P.S./Elliott

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 Deni 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 quandary. You shoot the picture, of course.

Although I'm queasy 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 representations 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 in general, 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.

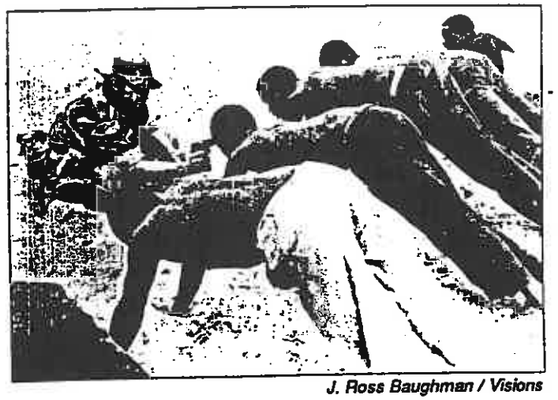
More than a decade ago, Baughman, then a photographer for AP, persuaded a Rhodesian cavalry unit to let him accompany them on a mission into the interior. It was rumored that the white army was torturing and killing black civilians. The army denied the charges and the civilians weren't talking.

Dressed like the soldiers so that he could be inconspicuous, Baughman photographed the 25-man unit while they burned down homes and tortured men, women and children. His photos won a Pulitzer Prize. His choice not to intervene won him international disfavor.

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 inhibited. I could have said, 'Gee, 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 shoo 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.



J. Ross Baughman / Visions

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

With photos and stories, voters need to be brought face-to-face with parts of reality that they would like to deny. The disenfranchised, those living outside of the law, need their stories presented and their faces shown.

What entices 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 these people to come forward and explain themselves. The explanations provided by arresting officers are obviously suspect. Yet we don't fully understand our society unless we get these stories from the perpetrators' point of view.

Society needs journalists who put professional duty before their desire to help.

Journalists should watch and wait when the reality they are collecting is information that citizens *need* and when they alone can be trusted to get that information out.

No one questioned the judgment of the photojournalists who, in 1963, shot pictures of Buddhist monks who self-immolated in protest of the Vietnam War. The world needed that statement.

However, 20 years later, when two Jacksonville, Alabama videographers shot tape while a man attempted suicide by dousing himself with lighter fluid and lighting a match, the community was appalled that no one interceded.

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 help if they're needed. 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, playing the role of observer and documenter of events can be a dirty job, but it's the journalist's job to do it.

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