

## **Photo Journalism – An Emotional Subject**

by Don Sogar

Our N4C definition for Journalism refers us to the news media and periodicals, and it suggests a wide variety of ideas for subject matter. “Journalism may include documentary, advertising, spot news, sports, human interest, humor, and the portrayal of our contemporary way of life.” It looks like most anything goes – just hope the judge likes it.

But what does the judge like? How does the judge interpret such a broad definition? Does he memorize all those names in order to see if a picture fits into one of the categories? Surely there is more than just fitting into a specified category. Would a photo of a baseball player standing at the plate waiting for the pitch be a better Journalism subject than a photo of an irate batter arguing nose-to-nose with the umpire? Why not? Does a picture of an animal running from the fire make better Journalism than a picture of the fire itself? What makes it better? Would you pick a photo of three band members in colorful uniforms marching in a parade on Main Street over a shot of just the face of the tuba player with cheeks puffed out so wide they look like they might pop? I wouldn't either, but what's the reason?

Study some of the entries in Photo Journalism contests. What is it that separates the winners from the losers? Or better, what is the common element of the winners? If I could try to sum it up in one word, I would say it is EMOTION. But the emotion is from the viewer.

The pictures that do well in Photo Journalism seem to me to be those that elicit an emotional response from the viewer. We don't respond alike, but to some degree we all put ourselves into the picture. When I view the picture of the drunk on the park bench, I'm either moved with pity for the poor guy or else disgusted at such conditions. I feel some of the grief of the victims of the raging fire and maybe even a twinge of fear at the thought of the same thing happening to my house. I might be awed by the grace or strength of the athlete as he crosses the bar; and if I can see the strain on his face, I will probably even try to urge him over with an internal effort of my own. I share some of the joy and even smile with those who were photographed just as they heard the good news. I'm nearly petrified in fear for the cowboy bull rider at the rodeo who is already tossed off the bull but can't free his hand from the tightly wound rope as he is spun through the air by the bull. And, there is a tug at my heart as I view the picture of the child trying to get a drink from the fountain that is just a little too high.

One of my favorite Journalism photos showed a delivery man trying to wheel a few too many boxes into the store on a dolly. He had them stacked about 8 feet high and couldn't quite lean them back far enough to get them through the door. The

boxes hadn't fallen yet, but I was sure they were going to topple. How could they possibly stay up at that angle? The moment was tense, the delivery man looked worried, and the photographer clicked the shutter at the absolute best time.

So, what pictures make the best PJ photos? People pictures. Emotion is easily transferred by way of people. But good PJ pictures are spontaneous, unanticipated, not contrived. That's why the picture of the artist painting a mural on the side of the building rarely does well in competition. The photographer could have come back an hour or two later to get essentially the same picture. The photo of the welder at work may look interesting with all the sparks flying, but somehow I view the situation as being under control and figure that he'll be doing the same thing tomorrow. But if the work involves upside down contortion while holding countless breakable plates, I cringe a little when I think of doing the same thing to my body and paying for all the plates I'd break, and I tend to think more highly of that photo in Journalism competition. The big old steam locomotive at the park might look impressive in size, but it hasn't moved in years, and any nostalgia of bygone days that it may drum up with the photographer does not automatically translate to the viewer. And the almost still-life photo of the clown with the painted face, though very colorful, has a tough time being selected ahead of the forlorn face of the little boy who was just told he cannot go to the park with his friends. The clown's sadness is painted on; the boy's is real.

People are not essential to good Journalism. They just make it easier. When people are not present, the emotional response could still be there. The photo of unkind graffiti could readily stir up anger, while a simple flag in an unexpected place may bring a spark of patriotism to the heart of the viewer. I still get a chuckle looking at the picture of a bird trying to steal a complete bag of potato chips twice his size – imagining what might happen if he took flight with it. I find that I worry for the owner of the house as I look at a picture of the floodwaters that extend half way up the building. And it's easy to identify with the monkey at the zoo.

Through several failed attempts, I discovered a way to get better Journalism pictures. When I go out to photograph Journalism subjects, I really need to think Journalism. If I just think about coming home with good quality pictures, my pictures tend to fit only into the Pictorial category. So when it comes to Photo Journalism, I try to take home images that will make them laugh and slap their knees or wipe away tears and hug their neighbors. I want pictures that cause them to squirm in their chairs, bite their nails, drop their jaws, raise their eyebrows, or grit their teeth. Those are the photos I want. I'm looking to find scenes that will stir their souls and cause them to think twice. If I think about finding images like that, I have much better success in Journalism competitions.