

**The Open College of the Arts. Photography 2: Documentary**

**Assignment 4 Critical review**

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**HOW CAN THE DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER GO BEYOND  
HIGHLIGHTING ISSUES, TO CREATE CHANGE OR BENEFIT TO THE  
COMMUNITIES THEY PHOTOGRAPH?**

Documentary photography has long been used as an eyewitness to issues, for social narratives, and as a space for photographers with reformist ambitions. So how can a photographer go beyond recording, sharing, and even commenting, as Ritchen asks, *“to include the making of imagery that is more proactive, serving to alleviate future suffering in advance?”* (Ritchen, 2020). Socially concerned photographers may show things that need correcting however as Sontag wrote, whilst photography can goad conscience, this sentimentalism allows viewers to disregard the basis of the suffering (Stallabrass, 2013:211), and may distract from addressing real issues (Martens, 2010:212). I will explore ways that documentary photographers can provoke change with their images such as, intent, long term commitment, testimony, fund raising, training, education, relationship building and collaboration, in addition to strategies such as, considered use of media and audiences.

**Intent and commitment**

Intent is imperative. Nick Danziger’s goal when photographing the disadvantaged and dispossessed is *“to give voice to those who rarely feature in the media”* and is known as a photojournalist who abandons impartiality (Widewalls, 2013). In 2005 he was commissioned to study the specific needs of women facing war, to document progress towards the *Millennium Development Goals* set by the United Nations to eradicate poverty by 2015 (Danziger, 2021). To do this he took portraits and first-person accounts of women in different conflict zones.



"My name is Mah Bibi. People tell me that I am ten years old. One of my brothers is five, the other seven. I am the 'head' of the family. Our parents are dead." © Nick Danziger/NB Pictures 'Mah Bibi, Ghor Province, Central Afghanistan' August, 2001.

Figure 1. PhotoVoice (2016)

Danziger shot this portrait when the girl at a feeding centre, refused food for herself and her brothers because she was a minor, grabbed Danziger and shared her story. His image captures a spirit of endurance and look of defiance in her direct gaze, reflecting her emotion while connecting to the emotions of viewers. He says, "*you look at the image and it's very strong because you realise that her life is difficult*" (Broadbentius, 2014)). Danziger intends to disturb with the images and testimonies he presents. Initially a one-off project, 10 years later he raised funding to revisit those he'd previously documented and was able to report that some have, with help, been able to improve their lives; sadly, he has been unable to find Mah Bibi. This retracing enabled further monitoring of humanitarian progress and a continued sharing of their stories and situation. Long term commitment as well as strong intent is crucial for photographic projects to achieve impact for a community.

### Direct giving to communities

Benefit can be provided to the communities by giving directly to them. Mark Neville produces work that “*actively seeks to serve the community he captures*” and finds extraordinary ways to give back to those he photographs (Neville, 2020). This began with his *Port Glasgow* Book Project, photographs of a shipbuilding community facing economic decline (2005), where rather than creating a public artwork he gave the resulting book free to the 8000 residents as a document to their lives. In monetary terms Neville ingeniously negotiated that the local football club distributed the book which meant they received the fourteen thousand pounds that distribution would have cost, to fund activities in their clubs.

Direct assistance can go beyond money. Photojournalist Susan Meiselas believes in giving back to communities, this may be as simple as giving prints as payment. However, when invited to photograph a woman’s refuge she developed a collaborative project through workshops in creative writing, collage, photo diaries, cooking then interviews. The end product was a book, but the process empowered women to engage, reflect, fundraise, look forward to supporting themselves, and encourages other women to use the refuge (Meiselas, 2017).

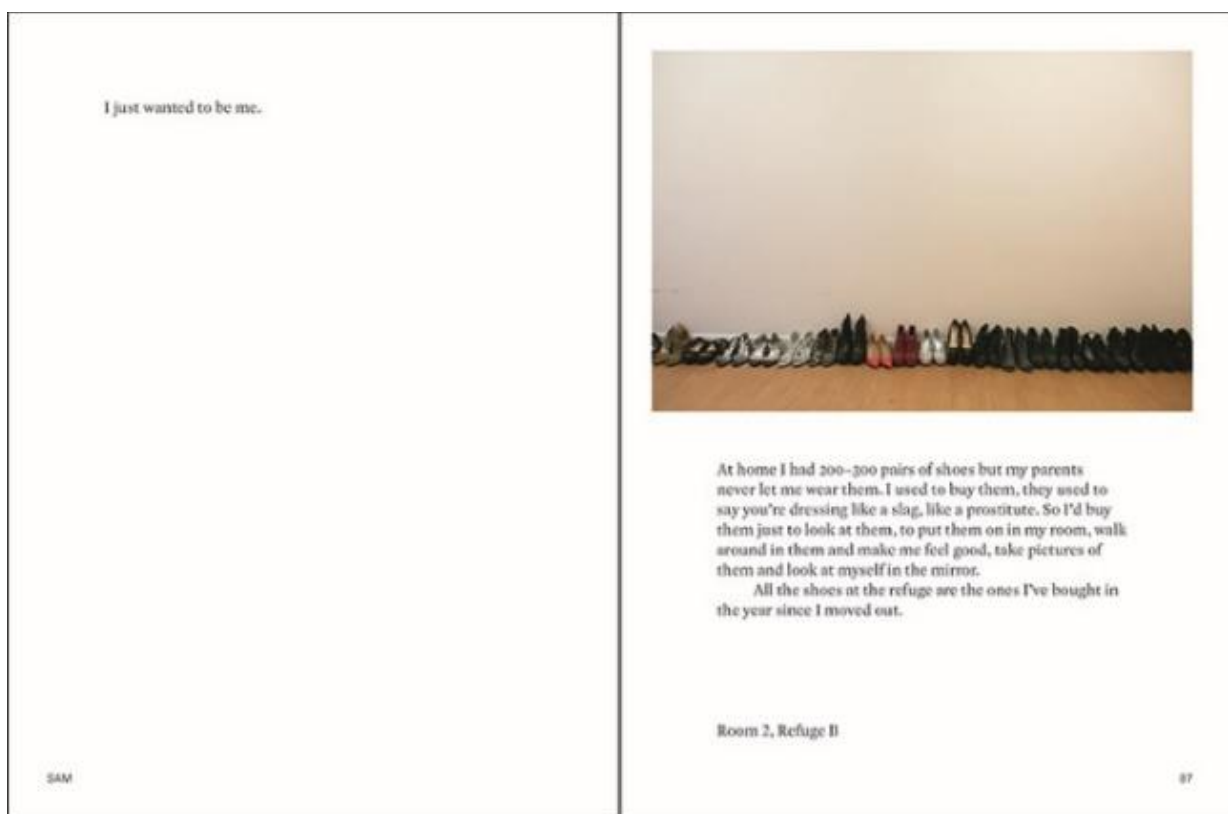


Figure 2. Meiselas (2017)

This image is a part of one woman's personal story. Meiselas presents a simple illustration of expression and freedom that nevertheless audiences can understand empathise and connect with.

Photography collectives are another example of how photographers can empower and upskill members of communities to make a difference. One is the *Out of the Dump* program (1991) founded by Reuters photographer Nancy McGirr. The program has worked with 1000 Guatemalan children living in the city garbage dump (Ritchen, 2013:115), raising expectations and developing employable skills such as photography, computer skills and creative writing; a direct impact is that some are now working as cameramen, editors, and teachers (Fotokids, 2009).

### **Collaboration with NGO's**

Another type of collaboration, that with larger often global NGOs, has proven successful in making improvements for communities. Photojournalist Gideon Mendel who uses art and advocacy to pursue political goals, believes that photography “*has the ability to make positive change in the world*” (Tank Magazine, 2012). In his work on flooding “*Drowning World*” (2007- 2018), Mendel gives subjects a direct accusing gaze at viewers, to challenge collective detachment on climate change. This art exhibited in many galleries and magazines, but importantly he collaborated with climate activists Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion so that his work had socio-political impact (Mendel, 2021).

Mendel also collaborated with Doctors Without Borders, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and local health departments over twenty years, showing the positive side of the ARV drug program providing “*a model that others could learn from and a reason to begin or expand similar programs*” (Ritchen, 2013:136). The final chapter of this work *Through Positive Eyes* was a global collaboration giving subjects cameras to tell their stories to the reduce stigma that slows the take up of medication. The director of communications at UNAIDS wrote to Ritchen that Mendel's work helped them to reach 8 million people who are on treatment today (Ritchen, 2013:136). Mendel reflects that the 500 copies of 13 *Framing Aids* posters “*which were widely used and distributed and was arguably one of the most effective works I've done*” (Smith, 2016).



5/12 Anonymous (hands).

*"I cannot talk in public or show my face because my neighbours and family don't know... I am putting my hands in the frame to show that they are the hands of a healthy and normal woman" (Maputo, Mozambique).*



12/12.

*"From last year I was able to get the antiretroviral drugs... Since then I have felt better than for many years... I want to show my fists in the photograph because I want to show that I am feeling strong" (Ncapai Thobani near Cape Town, South Africa).*

Figure 3 & 4. Mendel (c 2000)

Mendel made the best of a difficult situation finding as he arrived to photograph that most did not want to appear in his “posters”. Constructing a makeshift frame he suggested they put inside it whatever they were comfortable to, made a statement, remaining anonymous if they wished. He chose colour photography because he thought it more positive and accessible. The posters convey a spirit of optimism and living life while the testimonies challenge the stigma around being HIV-positive. Well considered collaborative documentary photography can be empowering and showing the positive side of an issue and routes to resolution intensifies photograph’s impact.

### **Choosing effective partners**

Photojournalist Ed Kashi describes himself as a storyteller, not an activist, recognising that to effect change he must partner with the right organisations. For his work on oil exploitation in the Niger Delta he partnered with Oxfam, Amnesty International other NGO’s, and academia. To maximize the impact of his images he combined them with text by a Nobel Laureate, Nigerian journalists, and human rights activists in his book *Curse of the Black Gold* (2008). Oxfam used images from his book to advocate for transparency in gas and mining industries to influence a pending bill in the USA, which was subsequently passed.

Kashi was commissioned by The Vietnam Reporting Project to report on the genetic effects of Agent Orange, an anti-foliage herbicide used by the Americans, which is still causing cancer, immune disorders, and severe deformities in Vietnamese today. He worked with families in Da Nang where he met 9-year-old Nguyen Thi Ly one of the affected children.





Figure 5. Insider V.I.I. (2021)

This portrait was shot quickly as she appeared, he deftly used the green background to contrast against her skin colour and pearls, and he frames within frames to form an aesthetically pleasing image. This image and the series resulted in a film paid for by Ford that compelled Congress to finance millions of dollars to clear contaminated areas in Vietnam (viipphoto, 2020). Collaborating with NGOs when photographing communities, takes impact to the next level, by facilitating access to subjects, locations, audiences, combine this with the skill of the photographer and it offers possibilities for extending campaigns worldwide.

### **Targeting audiences that can make change**

In my opinion this is the critical factor in producing change. New communication tools and literate audiences are opportunities for photographers seeking to maximise impacts of photographic work for communities; but they must consider their mediums and strategize to target useful audiences.

Books are one way to reach an audience. When photographing communities Neville asks himself “*how can they benefit from what I’m doing?*” (Neville, 2020).

Documenting the Eastern Ukraine where two million people have been displaced because of war, Neville will distribute 2,000 copies of *Stop Tanks with Books* (2020) free, to policy makers, parliament, and those involved with Minsk Agreements; people who can galvanize peace talks (Company, 2020). He feels strongly that books are hard to ignore (South, 2020).

His *Battle Against Stigma* project (2014) focused on mental health issues in the military, aimed to support veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Ministry for Defence who initially backed him, later forbid Neville to include his PTSD essay with the images, lest it implied that those portrayed were suffering with PTSD (The Photographers Gallery, 2020). He circumvented this by producing the work as two volumes, but in one slip case:



Figure 6. Company (2015)

After four years fighting for funding and permissions, he delivered his books to audiences that could make a difference, mental health charities, veteran, and military mental health centres, and following a message placed in the Independent, to veterans themselves.

Marcus Bleasdale who focuses his lens on human rights abuses, uses other means to target decision and policy makers globally, to ensure positive impact. He believes it is important to have a defined legal framework and act with human rights lawyers and advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch, to work at a diplomatic level



(Durbanova, 2017). Bleasdale's previous career in banking and a master's in International Relations gives him insight into the financing that drives conflicts and how to reach useful audiences (Bleasdale, 2021). He purposefully exhibited his project on the exploitation of goldminers in the Democratic Republic of Congo *The Rape of a Nation* (2009) to financiers of Africa's Gold industry in Geneva, to show them the effects of exploitation on people (Ritchen, 2013:105).



Figure 7. Bleasdale (2003) A child soldier rides back to his base in Ituri district, north-eastern Congo.

His image above is shocking and engages. The youth of the boy is emphasised by his legs struggling to reach the pedals of a bike; the Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder is also prominent, a juxtaposition of childhood, innocence and evil that lays out that something is not right. However, Bleasdale is clear that a photograph is only the start of the process, saying it is what you do with it, and who you engage with it that makes it powerful, so when the images are seen viewers “*scream for change*” (Bleasdale, 2013).

Danzinger's 2018 work on substance users and treatment centres was similarly targeted at an influential audience, policy makers at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, where he hoped they would see the effects that treatment can have (Anyone's child.org, 2018). These strategies of insightful targeting people in influence are vital if real benefits are to be brought to communities.

### **Effective platforms**

Meiselas includes in the ethical responsibilities of photographers "*an obligation to consider how their images are distributed and used*" (Borge, 2019:145). Many of the photographers I have already mentioned use a multi layered approach combining stills, film, and other media to establish impact. Sometimes a change of audience can be effective. Neville's work *Deeds not words* (2011) about the effects of toxic waste disposal in Corby was sent to every councillor in the country as a tool kit for them to use; the initial response was poor. However, a later exhibition at The Photographers Gallery (2013) led to channel 4 coverage, and by 2020 the work had influenced government policy (Smith, 2017).

Others such as Kashi have adjusted their processes to increase the monetary benefits of advocacy photography. Kashi formed a non-profit company for his advocacy photography work so that large percentages of money raised for issues were not wasted on taxes (Smith, 2018). This is something I would hope all photographers aiming to maximise benefit for communities are aware of.

### **Relationships and understanding**

Each of the photographers that I have used to exemplify the positive impact of social/documentary photography not only takes time to understand issues, but when working with subjects and communities gives time immersing themselves and forming relationships. Bleasdale describes it as an essential part of the process, when representing the issues, as well as the people with respect (Foto8, 2005). Kashi says that interaction, and building rapport are essential to tell stories that can create change (ISO 1200, 2020). As well as in-depth research for context, they focus on the individuals in situations, just like Danziger did with Mah Bibi, capturing something of the way that they live. They pass this emotion into their images, to "*produce an image that is strong enough to stay with us for more than a cursory*

*moment*” (Photovoice, 2016). These are the images that viewers will respond to and can make an impact.

## **Conclusion**

Powerful images are just the beginning for photographers who want to make local, global, social, and political impact for communities they work with. A passion about situations and investment in exposing them is essential, as is the ability to provoke a reaction with a photograph. Some elements seem relatively simple such as intent and commitment, however others require sophisticated understanding that *“every image is the result of a complex interplay of circumstances that are not only photographic or iconographic, but also involve political and medial relationships”* (Ritchen, 2020a). From the strategies that I have outlined above I believe the most critical is to strategically target audiences that have the power to make change for others. Photographers can be great advocates for change when they choose effective partners, and smart methods and platforms to tell visual stories; photography then becomes targeted activism with a lens.

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