
Photography in Publishing: From the First Photobook to Illustrated Newspapers

Franziska Boeswald

Abstract

The following article reflects on the key issues in the development of photography from its invention in the early nineteenth century up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Following the impact of Henry Fox Talbot's invention, the effect half-tone printing had for publishers and society will be discussed. Ultimately the arrival of tabloid newspapers and the war documentation within will be analysed.

Keywords

Photography; Newspapers; War; Documentary; Print-processes.

Introduction

This article will examine the correlation between photography, culture and the effect on newspaper publishing in particular. From the first published photo book by Henry Fox Talbot, it will discuss the developments in photographic printing and finally the documentation of wars until World War II with a focus on propaganda and photojournalism. A close look at perceptions of the medium known as the first mass media is necessary to

understand why it had such a great influence on people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Beginnings of Photography

Following the announcement in 1839 of Louis Daguerre's invention of the daguerreotype, the first fixed image on a metal plate, Henry Fox Talbot quickly declared that his so-called calotype, a fixed photograph on paper, was a much more significant invention of photography. Daguerre's method was very popular in regard to family photos and keepsakes such as amulets, however in using the daguerreotype an image had to be retaken in order to reproduce it. The clear advantage of Talbot's invention was that it was possible to create multiple prints from the same negative.

Between 1844 and 1846 Talbot published the book *The Pencil of Nature* which Graham Clarke described as "one of the most momentous photographic publications ever" and the "first book to contain photographic images" (1997, 41). Due to the lack of photographic printing processes available at the time Talbot had to publish the book in instalments; it included ca. 2475 prints.

The Pencil of Nature was an enormous achievement and due to the topic represented in the images it was still relatively close to the main element of paintings in the late nineteenth century, which was nature. As Val Williams and Susan Bright state "he [Talbot] was instrumental in developing the photographically illustrated book, or 'photobook'" (Williams and Bright 2007, 199).

Mary Warner Marien discusses reactions to early photography and refers to several articles written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1840. Within her argument it becomes clear that "reactions to early photography ranged from the exuberant to the cautious" (2014, 26). The invention of photography proved to be very useful particularly for science purposes. It provided lasting

evidence of objects ranging from flowers to medical instruments and became a vital part of scientific research specifically in allowing scientists to compare approaches.

Most nineteenth century photographs were “impelled by curiosity, by the desire to innovate and by social zeal” (Williams and Bright 2007, 26). In the age of industrialisation photography was one of the working sectors that profited a great deal from progress and cultural interest in the new and accurate ways of documenting.

During the rapid growth of cities, exchange of ideas on current practices became easier and this enhanced the medium’s popularity enormously. However it is important to keep in mind that “one of the primary points of reference throughout the nineteenth century is the extent to which photography continues to be understood in relation to painting” (Clarke 1997, 41). In retrospect Liz Wells (2015, 64) states, that “they [photographs] have become a major source of information by which we picture, understand and imagine the nineteenth century”. This becomes clearer when examining developments in photographic printing.

Developments in Photographic Printing

In the year 1855 Alphonse Poitevin “discovered and patented [...] the process of applying albumen mixed with gelatine and potassium bichromacy, the first [...] method of photolithography” (Newton 1979, 11). Even though this was already a big step towards a higher print production rate, photographic printing was revolutionised with the invention of half tone printing in 1881.

Half tone printing “enabled photographs and text to be printed simultaneously” (Williams and Bright 2007, 203) and was a widely available technique which provided the relatively cheap production of photo-mechanical prints. Accordingly, this new method of printing clearly “[revolutionised] the illustrated book and magazine” (Williams and Bright 2007, 203). Seeing text and image printed together developed a new habit of perception amongst

readers: “rapidly skimming over the surface of pictures rather than paying close attention to the words of a text” (Newton 1979, 16). A new quality of reading had been born.

Arguably there was a market for photobooks, which is reinforced by Mary Warner Marien: “Beginning in the 1880s, large photographically illustrated books depicting people, land and riches were published” (2014, 216). Surprisingly this kind of book did not only seem to appeal to a certain audience but was in fact “[accepted] in every social class” (Freund 1980, 4).

Roger Fenton as an Example of Early War Photography

The arts publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons “commissioned [Roger] Fenton to make images in the Crimea to which Agnew would retain the reproduction rights” (Marien 2014, 98), Roger Fenton being one of the first war photographers. Peter Turner describes Fenton’s job in the Crimean War as “[a] report, [making] it truthful yet [leaving] it publicly palatable” (1987, 114). Furthermore, Turner states “Fenton’s was a subtle document of a carelessly organized war, his portraits were filled with understatement” (1987, 114).



Figure 1: *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (Roger Fenton 1854)

One of Fenton's most iconic images from the Crimean War is certainly *Valley of the Shadow of Death* and shows an empty valley scattered with cannon balls. This reinforces Turner's opinion about the understatement in Fenton's photographs. Clarke describes Fenton's approach as "[ignoring] the brutality of war" (1997, 45).

The challenge for publishers like Agnew & Sons was that it was not yet possible to develop photographs quickly, or send them back to the publisher or printer fast enough to spark people's interest. Agnew published 160 of Fenton's images in 1856, which were also exhibited later. However, by the time it was published peace negotiations were already underway and the production was less financially rewarding for the firm than originally hoped. Fenton himself was surprised to find that people "would want to see or to buy images of suffering and carnage" (Marien 2014, 100-101). Yet his work was praised highly by the public and press.

Early war photography proved to be challenging in many ways. The public thirst for up to date war information was enormous yet "commentators mostly failed to take into account the inadequacy of photography to register the swift-action of battle" (Marien 2014, 97). Low light conditions, unfortunate weather or inadequate dark rooms posed a threat to accurate photographic war documentation. Furthermore "it was not clear [...] how to circulate, sell and archive images of conflict" (Marien, 2014); forms of rapid communication that journalists rely on today had not been invented in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This made it particularly difficult to deliver vast amounts of information, whether written or photographic, in a timely manner back to Britain. Nevertheless "military, commercial and propagandistic uses of photography were exploited during war" (Marien 2014, 97).

Advanced War Photography

The more advanced war photography became, the more obvious it became that "the war photographer was faced with transferring the real into the symbolic, and with finding or

staging heart rending incidents” (Marien 2014, 41). Before the invention of photography, paintings were the most popular mode of documentation when it came to war. Unlike photographers, painters had the liberty to show nationalist or fierce battle situations that might have never occurred that way. With the growing influence of photography people began to prefer to rely on the camera’s objectivity and the truth within the image. Liz Wells analyses the believability of photography the following way: “The simultaneous ‘it was there’ (the pro-photographic event) and ‘I was there’ (the photographer) effect of the photographic record of people and circumstances contributes to the authority of photographs” (2015, 19).

Photography was therefore, not only “providing realistic images of the struggle, but also ‘news’” (Wells 2015, 82). War photography was of huge significance for society since it was one of the few reliable resources bringing news from the front and could be accessed by anyone immediately upon publication. The invention of radio was a direct competitor for photography however images were still highly valued as a source of information. Due to the advanced print technologies and lavish display of photographs in newspapers “the quantity of up-to-the minute war information and imagery consumed by the public escalated” (Marien 2014, 222).

The steady improvement of technology meant that newspapers in particular were overflowing with war images. This led to what Marien describes as “a modern skill”: “how to ignore or forget images when confronted with an excess of them” (Marien 2014, 139). Nevertheless it is important to mention that photography was not only used for providing information, but also for advertising and more radical propaganda. Gisèle Freund argues that “the importance of photography [lies] in its ability to shape our ideas, to influence our behaviour, and to define our society” (1980, 5). This is visible in posters animating young men to join the army or imagery which is used to enhance hatred towards an enemy.

Even though photography was able to keep its reputation of being “innocent” and always showing the truth, the outbreak of the Second World War, and the use of photography in propaganda, caused this façade to crack slightly. John Tagg argues that “like the state, the

camera is never neutral” (1988, 63). He further speaks of the camera’s “power to see and record; a power of surveillance that effects a complete reversal of the political axis of representation” (Tagg 1988, 64). Obviously the camera did not only record facets of the war that the government commissioned the photographers to capture. Even if photographers returned from the war with a great amount of important images, they would not all be government approved and therefore not published.

Through censorship many images might not have been published at the time of the war however possibilities for war photographers were endless. The surveillance aspect Tagg speaks about becomes more of an issue over time. Crime needed to be recorded. Yet it was not necessary any longer to fix it on paper only. War crimes in particular could be captured and archived therefore becoming important evidence.

Opportunities for Publishers

As Marien makes clear “by the mid-1850s, governments and publishers were speculating about the potential of war photographs” (2014, 98). They definitely saw a market there since “the desire for photographs sparked one of the first mass-marketed media” (Marien 2014, 139). By the late 1880s, more than 60 photographic journals had been published and more than 160 photographic societies existed around the world. The most famous one was the *British Photographic Journal*. It was first published in 1854 and is still being published today under the name *British Journal of Photography*.

Another way of photographic publishing involved the invention of the Morris column in 1824 by George Samuel Harris. In a specification for a patent Gill argues “a Machine for the purpose of giving the most effectual and extensive Publicity, by day and by night, to all Proclamations, Notices, Legal Advertisements, and other purposes to which the same may be applicable, destined for universal information” (1824, 430) and explains in great detail how the Morris column could be used by publishers. It gave them the opportunity to advertise products, convey opinions and most importantly visibility, because people would

see it without having to purchase a newspaper or any other form of publication. This opportunity soon became largely popular not only in the UK but also in France and Germany.

Almost simultaneously, photographic postcards came into fashion. A leading postcard publisher at the time was the Detroit Publishing Company. Travel photographers enhanced the quality and quantity of the new product and were seen as “cultural interpreter[s] and witness[es] to the world” (Clarke 1997, 48). The idea of photographs within a communication system appealed to a majority of people since, as Liz Wells states, “images [were] windows into a world otherwise lost” (2015, 146) and “by 1910 postcard sales were averaging 860 million per year” (2015, 157) which gives a much better idea about the money involved in the industry and the opportunity it provided for publishers. However, the business challenge was that many people used family pictures on postcards to be sent to their relatives. These images were difficult for publishers to obtain and therefore they struggled to take advantage of this market, and instead focused on travel photography.

Photography in Newspapers

As previously analysed, a world without photographs was no longer an option. Clarke supports this opinion stating “whether it was in *Picture Post*, *Time Magazine*, *Life* or a newspaper, the photograph, as evidence of events, was basic to the representation of the story” (1997, 145). Not only did the increased hunger for photographs lead to the emergence of tabloid newspapers, but it also resulted in the “proliferation of press agencies all over the world” (Freund 1980, 161).

Tabloid newspapers at the beginning of the 20th century were seen as “a compact journal featuring eye-catching pictures and far less text than the earlier [...] newspapers” (Marien 2014, 235). Their popularity is easily understandable considering that pictures were a faster way to convey information than long articles. In times of censorship and propaganda “the captions that provide the commentary can change the meaning entirely” (Freund 1980,

163). Thus an image of an injured soldier can raise sympathy or anger and even suggest that revenge should be taken on the countrymen that are liable for the state of the soldier.

The “arrangement” of subtitles was not the only way censorship was implemented on photographs in newspapers. Interestingly the job of photo-editors already existed very early on in the history of newspapers; “[images] were selected, circulated for a short time, [and] then superseded by more images” (Marien 2014, 234), which gives an indication of the overwhelming quantity of images sent to newspapers.

When speaking about photographic agencies it is important to appreciate that “although press photography created full-time work for photographers, their output was considered to be property of the paper” (Marien 2014, 164); clearly this was not what photographers had envisioned for their work. Freund strongly agrees with this and points out that “the photographer, who had taken all the material risks, had no way of controlling the sale of his photographs” (1980, 161). Furthermore Liz Wells elaborates on the idea that “individual photographers were rarely credited for their work in magazines, and photographs were treated as though they were anonymous productions” (2015, 117).

This was one of the main reason why Robert Capa, a well-known war photographer, founded the photographic agency Magnum in 1947, together with Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour and George Rodger. Before Magnum was founded however photojournalism became increasingly important, particularly in newspaper publishing. It was valued for its “clear-eyed, subject-oriented style” (Marien 2014, 306).

With the rise in popularity of magazines, newspapers and therefore, photojournalism, a new multimedia genre was born: the photo-essay. A photo-essay consists of photographs with accompanying text that focus on one specific topic or theme. Turner describes it as the following: “Pictures, edited to form a narrative and designed to entertain and inform, were used with a minimum of words to bring the world to a magazine buyer’s door” (1987, 122-123). This suggests that the public wanted their magazine publications to consist of many images and little text.

Conclusion

Research into the influence of photography on publishing and society has led to a major revelation. Newton's observation about the changes in reading habits, which led to a focus on images rather than text seemed to have developed considerably earlier in time than initially thought. It is remarkable to see how quickly people became used to the overwhelming quantity of images that flooded the newspapers.

Clearly a world in which published images played a large role was not an invention of the twentieth century. The wide range of distribution from art to war photography led people to believe that it was necessary to capture everything in photographs. During war times, particularly in the Spanish-American and the two World Wars, photography became an incredibly important tool, particularly for documenting the scenes at the front. Photography was also used to create keepsakes for both soldiers and loved ones at home. However, its innocence began to crumble as images began to be used for propaganda and in a manipulative manner.

The more advanced technology gets the more people are questioning photography and today many people do not trust the images printed in newspapers or shown on TV. Further research on the photography development in both publishing and the arts after the end of the Second World War could be undertaken in order to understand why society has lost its faith in a medium that was not only the first mass media but also highly valued for its accuracy and detailed representation of the world.

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