

MULTIMEDIA ETHICS

By Donald R. Winslow

AUSTIN, TX
LONG BEFORE DAVID LEESON DECIDED TO take a buyout from his job at *The Dallas Morning News* in late 2008 to become a documentary filmmaker, he had already made the transition from being a traditional news photographer who used the photographic still image as his “weapon of choice,” as Gordon Parks called it, to being a video and multimedia photojournalist publishing his work on the Web. Early in the transformation Leeson realized not only the power but also the pitfalls of video as a commanding visual medium, and he saw new ethical challenges emerging for him and other newspaper photojournalists like him as they made the multimedia metamorphosis.

“In still photography, the boundaries are pretty clear, ethically,” Leeson said, but when he moved into the world of multimedia, he was concerned “with the surge of video erupting on newspapers’ Web sites” that standards weren’t being settled or addressed or enacted. “You wouldn’t do the same thing with a story, or with a picture. ... There are standards as to what gets published, and at some level there were instances of ignorance as people were learning, but there have to be standards and those standards have to be based on ethics and credibility, because that’s all you have, and you’re just as apt to lose your credibility while you’re messing around with video as you are with still photography.”

Meg Loucks is a *Houston Chronicle* multimedia journalist who shoots video and works strictly for the paper’s Internet site. Hired straight out of the University of Texas at Austin’s journalism program, she was the first to fill that position, hired not to shoot still images for the photography department but to shoot video for the Web. Today she’s one of three full-time *Chronicle* video journalists doing that job.

“You have to be careful that you’re capturing reality and not creating reality,” Loucks said. “I think video journalism presents some of the same ethical issues you might face as a reporter. You are less of a ‘fly on the wall’ than you are when you’re a still photographer; you’re arranging shoots, interviewing subjects, and so on. You have to be more careful.”

Leeson’s concern about multimedia ethical challenges drove him to write a set of video ethics guidelines for the paper before he departed. A long version of it circulated at *The Dallas Morning News*, and a shorter version was intended for the company’s ethics handbook. “While all the ethical guidelines that apply to still photography, graphics, and news writing would largely apply to video,” Leeson said, “motion and sound set the medium apart.” Because multimedia has so many components, so many more “moving parts” than just still photography, there are more opportunities for unethical lapses. “It seems to be confusing to so many people that it’s possible to do this kind of work [multimedia video] and still function in almost every way as you functioned as a still photographer covering news. I think a lot of that is a lack of



COVER STORY

WEB VIDEO'S ETHICS:

Meg Loucks, shooting video for a multimedia story for the *Houston Chronicle's* Web site, says, “You have to be careful that you’re capturing reality and not creating reality. You’re less of a ‘fly on the wall’ than you are when you’re a still photographer.”

Photograph by Paul S. Howell



PANO & SPOT NEWS. Bryan Chan of the Los Angeles Times uses a panoramic tripod to cover a Santa Barbara wildfire. Consecutive photographs are stitched together using PTgui software and Web published in Pano2. Photograph by Michael Owen Baker

confidence, and maybe a lack of skill. But if you're confident in your abilities to capture a moment and to tell a story, ethics isn't a problem," Leeson said.

"We're after the same thing [in video] that we're after as still photographers – we're after the moment. Any time you change a scene, that moment isn't going to have the same power. Is there anything like really being there? Being an eyewitness? You can't replicate those things."

Multimedia video storytelling is ethically different from still photography because of motion and sound and the added element of continuity, "getting from Point A to Point B, something video journalists have to learn," Leeson said. "It's kind of a double-edged sword, the video camera, because with sound and motion it ends up being the audio that drives a video piece. And that can be hard to learn. But we have to find a way to work with what we know best; we're storytellers, and if we try to become something else other than what we are we're going to get into trouble fast."

"When I started shooting video I was amazed at how influenced I was by almost everything I'd ever seen in video, and at first I stopped thinking about everything I already knew as a photographer over my career. Then I realized, why would I toss out everything I knew about telling a story visually just because the camera changed? This is just like when we went from black-and-white to color. What was color? It was nothing more than additional information. Along came color and what did we do as visual communicators? We learned how to use it; we learned how to boil it down, to use the things that were the most important. Can we find one or two things that will capture a reader or viewer's attention for just a moment? Yes, and there are a lot of things we can do that with with-

out stumbling over some credibility issue.

"We had to learn how to adapt to color, and it was just one more layer of information. And we'll have to learn how to do that with video and audio; they are just more layers of information. Video is just another component, but since there are ways you can use video to twist things, or to change the context, you have to be constantly asking yourself, 'Is this true? Is it in context?' But we always asked the same questions about our still photography," he said.

"Do not ask a subject to perform an act or repeat an action unless for illustrative or demonstrative purposes such as in a 'how to' video," Leeson wrote in his guidelines. "Setting up scenes or situations in daily news coverage is prohibited. Never change the sequence of your clips in a way that would change the contextual truth of a story."

Leeson's guide also specifically addressed audio: "Audio should always be presented in context. It is perfectly acceptable to edit out unwanted audio as long as the audio chosen for your story is used in proper context. In general, subjects should be presented in your video 'as they are.' If your subject naturally uses a lot of 'umms' and 'ahhs' while talking then it could be inappropriate to remove them and change their natural way of speaking. Use good judgment. The goal of ethical audio is the same as that of any journalistic endeavor, to be fair and accurate."

In his new video world he continues to function just as he did as a newspaper photographer, "showing up and hanging out, just as I did with a still camera," Leeson said.

"That way the video is very real and untouched. ... I've never had to say, 'Wait right there, let me get a shot of you coming through that door.' I haven't had any problems telling video stories this way, because there are ten thou-

sand ways to tell a story and after all, we're the ones who make the choices about how to do it."

WHILE THE STILL photographer has only a few ethical choices to make about whether an image is going to be "real" or not, there are "endless possibilities of where people can go in and recreate things" in multimedia, according to Jorge Sanhueza-Lyon, the multimedia producer and photojournalist responsible for multimedia projects at the *Austin American-Statesman* in Texas.

"In a still photograph there are less opportunities, while in multimedia there is sound, there's the timing – the way you edit the piece – that's another component where someone could be unethical," he said. "Where there are hundreds of edits in a video that lasts only 90 seconds there are so many ways to juxtapose things that could make a story seem one way or another. Multimedia certainly offers more opportunities to manipulate a story."

Sound is a big issue for Sanhueza-Lyon. "Any time you incorporate sound you bring in a whole range of potential issues. Is the sound actually from then, that day, or from a different time or even location? When you tromp around through mud, if you didn't get the sound, can you capture the sound of the mud separately?"

One thing he realized early in the process is that multimedia video for the Web is totally different than broadcast video. "There's kind of a 'template' for broadcast news," he said. "In online video there's this weird combo of cinema verite, long-form documentaries, video with narration, or voice-overs. ... Online is very different because it's so new, so fresh; multimedia is open to what the story needs, not a timeframe. On the printed page, there's limited real estate.

In broadcast television, there's limited time. Online, your canvas is unlimited, but with that comes all kinds of opportunities and all kinds of time to do things that are potentially unethical."

How does an online audience know if a multimedia piece on the Web was done ethically? "The assumption is that you're working with some kind of deep-rooted journalistic standard and ethics, as unbiased as possible," Sanhueza-Lyon said. "But it's so varied what you see online. You'll see a journalist who is using a point-and-shoot, you'll see a YouTube kind quality. ... It might be shot in real time at an accident, or a fire scene, or at the first day of school, but it has an honesty to it in its grittiness with no cuts, no edits, and people view that differently. And it also depends on where they're seeing it. ... Is it on some guy's music blog or is it on *The New York Times* video page?"

Sanhueza-Lyon spends a lot of time discussing multimedia ethics with the upper level and graduate students he teaches at the University of Texas College of Communications and School of Journalism.

"I tell them that anytime you're dealing with a medium as powerful as multimedia, with so many different types of building blocks, with lots of ways to tell stories, with that power comes the potential to be very unethical, to add things, to give the story a tone it might not have," he said. "I show them my raw footage to show them how you could potentially do things to make someone look one way or another, and to show how I go about documenting something as it happened, not recreating it. I tell them to work a lot like a still photographer would work on a long-term project, having respect for the people you're telling stories



NO FUDGING. "At the Associated Press we have really strict ethical guidelines," multimedia journalist Lila Merideth, seen at the NewsVideo Workshop in Oklahoma, said. "We don't do anything, like fudging the audio." Photograph by Donald R. Winslow

about and understanding that you have a great responsibility, you're a vehicle for their story. The more they learn about the medium, the more they understand how powerful it is and to be careful. They compare what they see online with what they see on television broadcast news, to see the potential for doing things many different ways, and they come up with many issues to discuss."

He has a reaction to the mourning chat of those who think journalism is dead. "I never worked in a newsroom with typewriters and Scotch in the drawer, so when I hear people say that journalism is dead I think, 'Maybe your kind of journalism is dead, but storytelling is more alive now than ever.' So my hearing goes off. That's why I love teaching this class. These students who were initially thinking about going that traditional storytelling route – some internship in the middle of nowhere – are getting converted. They're seeing that the old system just isn't there any longer."

SO WHAT ARE the college professors who are tasked with teaching new generations of visual multimedia photojournalists telling their students today about multimedia ethics?

At the University of Miami School of Communication, Rich Beckman, the Knight Chair of Visual Journalism, is most concerned about how increased competition affects ethical decision making, how a global audience affects and interprets ethical standards, and how the proliferation of citizen journalists affects ethical standards.

"With 24-hour news cycles, reduced post-layoff and buyout staff sizes, and the pressure to publish first, there is an ever-increasing strain on the process of making ethical decisions," Beckman said. "Publications have fewer editors, more people have been empowered to publish directly to online sites, and immediacy often overwhelms the need for accuracy – which is a mainstay of ethical reporting. Even those publications that have not sacrificed high ethical standards have found themselves competing for viewers with publications that publish questionable content to attract a large audience, such as when the Erin Andrews peephole video was published on YouTube ... and still photographs were published in the *New York Post*."

Beckman said that life was "simpler" when there were publications with relatively specific and defined audiences. "Most had a code of ethics or followed one written by its professional association," he said. "Different publications in different communities had different standards, but at least we knew what to expect and could understand these differences if not always agree upon their reasoning or relevance. Now, every publication is online and anyone who so desires can publish 'journalistic content.' And anyone, anywhere, with appropriate bandwidth and hardware, can view that content. So, how do you publish for a relatively undefined audience, and how do you define ethical standards for every individual who now claims the label of journalist?"

Indiana University associate professor of journalism and *National Geographic* photographer Steve Raymer sees several ethical problems in multimedia that still photographers will encounter as they make the transition. "As pho-



HARD CHOICES. Early in the multimedia learning process one of the first ethical considerations visual journalists encounter is about keeping their video in context so that their story is "true." Around 2 a.m. on the last night, sleepless students at NPPA's Multimedia Immersion workshop in Las Vegas spent the last hours of their training making choices about editing their projects (above). Photographs by Josh Meltzer

tojournalists combine still images, video, and natural sound, they invariably start to direct their subjects," Raymer said, "if only to explain the process or to 'mike up' a person from whom they're going to interview for sound that accompanies their pictures. There is a line we don't want to cross. Photojournalism is about being a faithful witness, not about production values. The pursuit of technical perfection in integrating stills, video, and sound can tempt photojournalists to create a story that may have a tight narrative and compelling images, but is still dishonest. The technical demands fly in the face of waiting patiently for the honest moment, or moments, to unfold at their own pace. Let's not forget the lessons of people like Henri Cartier-Bresson in our rush to dazzle readers."

Raymer is also concerned that multimedia journalists



TECH ISSUES. Joe Forzano of The Palm Beach Post covers student athletes for a weekly Web video feature. Some fear that technical demands may get in the way of waiting for honest moments to "unfold at their own pace." Photograph by Thomas Cordy

"working on their own" might not have enough editorial oversight. "Just because we can publish a story on the Web with compelling video and sound doesn't always mean that we should. The reason we have editors is to exercise judgment, which includes judgments about ethics and values. I have seen many of my own photographs killed because of matters of taste – a rather ill-defined concept that has to do with what an audience will accept – and ethics, including doing harm to individuals and institutions. Looking back on some heated discussions in the layout room of *National Geographic*, I support most of the judgments of editors who decided what would and what would not be published – even though I objected at the time. Let's not neglect the role of the editor in online visual reporting in our rush for immediacy and our euphoria over unlimited space for our words, images, and sound that accompanies them."

Professor James Kenney, the coordinator of the photojournalism program at Western Kentucky University, also thinks multimedia ethics can be approached fundamentally like still photography, as long as the goal is to avoid affecting the reality of a situation out in the field as much as possible and to avoid affecting the reality of a digital file through the use of processing software.

"I encourage my students to develop an ethical boundary gleaned from research on industry standards, discussion about specific ethical situations, and – mostly – practical experience," he said. "That way when a mistake is made it can be more easily identified and corrected. Perfect ethical decisions are not always made, but that shouldn't stop us from being ever vigilant."

Jeanie Adams-Smith is an associate professor, also at WKU. "There seems to be more pressure than ever for the photographer to have 'The Image,' and it has led to some irresponsible decisions, like the Reuters smoke over

Baghdad and the *Los Angeles Times* photographer who combined the images so that there would be an implied conflict between soldier and civilian. This is disturbing because more than ever journalists must maintain credibility. It is what separates us from the masses who post information on the Web ... and it starts in the schools. WKU teaches ethics and news judgment from the first class through the last. It is the most important part of a journalist's decision-making process. Our new frontier comes with audio and video. What we feel comfortable teaching is the same standard we have applied to still photography: if they aren't doing it, don't make them, and that people saying and doing what they naturally would do will always make better pictures. If you can walk away with a sincere interview you will feel better about it."

AT OHIO UNIVERSITY'S School of Visual Communication (VisCom), assistant director and associate professor Stan Alost sees a bigger ethical challenge in the big umbrella that's going to define how multimedia visual journalists are classified. "The overriding ethics issue facing this industry, and educators by extension, is not manipulated images, foley sound [effects], or staged video; what faces us is the hard choice of whether we will create good journalism or entertainment," Alost said. "When we answer that question, the resulting choice will dictate the ethical norms and practices acceptable in creation of content."

"If we choose journalism, then the practices are guided by the single premise of providing accurate information that engages the audience and takes them places they would not, or could not, go. The content, no matter its form, explores and explains others, and us to ourselves. If a journalist holds true to accurate and inclusive reporting, then such issues as photo manipulation, music used to cre-

ate emotion, and staged shots become moot. Conversely, using these techniques means the resulting content is entertainment and not journalism.

"Part of the dilemma is that the crucial role of journalism is financially less robust today than in the past. There is strong financial pressure to provide entertainment and not journalism. Yet, for democracy to thrive, journalism is essential. For photojournalism to survive, journalistic ethics are essential."

Arkansas State University associate professor John B. "Jack" Zibluk sees the multimedia ethical challenge as one that extends outside the "professional" circles of traditional journalists. "With so many new points of access – cell phones, Web pages, blogs, YouTube, Facebook – more people than ever are acting as photojournalists and documenting their daily lives, their communities, and their activities," Zibluk said. "Many new media practitioners are acting as journalists professionally as their employers press everyone from CEOs to clerical employees to use cameras and other gadgets for both promotional and editorial purposes. The majority of these new journalists have little or no background in traditional journalism, journalism ethics, or any kind of ethics at all. And this lack of background contributes to lower technical and ethical standards throughout the world of communications. At the very least, it's breeding a new kind of digital divide: the cognoscenti who understand ethics and maintain high standards are becoming fewer all the time, and the ever-growing group of folks who have little understanding and respect for journalism as a profession.

"The profession needs to reach out beyond its shrinking self to explain to the new journalists who don't even know they're journalists, the semi-journalists, and the audience," Zibluk said. "If we do that, it will serve democracy and eventually revitalize the profession."

He also sees a need to bridge the gap between video and multimedia reporting and the ethics of still photography photojournalism. "As someone just coming up to speed in the multimedia world, I found The Kalish Workshop to be everything I needed and more," he said. "I saw a huge paradigm gap between video and still. In still photojournalism, you grab the moment. One instant says it all. But multimedia and video is more like reporting with words. You take a lot of information and then reconstruct it all to make a narrative. It doesn't have to be in chronological, real-time order," he said. "The disparity is wide. I am coming up with a 'reporter test' that says 'Don't do anything that a reporter wouldn't do.'"

Loup Langton, the visual journalism program director at the University of Miami School of Communication, has two ethical issues at the top of his list of concerns. "First, captions have always critically affected the ways in which photographs are interpreted. Readers rely on the caption to find out what is going on in the photograph. Multimedia photojournalism tells stories a little differently than print media photojournalism. Nevertheless, the pairing of images and words remains subjective and potentially dishonest and unethical. 'B-roll' images paired with words – voice or written – create a reality. Multimedia journalists –

content gatherers and producers – are obligated to take as much care as print journalists when combining words and pictures," he said.

"Second, online visual reporting has expanded the marketplace of news. The diversity of news sources is almost limitless, and many of these sources practice 'committed' or 'advocacy' journalism. The concept of 'objectivity' – which I never believed possible in practice – has become less esteemed. This does not mean that ethics, fairness, accuracy, and thoroughness should be tossed overboard as well. Journalists should pay extra attention to these concepts precisely because they are personally committed to a particular story and viewpoint."

At the Rochester Institute of Technology, photojournalism professor William D. Snyder (who formerly worked with Leeson at *The Dallas Morning News*) believes that one of the most pressing ethical concerns multimedia photojournalists face today is that so many people view Web content as being "free."

"For us, that translates into attribution and monetary compensation," the four-time Pulitzer Prize-winner said. "Whether it's a single issue someone 'borrows' for the blog or an aggregator who imbeds a multimedia piece for their site, others are using our work to produce revenue for themselves without compensating us. Yes, more people may see our work and maybe our 'hits' go up, but we still don't realize the revenue we deserve for our work. If someone is using our work to provide content and they make money from their site, we should be compensated."

Unfortunately, many students contribute to this "free" mindset, Snyder said. "They view content on the Web as 'free' themselves, unless – of course – it's their work. They rip off music, 'borrow' photos for projects and, in general, use material from the Web without proper attribution or compensation to the producer. I talk to students about how to protect their copyright and in the same conversation confirm that they illegally download music for their 'private collection' without a hint of irony, much less embarrassment. It's an attitude that's pervasive throughout society – that the Web equals "free" – and it will bleed us to death unless we educate our students, and figure out a way to fix it online."

WHEN INDIANA UNIVERSITY School of Journalism executive associate dean James W. Brown was asked what he thought were the most pressing ethical concerns facing multimedia photojournalism and online visual reporting these days, the response he found himself writing was quite lengthy. So long, in fact, that he realized he couldn't confine himself to a couple of paragraphs so he went ahead and wrote a lesson that he could use in the classroom as well as on his blog.

"Such a simple question turned out not to be so simple in my mind," Brown said. Some of what he ended up writing in response is reported here.

"Most print photojournalists would prefer to be completely unnoticed as they go about their work and in a perfect world so would television photojournalists," Brown wrote. "Often the best moments in pictures come when the subject is ignoring the camera and photographer. For



DEADLINE PRESSURE. Using a satellite terminal, Steve Nelof of The Denver Post inside one of their news vans after shooting, editing, producing, and publishing to Denverpost.com a Web video story from a rural tornado scene. Photograph by John Leyba

decades now, still photo equipment has been relatively unobtrusive. The major difference between traditional photojournalism and multimedia is the addition of sound and motion. And that is a huge difference. There is no doubt that sound can be a super additive catalyst in making a story even more compelling. Pictures have the capacity to create emotion and sound can add another layer of emotion. We have often seen still pictures with synchronized comments by the photographer, which helps frame the interpretation of the pictures. Motion can help explain detail where movement is important.

"So what is the problem?" he asks. "From a still photographer's perspective, recording sound ratchets up the level of intrusiveness. We don't have to be recording engineers to know that the closer the microphone is to the source, the better the signal-to-noise ratio. Frequently, this involves putting a wireless microphone on the subject and running the cable inside the shirt or blouse of the subject. And shooting video has the potential to be even more intrusive. Now the photographer has to worry about screen direction and attempting to find repetitive action that one can edit into a matched action sequence. There may be multiple changes of tripod setups for different views. Photographers can no longer be as unobtrusive as they might wish."

Brown tells his students about a video he shot of a man assembling a bike in a high-end bicycle shop. There was a radio playing in the background that distracted from the sound in Brown's edited story. He took the video to former NPPA president Steve Sweitzer at WISH-TV in Indianapolis for a critique. Sweitzer told Brown that he needed clean audio for his pictures and he didn't have it due to the radio. "Do you mean I should have turned the radio down or off?" Brown asked. "Yes, under certain circumstances," Sweitzer said. "Ask yourself what the story's

about; if the radio's a part of the story then by all means, leave it in. But if it's just a distraction from the sound you need to tell the story," in this case the sound of the bike chain as it spins through the gears, "you might have to exercise some control over the background noise. Maybe use a lavalier microphone rather than the stereo microphone on the camera. Sometimes you have to ask a reporter to quit talking or shut a window to eliminate the lawn mower noise outside." Brown says Sweitzer's practical test is to ask himself if he had to explain to a room full of viewers what he had done, would they believe he had behaved unethically or if he had in some way created a visual lie. "That's a good test," Brown said.

"At some level there is inherent manipulation of reality in every act of a photographer in both print and broadcast, beginning with making the appointment to shoot the story," Brown wrote. "Many variables come to play when the shutter is pressed on either a still or video camera. Lens selection and viewpoint, editing, sequencing, and timing of pictures are but a few of the decisions that we know may have an effect on the meaning of the story in the viewer's mind. All photographers could work at being better at anticipating behavior and being at the right place for the shot you need without any direction of the subject. If possible, ask what the subject is planning to do when you first meet; this will help you plan shots in an unobtrusive manner. And all concerns about the technology and processes of multimedia story telling should be openly discussed in the newsroom. Each news organization should arrive at policies that guide reporters and photographers in the field. Ethical concerns make us think about what we ought to be doing in seeking the 'truth' of a story ... and after all, what is truth?" ■

The NPPA Code of Ethics is online at www.nppa.org.