As life passes by
A journalist's role: watch and wait

Sometimes journalists need to give up their positions on the sidelines and intervene in events they're covering. The difficulty is knowing when.

by Denis Elliott

Given the choice of shooting a picture or saving a life, what do you do? Photojournalist Ross Baughman says that if you're on the job, there's no question. You shoot the picture, of course.

Although I'm curious about how the theory plays out in extreme circumstances, I think Baughman is right. Society needs one profession charged with documenting reality. If we're going to do a good job of governing ourselves, we need representatives that are neither hidden in shadows nor painted by hype. Journalists can't provide that without the special privilege of watching life's drama from the sidelines. They can't provide that without the special obligation to stay out of life's way.

Sometimes journalists should come to the aid of an individual, but generally, they should put their duty to document first, even if someone is hurt or killed. And, not only should journalists be free from prosecution when they witness crimes, they should be praised for their willingness to put their own physical and psychic safety aside to provide a look at the underbelly of life.

More than a decade ago, Baughman, then a photographer for AP, persuaded a Rhodesian cavalry unit to let him accompany them on a mission into the interior. It was rumored that the white army was torturing and killing black civilians. The army denied the charges and the civilians weren't talking.

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Baughman says that he could have stopped some of the atrocities, if he had been so inclined. "I would have been able to make the soldiers feel embarrassed. I could have said, 'Off, fellows, do you think this is necessary?'"

Or he could have protected the victims. "It would have been possible for me to poke my head into the next hut and shoot the people out the back, giving them a few extra seconds," Baughman said.

But he knew that style of reporting would have offered no more than what people already knew. It's no surprise that military units use threats to achieve their ends. "If you're going to find out if they're really going to pull the trigger, you have to wait," Baughman said.

With photos and stories, voters need to be brought face-to-face with parts of reality that they would like to deny. The disempowered, those living outside the law, need their stories presented and their faces shown. What excites people to attend dog fights? What's going on in the minds of young gang members who make city streets unsafe? We won't get answers waiting for the next patrol.

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J. Ross Baughman / VII

The photographer of this Rhodesian soldier during a search-and-destroy patrol got a Pulitzer Prize — and criticism.

Lighting a match, the community was appalled that no one intervened.

In the second instance, the journalists should have put the man's life first. The drunken, out-of-work roofer's story of individual despair did not carry the same weight — the same need to be told at all costs — as the story of a religious group giving lives in protest of war.

But the line that separates one from the other is not that distinct. How about if six people had attempted suicide in the park? What if the roofer said that he was protesting some social ill? What if photojournalists happened upon the monk alone in a field rather than before a crowd of hundreds on a street in Saigon?

When journalists stumble upon life threatening scenes with no context within which to judge what's going on, they should report it. But when they set out to do a story that they think may involve crime or pain, they should be prepared to watch rather than to react.

Society needs journalists who put professional duty before their desire to help. It's the same kind of need that society has for attorneys who are willing to defend those guilty of heinous crimes, despite their own horror at the crimes committed.

At times, the jobs of observer and documenter of events can be a difficult one. But it's the journalist's job to do it.

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