The purpose of this case study was to explore how decisions were made about photo selection and to determine news professionals’ influence over this process. The findings reveal that the social construction of news photos is a collaborative process, but by and large, most decisions about which photographs are published in newspapers occur with photo editors. Photo editors are the visual elite because they, more than news editors, have a visual sense that weighs the aesthetic value of a photo with the expression of ideas displayed in a news photo.

By Michelle Seelig

Nearly all of what the public sees or reads in the newspaper has been constructed in some fashion, including news photos. Although some research does exist regarding the social meaning of the news (Altheide, 1976; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1997; Shoemaker, 1997; Tuchman, 1978), very little research considers the social construction of visual news (Bissell, 2000a, 2000b; Lowrey, 1999; Newton, 1998). If, as Lowrey (1999), Messaris (1997), and Sontag (1989) claimed, society is becoming increasingly visual,

> Figure 1. News photos are selected on the basis of their aesthetic value as well as their news value. Copyright © 2000 The Philadelphia Inquirer. Reprinted with permission.
News photos may assume an even more prominent role in the public information process. Sontag also suggested that much of our lives, even the manner in which we dress, is influenced by what we see. As such, it is reasonable to believe that in the future, readers will depend—with good reason—on visual news.

Along with what seems to be an increased awareness of the subjectivity of photographic construction, Perlmutter (1995) and others (Bissell, 2000a, 2000b; Langton, 1995; Lowrey, 1999; Newton, 1998) have suggested that an exploration of the practices and professional philosophies of news professionals involved in photojournalism is informative. In view of this, the data derived from inquiry should provide a compendium of professional beliefs and positions concerning news photos. As I will show, the social construction of news photos is a collaborative process, but by and large, most decisions about which photographs are published in newspapers occur with photo editors (photographers decide when and what to supply to the editors in terms of specific images, then the editors decide which image to use based on the story and images supplied). In so doing, this research forwards the notion that photo editors are the visual elite (Seelig, 2001)—a concept used to characterize the news professionals making the very important decisions regarding what is visually newsworthy. The purpose of this case study then, is to explore how decisions are made about photo selection—particularly news photos—and to determine the power of the visual elite and their influence over this process.

Background and Literature Review

News editors are responsible for the daily decisions regarding the news frame, whereas photo editors are the news professionals responsible for the visual news frame. This study situates news photos within the theoretical context of the social construction of reality. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), the social construction of reality is intertwined with the sociology of knowledge. So, if knowledge is socially constructed, then, by its very nature, reality is socially constructed as well. To understand everyday life, we must consider the relation between knowledge and behavior, because, “it is precisely this ‘knowledge’ that constitutes the fabric of meaning” (p. 14).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggested that knowledge is gained through our objective and subjective reality. Objective reality is defined through our environment, daily routines, habits, and patterns of behavior; our memories; individual roles or performances, as well as other people’s performances; “second-order” meanings: mythology, theology, philosophy, and science; and significant individuals and groups of individuals or organizations. Subjective reality is defined through primary socialization (learning through participation in society), secondary socialization (learning from an organization or institution), conversation, socialization through specific social structures, personal identity, and biological factors. Our subjective meanings are important in understanding reality, possibly because they help us gain understanding of how people come to develop meanings, as well as help us to understand how people in return construct reality. The social construction of reality is a recursive process that occurs first with the nature of reality, second through knowledge, third, through our own subjective interpretations and meanings by which we engage in social situations, and last, the nature of society. So, if Berger and Luckmann are accurate in their interpretation of how knowledge occurs, then is it not possible that the construction of the news photo occurs in a similar manner?

Both Lowrey (1999) and Bissell (2000a) maintained that although news is a manufactured product, it is important to address news professionals’ biases, philosophies, and opinions, as well as behaviors and other organizational forces that shape the photo-editorial decision process. Bissell (2000a, 2000b), Langton (1995), and Newton (1998) took the first steps in applying the social construction of
reality to the study of news photos and provided some understanding of news professionals’ attitudes, opinions, and practices toward the social construction of news photos.

Newton looked to the social construction of reality to resolve the concern that news photos never truly mirror reality despite how scientific a process used or how close to reality a news photo is. Newton conducted an ethnographic study of photojournalism professionals at 15 daily newspapers in three countries and one international wire service. Newton found that although news professionals were committed to the idea of visual truth as fair and accurate representation of the news, many recognized the subjective nature of rendering reality. Bissell (2000a, 2000b) investigated photographic gatekeepers and examined how decisions were made regarding photographic news. This included the culture of the newsroom and gender of gatekeepers as variables in the photographic decision process, as well as gates in the photographic news process. Similarly to previous news research (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Newton, 1998; Shoemaker, 1997; Tuchman, 1978; White, 1950), Bissell found that decisions regarding the selection of news photos are subjective and determined on an individual basis. There are multiple gatekeepers, and gatekeepers bring along their biases to the decision process. In so doing, “an individuals’ influence can be equally important in the construction of visual news” (Bissell, 2000a, p. 12). Bissell (2000a) suggested that the visual news presented in the newspaper offers readers a “slice of life” (p. 12). By that, Bissell said, “the process of selecting news—traditionally thought to be an objective process—is undertaken by individuals with personal preferences, biases, opinions, and philosophies” (p. 12). Langton (1995) examined photo news production at four major news publications: Time magazine, Newsweek magazine, The Washington Post, and The New York Times. Evidence suggests that the concepts of reality and truth are defined by culture. Further, the routine process of photo production is part of the news media culture that is both a product and a producer of a socially constructed reality. Langton’s overall findings suggest that photographic images are not objective interpretations of reality, but rather subjective interpretations of reality among many producers involved in photo production.

White’s (1950) classic study defined gatekeeper as an individual or group responsible for making the decision to select information or not to select information, for example, a photo editor’s decision to select one image over another to best convey the story being told. The gatekeeper, then, reflects one person’s perception of reality—the information he or she selects is only one photo editor’s interpretation of those events he or she believes to be true. As information passes through each gate, information is often added or deleted; in so doing, the event is reconstructed through each news professional’s perception of the event.

So if news professionals socially construct the visual news, and by that help create the “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 3), then Tuchman (1978) was correct in suggesting that the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself. According to Newman (1984), “It is the essence of journalism. The news, because we are the editors, is what we say it is” (p. 23). Then, is it not possible that photo editors also construct the “pictures in our heads” by assigning, selecting, and presenting news photos and in so doing, socially constructing reality? Thus, to the extent that photo editors have a role in constructing the visual news frame, the following research questions guided this study:

**Research Question 1:** Who are the decision makers in the photo-editorial decision process?

**Research Question 2:** What if any, are the practices, professional philosophies, attitudes, and opinions of decision makers as to the social construction of news photos?

**Method**

Over a 3-month period starting in late November 1999 and ending in mid-February 2000, this case study focused on the photo-editorial decision makers at The Philadelphia Inquirer.

**Sample**

News professionals with direct authority over the assigning, selection, and presentation of photos were observed and interviewed. This included all
9 photo editors, 7 news editors, 2 page designers, 2 graphic artists, the director of photography (DP), the deputy director of photography (DDP), the deputy managing editor (DME), and the art director. Five key informants also were identified—the DDP, the national or foreign photo editor (NFP), the metro-biz-science, medicine, special interests, and health (SMASH) photo editor (MP), the weekend photo editor (WP), and the weekend page one news editor. These key informants’ roles and responsibilities involved producing different sections of the newspaper, resulting in different perspectives, attitudes, practices, and philosophies relating to the social construction of news photos.

For example, the NFP concentrated on photos for page one. These images were usually hard news and usually came right off the wires or straight from the camera; no manipulation was allowed at that point. The MP, however, focused on soft news photos, such as sports, science, technology, and features. These types of photos played a different function in the newspaper, and some creative freedom was tolerated. The WP was also chosen because he was responsible for selecting all images for all the sections of the weekend editions, and he gave the final seal of approval for photos. The DDP was chosen as a key informant because she oversaw the entire photo–editorial decision process and the key players involved.

 Procedures

Ethnomethodological methods were used to identify and understand how news professionals make sense out of their everyday occurrences and their behaviors within this news organization, as well as to assess how they construct meaning for news photos (Garfinkel, 1967). Specific procedures included in-depth interviews and observations. This included observing how news professionals in the photo department interacted with each other and how they did their work; observing editorial meetings as well as informal staff meetings in the photo department and the news desk; observing photojournalists on assignment; and observing photo editors as they selected, edited, and disseminated news photos for the final news package.

Once I understood the photo–editorial decision process, I shifted to participant observation. This encompassed short daily informal interviews with photo editors and news editors to ask questions regarding photo decisions of that day; at times I was asked to weigh in on photo selection. Analysis of news photos was combined with observations and discussions with news professionals in an effort to better understand the selection and presentation of news photos.

At least one formal interview session was scheduled with each photo editor, the DP, the DDP, the DME, the art director, several news editors, page designers, graphic artists, one assistant news editor, and three photojournalists. In-depth interviews were semistructured so that interviewees felt comfortable; a less structured interview format allowed the interviewee to be receptive to questions. This included starting each interview with open-ended questions to guide interviewees to discuss specific subject matter such as the following: How many years have you worked in the news industry? How many years have you worked at The Philadelphia Inquirer? How are photographic photos selected for the final news package? Who makes the final decision to run news photos in your organization?

Information Analysis

Most information was collected, transcribed, and organized, along with some analysis in a combined single operation, using the analytic technique of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In an effort to provide an accurate textual account of each interview, I used a tape recorder upon consent of all the interviewees. All interviews were recorded on audiotape, and notes from interviews and observations were recorded on legal pads. I transcribed field notes and taped conversations following each day’s observations and interviews. Whenever possible, I semitranscribed my notes from interviews as soon as they concluded.

During the information collection period, I kept an active log of my observations and notes. Each page was divided with a line off-center—one side for coding, the other for descriptive and reflexive notes (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I assigned categories to my notes, on the coding side of the page. In so
doing, I reorganized and condensed several times previously defined categories both from the literature and from information gathered during interviews and observation analysis. During the first stage of coding, I transcribed my information using simple and broad concepts—technology, social constraints, policy, business constraints, external constraints, type of news story, decision makers, and process—next to each entry on my legal pad.

As I gathered more information, concepts were more descriptive. I recorded previously coded information as well as newer information with these new descriptive concepts. This process helped refine the descriptive concepts used to define information collected. I repeated this process three times while I transcribed and coded my information. During the final phase of transcription and coding, I transcribed my information using color index cards. I assigned a category to a color and during transcription, I included the categories on the front of the card and the information on the flip side. Furthermore, I created subcategories within the larger categories. These were included on the front of the index cards along with the broader category. In the final analysis, two categories emerged—decision makers and technology.

Findings

As expected, information gathered at the *Inquirer* found that photo–editorial decisions did not occur in a vacuum. Evidence suggests that there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities of news professionals—photojournalists, photo editors, news editors, and page designers—as they pertain to the social construction of news photos. By and large, photo editors contributed the most to the photo–editorial decision process. In so doing, photo editors selected news photos based on their own biases and opinions, as well as on practices and professional philosophies.

Decision Makers

Research Question 1 sought to identify decision makers involved in the photo–editorial decision process. This was approached in two ways: analysis of the photo–editorial decision process and an assessment of photo editors' photographic experience.

Photo-Editorial Decision Process

Photo editors started the day by coordinating projects and assignments according to news budgets. As the day progressed, photo editors tracked stories in development. Photo editors periodically checked the news wires and awaited film from photographers on assignment. After the photographer(s) finished their assignment(s), they came back to the newsroom and met with a photo editor to edit photos. Photographers, with the supervision of a photo editor, selected a limited number of photos to scan into the computer. Photo editors usually narrowed the selection of photos to three or four (at most). Photo editors then prepared images for publication; this included cropping, size recommendations, checking caption information, sending images to the digital lab for toning and color correction (if needed), as well as placing photos on pages for final release.

Photo editors also worked with assigning news editors, photographers, wire services, page designers, and news editors to coordinate photos and news stories. Assigning news editors focused more on assigning reporters to stories and worked with photo editors to coordinate photo coverage; news editors focused more on the design and layout of pages—such as story and photo placement, display issues, and so on—for page one, inside page one, and the local and regional sections of the paper. Page designers also were responsible for the design and layout of pages; however, their decisions pertained to all other sections of the paper not covered by news editors.

Collaborative process. Based on the evidence gathered, photo decisions do not occur in a vacuum; to be more precise, these decisions are a collaboration of several news professionals. News media culture is part of the news production is a product and a producer of a socially constructed reality.
professionals such as photo editors, news editors, and page designers are responsible for the decisions regarding the assigning of photojournalists to stories, photo selection, and ultimately presentation of news photos for the final news package. According to the DP, "the final layout of the paper, [those] decisions reside with the news editor and page designer, and what they consider newsworthy. Photo editors offer photos to news editors and give strong opinions, even prioritize photos," but ultimately the decision to give the seal of approval rests with the news editor. The NFP remarked, They have the real estate. They know how much space is available for the stories and photos. Therefore, photo editors talk to news editors in order to get photos in the paper. After that it is up to invention, and it is up to everybody to do their job and what they have been told their job is. It is an ongoing ever-changing process—where they see one person’s role leaving off, another one is beginning, and you are competing for space, but here it starts with a story someone is given, along with fixed length for words and space for pictures. News reporters always look to chip away space from photos, whereas photo editors are always looking for space. It is a constant struggle.

News editors reported that they discussed selection of photos with photo editors; however, they asserted that they make the important decisions of the selection of news photos. They might ask a photo editor for different photos if they do not like a photo or request a certain size of photo. From time to time, news editors and photo editors will discuss photo selection until there is some type of agreement. However, in the end, the person with the highest rank—the news editor—decides. Not everyone is happy with these decisions. If there is a major disagreement, the managing editor or editor-in-chief truly has the final say. This rarely happens; instead, other department heads may be asked to weigh in on these decisions.

The only significant difference of opinion I observed occurred between the DDP and the WP in regard to the newspaper’s front page on New Year’s Day 2000. Usually, the DDP would not get involved in the minutiae of photo selection, but because it was the Millennium news story, the DDP paid close attention to photo selection. The DDP wanted local staff photos on the cover, but the WP felt they were not good pictures and that there were better photos from around the world. In his opinion, the Millennium was a celebrated event that was not specific to Philadelphia, rather it was a world event; therefore he believed the best pictures from around the world should be displayed on the cover of the newspaper. The WP editor said, “The photos from Paris were spectacular.” The DDP went to the assistant managing editor (AME) for a decision, who agreed with the WP editor and ran the local photos inside. The WP felt that readers wanted to see the best pictures from around the world, and the news editors and AME agreed with him.

Seal of approval. On the surface, it may appear that the page one and section front news editors have the final decision regarding the selection of news photos. Yet the patterns of behavior in the newsroom uncovered a slightly different interpretation of the photo–editorial decision process. Photo editors were mostly responsible for the very important decisions regarding news photos, and news editors were merely rubber-stamping decisions made by photo editors or giving the final seal of approval. The real decision makers were the photo editors.

Essentially, photo editors narrowed the selection of photos to what they considered best represented the news story and offered these to the news editor for a final rubber stamp or seal of approval after much collaboration and negotiation. When a discrepancy did occur, typically it concerned how many photos to run with a story or whether a photo should go on a section front or inside. If the assigning news editor and photo editor disagreed with the final offering of news photos, then the news editor would make the final decision regarding photo selection; again, this rarely occurred.

To illustrate, the DDP discussed a photo story “Doctors Without Borders” with a staff photographer and the foreign assigning news editor regarding space, placement, selection of photos, and cutlines. The DDP provided the foreign assigning news
editor with proofs of the staff photographer’s photos rather than looking at them in the computer, and they discussed them together. The staff photographer also provided extra details and background information for the story. The DDP also informed the foreign assigning news editor of how many photos were set to run and the placement of photos on the section front and inside, as well as the size of photos.

Although the conversation appeared as if the foreign assigning news editor was making these decisions, from the tone of the conversation and the way details were discussed, the DDP made the relevant decisions pertaining to the selection and layout of photos and was merely discussing them with the foreign news editor as a courtesy. I believe this occurred for two reasons. One, the DDP was in a position of authority. She was the DDP, and this position afforded her some authority over editorial decisions. Second, decisions like these are often the result of the trust news professionals have in each other to get the job done. If, in fact, the foreign assigning news editor had any reason to question the DDP’s decision, their relationship was solid enough for him to do so.

In another example, the MP was searching for photos to accompany the story of Pope John Paul II opening the doors to the Vatican on Christmas. The MP was worried that in all the photos coming off the wires, the Pope was not recognizable except for his red hat and robe. The MP discussed his selection of photos with the page one editor, and they agreed that the MP had selected the photo that contained enough information for readers to recognize the Pope. In this instance, the page one editor trusted the MP’s selection of photos and merely rubber-stamped the MP’s decisions.

Likewise, there was a strong collaborative effort between those news editors and photo editors involved in the production of the weekend edition. The weekend Metro/Biz/SMASH news editor (WMN), Sunday page one news editor, and WP pointed out that they had been doing this together for a long time and trusted what each had to say. They had built a rapport, so there was room for the WMN to make decisions and vice versa for the WP and others to make decisions.

Based on these observations and conversations with photo editors and news editors, it is my opinion that a large part of this process, and the reason this “seal of approval” prevails, is dependent on a solid working relationship between news and photo editors. This seal of approval occurs smoothly because news professionals follow consistent routines with clearly defined roles and responsibilities on a day-to-day basis. This is also the result of news professionals working together for several years. Photo editors and news editors who work together often enough have built trust in each other and the work that they do. They know each other’s style and work ethic. They know what to expect and know what decisions are for the good of the paper. For these reasons, collaboration is important, but it is news editors’ faith in photo editors’ experience that truly entrusts photo editors with the very important decisions as to what is visually newsworthy.

Experience

Through analysis of various self-reports of and interviews with photographers and photo editors, it is clear that photo editors hone their visual sense long before they join the staff at the Inquirer. Photo editors and news editors who work together often enough have built trust in each other and the work that they do. They know each other’s style and work ethic. They know what to expect and know what decisions are for the good of the paper.

Photo editors’ experience consists of knowing how to use the camera, handle photos, crop and size photos; what makes a good picture; how to frame a news event, select pictures, and use pictures in layout and design; how to be creative with photography; how to use photography as a means of communication; and most important, how to decide what is
visually newsworthy. These skills are acquired through formal training, hands-on experience, common-sense knowledge, and attending workshops and seminars.

The MP said that in the past, photo editors’ experience consisted of working in another, often smaller news organization as a staff photojournalist or as a freelance photojournalist. The idea was to learn the trade at a smaller news organization and then move up to a more prestigious news organization such as the Inquirer. Then, somewhere along the way, the photojournalist became a photo editor. The NFP reported that her photo editing experience came about from working at photo agencies such as The Associated Press and United Press International.

According to the MP, starting in the mid-1980s, the Inquirer began to hire news professionals—including photo editors and photographers—with a college education. Photojournalists also are cross-trained to be photo editors so they can fill in if needed as they learn to be photo editors. Photojournalists and photo editors are encouraged to attend workshops and seminars.4 For instance, the NP was not formally trained in photojournalism, so she said that she plans to attend a couple of photography workshops to help strengthen her skills and keep abreast of the latest techniques in photojournalism.

The inclination to select photos based on aesthetics was not always supported by photo editors and most news editors. At times, news photos were selected purely for their content.

In these seminars and workshops, photojournalists and photo editors learn from experienced news professionals the power of photographic storytelling to convey information quickly, as well as the ability to spot visual potential in news coverage.

Most important, photo editors learn how to be an advocate for photos and for their staff, as well as to sharpen team-building and collaborative skills—knowledge that is not commonly taught in the newsroom or in the traditional college classroom. Photojournalists and photo editors also review the ethics of photo manipulation.

Ultimately, the Inquirer looks to hire people who have not only photographic skill but who also have a creative intuition and who are able to think on their feet and ask themselves, “What do I need to do to get this picture?” These are people who have a sense of the story they want to tell, as well as a passion for a topic or story. This look at photo editors’ experience provides some understanding of how photo editors at the Inquirer decided what was visual news.

**Photo Selection**

The second research question examined how decisions were made about photo selection. A large part of the social construction of news photos results from photo editors’ decisions about what makes visually appealing and newsworthy photos. Other times visual news construction results from a negotiation between photo editors and news editors, or the difference between selecting photos that are content-driven versus selecting photos that are beautiful to view.

**Aesthetics**

As expected, photo editors were concerned with the overall presentation of news photos; this included selection of photos for their aesthetic value as well as news value. Aesthetic value consists of the overall composition of the image, including color, movement, clarity, and so on (see Figure 1 on p. 164). Photo editors described news value as “looking for news photos to provide information that the reader could not otherwise get from the text of the story.” A news photo should also convey imagery in a way that words alone cannot, and in a way that readers bring their own judgment to them. The layout of photos on the page juxtaposed with news elements is considered, too (see Figure 2).
2000: A Global Celebration

Dayne and Wisconsin repeat at the Rose Bowl -- Sports

From Florida to California to Spain, why not the south will.

For the Eagles in '99, patience and progress

Their season isn't over yet, but for the Eagles, the future's quite bright.

Don't call it a fluke

The Philadelphia story: A literary revival?

Winning with alchemy, vampires and Buff Day

Russians embrace news of Putin replacing Yeltsin

Street ready to tackle bureaucracy

Figure 2. The layout of photos on the page juxtaposed with news elements is considered.

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For example, the features daily photo editor (FDP) looked for the basics—composition, focus, lighting, and good movement. The FDP said he preferred photos that were nice and made people stop to look. The weekend features photo editor (WFP) looked for photos that jumped out at him—which are photos that are beautiful or intricate. Similarly, the NP considered the composition of images—“sometimes landmarks in photos [and] good color.” Also, the NP said that it was important to consider the size of the photo. Would it read well small? The DDP worked mostly on special project photos; she said she selected photos more for how they fit with each other than for how they fit on a page. She was interested in how photos tell a story, the whole package.

According to the bureau photo editor (BP), there was a difference between newsworthy photos and photojournalism. Photos with an aesthetic and news value were representative of photojournalism. These photos were a higher quality, more like Magnum photography (e.g., the picture agency). “Photos not only look great, they tell a story,” said the BP.

Photo editors were concerned with the overall presentation of news photos; this included selection of photos for their aesthetic value as well as news value.

Content-Driven Photos
The inclination to select photos based on aesthetics was not always supported by photo editors and most news editors. At times, news photos were selected purely for their content. These types of news photos were often referred to by photo editors at the *Inquirer* as newspaper photos or newsworthy photos—quick and superficial. The content was there; all relevant information necessary to understand the news story was in the picture, but visually the photo was uninteresting. At times quality was poor, color was off, and composition was lacking. Yet the reader does not have to read the story to understand what is happening in a news photo; the photo clearly depicts the event captured.

Photo editors considered this a professional philosophy: “selecting photos from the reader’s perspective.” The WP asked himself, “What does the photo mean for the reader, when the reader sees this photo?” He said he felt that in this way he was an advocate for the reader. The MP reported he is “interested in selecting images that will interest readers.” However, the MP did say it was possible that a photographer could persuade him to use an artsy photo. Primarily, he considered the informational value of the photo. He would not use photos in which information that told the story was lost in the art of the photo. Also, if information got lost in some way, or he did not feel information would transfer well to the reader, he would not use it. This is how the MP edited for the reader, packaging words and pictures together to tell a story that would be compelling to the reader. The NP said, when looking at photos she tries “to take the role of the reader, how they will understand it, not how artsy it is.” She remarked that she always has “the reader in mind when selecting images.” The sports photo editor said, “Images need to be able to read quickly. Also, how easily [I] can put my finger on them in the computer” (see Figure 3).

The NFP said that often most news editors are just looking for photos that match the content of a news story. The WMN looked at the image, what it conveyed to her. She tried to look at a story to see how the image related to it. This was often reflected on the front page of the *Inquirer*. So, instead of selecting the best photo for the cover, the photo selected was usually whatever seemed newsiest to the local readers. The DME said, “It is the intent of the *Inquirer* to find the best way to tell a story. If it is words, then use words. If it is images, then use images. It is always what is the best way to tell a story and what is the best image. Therefore, the *Inquirer* looks for images that are the most engaging and the most appealing to our readers.” For example, when Oprah Winfrey was in town, the *Inquirer* obtained great photos of her, but the news desk debated whether to use them. The DME felt that her photos were the most
engaging as well as what the readers wanted to see. They ran the Oprah Winfrey photos.

In keeping with the philosophy of selecting news photos that readers want to see, the Inquirer preferred photos of people. Readers relate better to photos of people, said the NFP and MP. According to the MP, “If you have a controversial story to tell, show it through the eyes of the people. Show it through the eyes of someone living whatever the story is about. That is what a reader is going to react [to] more times than not.” It was also important that famous or well-known people were clearly recognizable in photos. These types of photos usually were cropped more tightly, and the subject’s eyes were clearly shown.

The Inquirer also considered photos of diversity and images that reflected the community to be strong subjects. The NP reported that she looked for diverse subjects in news photos, such as a mix of gender, race, age, and so forth, as well as a variety of subject matter. This philosophy resonated with other photo editors, too. Even photographers reported that they kept diversity in mind when shooting news events. It was possible then, that the Inquirer looked for photos of diversity and photos that reflected the community because it showed the paper cared about the community to which it was trying to appeal and which the paper was said to represent. In this way, photo editors believed they were editing and selecting photos with the reader in mind.

Photo editors were mindful to select tasteful photos, too. The DP said, “Every day, the photo editor considers matters of taste. The Inquirer is a family newspaper; therefore, the information presented to our readers must reflect that.” The DP also said, “we cannot assault the sensible in the morning without good reason.” Therefore, news professionals considered photos “in good taste” to their readers.

According to the WFP, if a visual explained things better, news editors would be receptive. Although he said that news editors thought there always had to be a photo with a news story, he felt that not all stories lend themselves to photography. Rather, the WFP said, he was more concerned with how well a story was told. If a reporter could describe a news scene in detail, then the newspaper should let readers use their imaginations; he said it was a matter of giving readers credit visually. Similarly, the FDP said that too many news editors try to do too much. “With our newshole today, we still do not have the space for photos with every story,” the FDP says. “If we cut back the number of stories, then we might be able to have a photo with every story.”

> Figure 3. Photo editors try to choose photos that quickly convey essential information to the reader. Copyright © 2000 The Philadelphia Inquirer. Reprinted with permission.
ism. An informal reading of photos in print revealed that the *Inquirer* usually used a strong combination of the two. Once in a great while, however, a particularly compelling photo would come. When it did, photo editors agreed a photographer had at once captured the essence of true photojournalism, as well as a newsworthy photo that transcended both aesthetics and content. The DP said, “These types of photos make you say, Wow!” The DP further explained, “You want something that is going to stop the reader, make them want to read the story, read the *Inquirer*, admire the picture, read the caption. Photos of ‘capturing moments,’ as described by the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson [1966]. After all, not all photos make you say ‘Wow!’ But, when they do, you know you have captured the decisive moment.”

Though no textbook or class ever taught the “Wow! factor,” the DP said, “it was something he learned in his early days working as a photojournalist. …not all photo editors understand the Wow! factor.” The DP believed “it is something you learn. Ultimately, it is what a news photo should do.” Every photo editor should look for this kind of photo, he said, “unique images that grab your attention, hold your breath, and elicit an emotional response.” Once more, this was something he said he learned from years of experience. Others at the *Inquirer* shared the same idea—the DP just gave it a name—the “Wow! factor.” The NFP remarked that she ultimately preferred photos that make the reader stop and say “hey.” Similarly, the NP looked for photos to spark a reaction in her, whereas the WFP looked for photos that jumped out at him: “If you study a photo long enough, you keep finding amazing things to talk about.” The WP also looked for photos that moved him, were interesting and newsy, made him want to know more when he first saw them. Likewise, the weekend page one news editor said that he looked for the most eye-catching photo and one that had inherent news value, or strong feature appeal (see Figure 4).

In much the same way that photo editors looked for photos that make you say “Wow!,” the Sunday news editor looked for news photos that elicited emotional responses. He felt good photos were emotional; therefore, he looked for the joy in someone’s eyes at a wedding, or tears in someone’s eyes, or sweat on a hot day. He said he looked for things that make your heart stop—a physical scene, beautiful landscape, or a horrific crime scene—things that make you laugh or cry. He said photos that are extremes—the best and worst events—make gripping photos. For example, during one of the funerals from the Columbine High School shooting, a wire photo came through that showed a classmate autographing the coffin of a fallen classmate. The emotion of the kids writing on the casket moved the editor. The photo was visually clear and powerful, eliciting emotion and information. Though one can describe this photo in words, words do not evoke the same emotional response as the photograph—it puts you there.

Other examples include the Millennium celebration photos (see Figure 5) and the photos of Elian González. Photo editors remarked that these photos were powerful because they made a viewer stop and think. They made a viewer say “Wow!” They brought out joy—or fury.

In sum, the *Inquirer*’s practice appeared to be that if visuals could tell a story better or evoke emotions in the reader that words alone could not, then find photos that do precisely that. In fact, an informal reading of photos in print revealed that the photos that appeared in the *Inquirer* were a strong combination of newsworthy photos and great photos.

**Limitations**

Overall, news professionals were receptive to this research and willing to be observed and interviewed. In some instances, people were so eager to engage in conversation that they neglected their responsibilities. I believe I created trust with the participants during this research and that they in return were more receptive during interviews. In my opinion, people were receptive to my research because they were confident in their work and the product they produce. Still, this research is limited to my subjective interpretations. Although I tried to remain neutral, my own biases and my own experiences with photo imaging and teaching traditional and new media might possibly influence my role in...
the interviewing and participation process. Prior to this research, I worked in graphic design and photography at a news service. Part of my job was to manipulate and retouch entertainment photographs packaged in movie reviews. Further, my role as an educator has included teaching students digital photography, photo imaging, desktop publishing, and Web authoring. Hence, I am well aware of the capabilities new technology affords news professionals.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the findings presented here are based on my interpretations of the photo-editorial decision process at the Inquirer in 2000. My insights are unique and valuable because of the window my experiences offer for gleaning insights other scholars might not see from the same rich information from the Inquirer. These findings are not generalizable, yet they provide a window to the social construction of news photos by describing who made decisions about what is visually newsworthy in a major U.S. newspaper, and how and why those individuals made their decisions. Although these findings were found to hold true in 2000, it is my belief that the findings presented here are applicable today and will continue to be so in the years to come.

Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction, readers put much trust in what news professionals constitute as...
Hello, 2000!

Around the world, joyous crowds greet the new year

Few Y2K problems were reported, as years of expensive preparation seemed to pay off. Lights stayed on, and calls went through.

By Leslie A. Neiman, staff writer

Figure 5. Millennium celebration photo is an example of the Wow! factor.

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visual news, and will continue to do so as society continues to progress in the direction of a more visual society. "The burden falls heaviest on photojournalism because the human tendency is to believe what we see, even when we know better" (Newton, 1998, p. 7). For this reason, this study looked at who the decision makers involved in the social construction of news photos are. What I observed was a collaborative process based on objective and subjective realities of individuals involved in the social construction of news photos. It is through interaction and shared interpretations of what the social construction of the news photo should be that the news photo is in fact constructed. When news professionals' subjective judgments regarding news photos help to shape what is news and others share in that interpretation, then they in fact are socially constructing reality.

The findings presented here support the contention that photo editors—and to a lesser extent news editors—are gatekeepers of visual news. Photo editors are mostly responsible for the decisions regarding story selection, assigning reporters and photojournalists to stories, and ultimately photo selection. News editors merely rubber-stamp decisions made earlier by photo editors or give the final seal of approval. Photo editors filter out photos they consider irrelevant to the news story, and they select only those photos of reality they think best represent the story at hand. They have direct authority over newspaper photos because of their editorial functions.

Despite the individual differences photo editors and news editors might have regarding a news photo, they shared an underlying professional philosophy—to publish news photos that were visually newsworthy, appealing, powerful, informative, and that told a story. Specifically, the practice was to select and present news photos that convey an event visually. Decision makers at the Inquirer considered what information was the best, most interesting, most useful, and most visually vital to the reader. Photo editors' selection of diverse, sensitive, and appropriate news photos occurs daily and as routine. This process is a consistent factor in the selection of news photos and is equally important when determining how images might affect readers.

To summarize, photo editors are the visual elite because they, more than news editors, have a visual sense that weighs the aesthetic value of a photo with the expression of ideas displayed in a news photo. They also have a creatively intuitive ability to recognize and understand ideas conveyed with visual images. Photo editors know how to tell a story visually, and they understand the power of photographic storytelling to convey information. This includes the ability to sift through enormous numbers of images quickly and spot visual potential in news coverage. For that reason, they look to photojournalism in some capacity to help tell that story. In this way, good photo editors become who they are because they have both a natural visual instinct as well as a significant amount of experience with respect to photojournalism.

Still, one must learn the trade first; not all knowledge is taught in the classroom. This visual sense is considered important criteria in hiring photojournalists and photo editors at the Inquirer. Unquestionably, experience gives photo editors as well as photojournalists the opportunity to develop their visual sense. For these reasons, photo editors at The Philadelphia Inquirer are the visual elite—by virtue of their position or education and photographic experience—and exercise much power or influence over others and recognize as well as understand ideas conveyed through visible actions or images (pictures). They have the power to decide what is visually newsworthy and the ability

A large part of the social construction of news photos results from photo editors' decisions about what makes visually appealing and newsworthy photos.
to “see” photographically; this is what I believe distinguishes photo editors at the Inquirer as the visual elite.

Notes

1 Observations and informal interviews included a total of 20 news editors, however, only 7 were formally interviewed in this study.

2 Key informants were also chosen based on their willingness to be observed and interviewed at great length. Due to numerous complexities on the news desk during this research period, the weekend page one news editor was selected as a more reliable key informant than the daily page one news editor.

3 Due to space limitations, only data collected on decision makers is reported here. For more on technology, see also Seelig (in press).

4 Such seminars and workshops are hosted by the Poynter Institute or professional associations, including the National Press Photographers Association, Society for Photographic Education, Women in Photography, Wilson Hicks, and others.

5 Mostly, there were no problems taping interviews and people did not refuse to talk, with one exception—the page one news editor. I was able to observe her and indirectly ask questions regarding her work, but we never engaged in a formal interview for several reasons—trouble coordinating schedules, vacation time, illness, and an unwillingness to participate in this research.

References


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