution currently taking place among the Arab states of North Africa has been made possible by the convergence of digital media and the extensive use of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The potential of crowd sourcing and social

Fig. 2. Protestors wield camera phones in Egypt unrest.
networking to bring about social reform is a recent concept that was first put to use in Congo. In January 2007, during the latest round in a series of elections, rioting broke out and the country descended into chaos. Fortunately, people were able to use newly developed software that alerted them to areas that were considered unsafe or dangerous. The software was known as Ushahidi, which is the Swahili word for testimony.

Ushahidi is the latest effort to “crowd-source” newsgathering on unfolding crises in remote areas via e-mail and mobile phones. The idea is to get immediate attention and relief to strife zones, and fill the gap left by news organizations that have slashed their foreign bureaus (Bahree, 2008 p.83-84).

Photographic images or written reports can be uploaded to the Ushahidi site. The location where the reports or images originated are then geo-tagged and displayed on a computer generated map which is accessible on-line. Software like Ushahidi, Facebook and Twitter are connecting the world in ways that ten years ago would never have been thought possible. The distance between cultures is becoming smaller, due in part to a new language of international communication that has evolved in the data streams of the social media networks. Communities that were once isolated due to physical location or political regime are now able to seek support internationally. This has been the case in a number of Arab counties that are currently experiencing widespread social empowerment, with a hope that it will eventually lead to national reform.

In January 2011, digital images showing protests in Tunisia were uploaded on to Utube and were rebroadcast by a number of satellite news stations including Al Jazeera and Press TV. The Arab people, who are often perceived by the West as powerless victims of oppressive governments, documented the protests themselves using their mobile phone cameras. The lack of international news coverage by western news crews using High Definition recording equipment only served to lend more veracity to the low-resolution camera phone images. Those digital images went on to capture the hearts and minds of people in the neighbouring Arab countries and soon the people of Egypt, Bahrain and Libya were following suit. The governments of those countries affected by the protests were quick to cut their countries’ connections to the Internet but, due to privately owned satellite communication and mobile phones, it was impossible to isolate and contain the steady flow of digital images.
Despite attempts to control the documenting of events by the people themselves, the formlessness of the digital photographic image allows it to flow through metaphorical cracks in the system, in between the jailer’s bars and out into the open world.

Fig. 3. Members of the opposition took over a government office building in Benghazi. They were gathering photos and videos.

As technology progresses, the way society uses and receives digital images may also change. Documentary photography has always embraced the latest developments of new photographic technologies. If this were not true, then how could Jacob Riis have made his famous documentary images without the use of flash powder or Henri Cartier Bresson photograph street scenes without his pocket Leica? Despite reservations from older generations of photographers, digital photography has proved itself to be a worthy asset to the documentary photographer’s tool bag. Whether the photographer produces the images themselves or they simply pluck them from the digital stream, digital photography is allowing for the emergence of new strategies and concepts around documentary photographic practice which challenge its traditional role as witness but remains loyal to its function as social informant.
List of figures


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