Mastering Storytelling in Photojournalism: The Multimodal Project

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**Introduction**

Over the past few decades, new media technologies in digital media have changed the traditional way of how stories were told in photojournalism. The once coveted ways of sharing stories nationwide via television broadcasting or radios or newspapers have lessened and stories are shared via smartphones, tablets and other devices that have changed storytelling on digital platforms. These new digital media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blogs, YouTube, StoryCorps to name a few. The shift has created an unprecedented platform for individuals all over the world to share their stories on a larger scale within the digital space.

**Social Media Platforms**

[Facebook](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook)(an online social networking), [Twitter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter)(an online social networking service that enables users to send and read short 140-character messages called “tweets”), [Instagram](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram) (is an online [mobile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_social_network)[photo-sharing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo_sharing), [video-sharing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_hosting_service) and [social networking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service) service that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and share them on a variety of social networking platforms) and [blogs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog) (a discussion or informational site published on the [World Wide Web](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Web) consisting of discrete entries (“posts”) typically displayed in reverse chronological order).

**Storytelling, Photojournalism and Digital Media**

So what exactly are storytelling, photojournalism and digital media? According to Zideate, [Storytelling](https://www.zideate.com/definition/162/storytelling) is a method of explaining a series of events through narrative. Wikipedia defines [photojournalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photojournalism) as a particular form of journalism (the collecting, editing, and presenting of news material for publication or broadcast) that employs images in order to tell a news story. These two unique practices afford individuals a chance to create, share, alter, promote, and participate in online discourse communities. The wiseGEEK researchers offer a snapshot explanation of photojournalism,  it’s the most direct and clear explanation on the web. They describe photojournalism as “a branch of journalism characterized by the use of images to tell a story. Photojournalists are scattered all around the world within various careers such as documentary photographers or wedding photographers all with the purpose of capturing that Kodak moment to tell a story. In the article "**“**[**Visual Rhetoric, Photojournalism, and Democratic Public Culture**](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/466134.pdf?acceptTC=true)**”"** it provides a unique perspective on photojournalism and suggest how iconic images can affect the viewer’s emotional reservations. Although, visual images intensifies the visual experience of a viewer, it can present an unwarranted challenge. In reading this article it began to shape my views on visual structures and how it creates a false perception on certain individuals.

Online [discourse communities](http://utminers.utep.edu/jquintana4/my_discourse_communities.htm) are communities as a social group that communicates, in part, using written texts, but also shares common goals, values, writing standards, specialized vocabulary, and specialized genres. Wikipedia defines [digital media](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_media)as any media that are encoded in a machine-readable format. Digital media can be created, viewed, distributed, modified and preserved on computers. These discourse communities have become a mundane space for users to go to participate and contribute to that specific online community.

**Why Has Storytelling Changed in Photojournalism?**

As a result of the shift in new media technologies, storytelling has significantly changed.

In [*Producing New and Digital Media: Your Guide to Savvy Use of the Web*](http://www.amazon.com/Producing-New-Digital-Media-Guide/dp/1138830100) by James Cohen and Thomas Kenny, the authors conclude “since the advent of the online media distribution outlets, the audience has fragmented more than any professional could have predicted, and as we move toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we aim to give you an understanding of the new and digital environments. The evolution of visual media is a drawn-out process, and only in the last few years has storytelling rapidly changed.” (143) This analysis of the change towards digital media provides a small glimpse as to how and why users participate within new platforms in storytelling via photojournalism. Users are increasingly savvy in how they read, digest and engage with content via many channels.

During my research in how new media technologies have changed storytelling and photojournalism, I stumbled upon the blog Humans of New York (HONY). Humans of New York is a photo blog by photographer Brandon Stanton. In the article, Brandon Stanton’s New York Stories via The Guardian,it successfully showcases the ideal storytelling blog. It is a blog that with stories from people all around the world wanting to be heard. It gives these individuals a chance to have a voice, which is all most people want. Also, it is very useful because he asks his prospects very important interview questions. For beginners this may be a source to reference to for a few thought-provoking question.

The photo blog introduces viewers/users to various stories that explores issues surrounding sexism, inequality, freedom and loss just to name a few and in doing so has vastly changed storytelling. The creator of the blog posts a photo that is accompanied by a quote from the participant who is anonymous. The photo blog houses its unique stories via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and their site, which affords viewers and user of those online communities a chance to connect and engage. I became fascinated by the blog because it afford individuals a chance to interact with stories in a more visceral way, the blog receives an influx of user engagement including comments, sharing, and likes. Many of the stories shared via the photo blog appeal to viewers/users emotions. In the early stages of the project I stumbled upon an image of a young girl sitting on a bench in a park.

As I recall this moment, there was something incredible which drew me to the image. The image was of a girl sitting in the park with her hands clasped wearing a Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) sweater.[](https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/belli-f2015-eng2720/files/2015/11/IMG_1974.jpg)

In the quote, accompanied by the image, the young woman recalled her struggles on leading up to her graduation from FIT. While studying at FIT, her grandfather became terminally ill and became hospitalized throughout her undergraduate year. Finally, on the evening of her graduation, he passed away. In the quote, she recalled the loss she experienced and how no amount of success could replace the emptiness she felt.

After reading her story via Instagram, I was fascinated by how much her story resonated with me and how many user engagement she received. For a short moment in time I understood this stranger, I saw her for what she wanted me to see and for a moment she had a voice on a major platform. I gravitated towards the photo because it spoke explicitly about loss and how unique it was to present yourself to the world via this social platform.[](https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/belli-f2015-eng2720/files/2015/11/IMG_1976.jpg)

With social media being such an increment part of how individuals share their stories, it made me begin to rethink how stories are being shared and transformed because of new media platforms. Specifically, I wanted to explore what made this image successful. This was the “Aha!” moment; I wanted to explore how media connects people. This single method of communication and connect would make for a stronger community and create more integration.

**How to Define Success?**

Initially, at the beginning of narrowing down the project I knew I wanted the project to center on storytelling and photojournalism. Particularly, What makes a story successful in photojournalism? My definition of success amount to user engagement such as the number of likes, the amount of times the image was favorite, viewed, retweeted, reblogged, reposted, how many comments, how authentic the story was, the amount of times the images was shared on other sites, and if other viewers/users shared their stories because of the image. I wanted to be able to quantify these engagements because it would pave the way for a successful delivery of a story via various social media platforms. With these questions in mind, the project began to unfold.

**The Project**

Mastering Storytelling in Photojournalism: The Multimodal Project is a final project in the course ENG 2720 Writing in New Media. The final project explores how new media platforms have created new communities like Humans of New York (HONY), for stories to be shared which affords viewers/users a chance to engage with content nontraditionally. The goal of the project is to create three images similar to HONY by using what I define as their 10 best practices, which will be shared across my personal Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and personal blog Black Attire Aficionado and track user engagement. The project was initially designed to quantify the user engagement. The quantification of user engagement would entail monitoring the sites, record and analyze the different ways viewers/users interacted with the image. Essentially by using HONY’s best practices; I believe I can produce user engagement similar to Humans of New York but on a smaller magnitude. Finally, by understanding user engagement on different social media sites, one can tailor the message for a specific audience that can contribute to a more successful story delivery. The end-result of the project will be presented on my OpenLab ePortfolio site which will include the project abstract, the proposal, the presentation, the write up and the project deliverables including links to my personal blog Black Attire Aficionado, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram account.

Initially, the goal of the project was to quantify user engagement, which would make for a successful storytelling in photojournalism but after many iterations of the project this was no longer the goal. After weeks of tracking the images created with the 10 best practices, I came to the conclusion, “What if the Numbers don’t Matter?” This became paramount after unsuccessful user activity with the images on several social platforms. I realized later that mastering storytelling in photojournalism was less about the numbers but about how digital media has connected us more than ever and through new media platforms we are able to share our stories in a revolutionary way.

The Mastering Storytelling in Photojournalism: The Multimodal Project hopes to shine a light on how a stories success cannot be quantified by the amount of likes it receives.

**The Road to Creating the Image Deliverables**

Upon my research to create images that were similar to HONY, I came across an interview of Brandon Stanton that he gave via TED Talk “The Art of Storytelling, According to the Founders of StoryCorps and Humans of New York” by Amy S. Choi. TED Talks and TED Ideas are a division of TED, a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas around the world. The article examines the success of two powerful storytellers such as Humans of New York’s Brandon Stanton and Storycorps’ Dave Isay. These two pioneers have successfully given a voice to many individuals who were once voiceless and a platform to share their stories. One of the claims in the article from Dave Isay is to “create an intimate culture where trust is paramount.” By doing so, interviewees are in a comforting ecosystem where they are truly able to be themselves. Also, in the article Stanton mentions, “interviewing someone is a very proactive process and requires taking a lot of agency into your own hands to get past people’s general normal self-preservation mode,” he says. “My interviews are very pointed. I’m an active participant; I will kindly interrupt people. But I’ve learned there is nothing people won’t tell you if you ask in a compassionate and legitimately interested way.” Additionally, mentioned in the article Dave Isay, founder of StoryCorps, an independent nonprofit project whose mission is to honor and celebrate the lives of everyday Americans by listening to their stories and turning them into short animations.

After reading this interview I became inspired to find prospects to participate in my experiment. I wanted to create three images that were similar to HONY. I decided to interview a male friend of mine, a female classmate’s girl friend and myself. The images along with quote would be housed on my personal blog Black Attire Aficionado, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook in an effort to track user engagement.

**Parts of the Image**

Image- A picture

Quote- A quote on loss

Hashtag- is a word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic

**The Image Deliverables**

Image 1: The Loss of Time

**Quote** “The worst kind of loss is the loss of time, because it’s constant and never ending, you won’t stop losing time until you die. This can drive one crazy as your goals becomes more immediate and crunched under the weight of time. Time lost also manifests itself in moments spent with others, it’s a little scary how long we can go without seeing someone or doing something and be instantly reminded of that once we see the person or participate in that activity again. Our memories remind us of how fast time flies and how if we don’t use it responsibly we can waste a lot of time, as time waits for no one.”[#HumansofNewYork](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/humansofnewyork)”

[](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153317389440773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater)

During the first week of December I began to execute my deliverables for the project. My biggest deliverable was creating the three images that reflected HONY’s bet practices. I met with participant one in Chinatown, New York to photograph him. After photographing him I asked him “What is the worst loss you have experienced?” His response was unlike anything I could have imagined. The loss he reflected upon was the loss of time--- it was quite poignant. I recorded his quote on my iPhone using the voice memos where I later typed out the quote. When I arrived home, I posted the image and the quote on my personal social media platforms via [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153317389440773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater), [Twitter,](https://twitter.com/jodieannsteph/status/673141560708571136) [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/-uuCfbjm68/), and [Black Attire Aficionado](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/a-timely-loss/) along with the hashtag (#HumansofNewYork). A [hashtag](https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+a+hashtag&oq=what+is+a+hash&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.4277j0j7&sourceid=chrome&es_sm=91&ie=UTF-8) is a word or phrase preceded by a hash or pound sign (#) and used to identify messages on a specific topic. Over the next following days I began to monitor the user engagement across all the platforms. Initially, when I first started there was no response. I became worried that no one would interact with the image, which would make my project unsuccessful. The photo via [**Instagram**](https://www.instagram.com/p/-uuCfbjm68/)received 21 likes and 3 comments; three Instagram users participated in the conversation. Many found the quote on loss to be “powerful”. I did not engage with any of the commenters because Brendan Stanton does not engage with users, it is one of the strategies I listed in my Humans of New York Best Practices, which will be shared on my ePortfolio site. I found the photo shared on Instagram to be successful because it received likes and users engaged with the photo. On the platform [**Facebook**](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153317389440773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater), I received 10 likes and there was no user engagement on this platform. I did not find this very successful because I have over 700 Facebook friends and was quite surprised by the lack of response. On [**Twitter**](https://twitter.com/jodieannsteph/status/673141560708571136), I took a different approach to sharing the image. I posted the image with a short sentence from the quote and linked it to my personal blog[**Black Attire Aficionado**](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/a-timely-loss/) using Bitly and the hashtag #HONY so that anyone searching the hashtag would see the tweet. The photo shared via Twitter, received over 300 impressions (the amount of times people saw the tweet on Twitter), and received over 17 user engagements such as clicking the link, the hashtag and the media (the photo).  On my personal blog[**Black Attire Aficionado**](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/a-timely-loss/)the image received over 14 likes, 3 comments and received 6 stars. There was something about the numbers that did not make me happy; I could not narrow down what it was so I proceeded to the next image creation.

Image 2: The Loss of Laughter

**Quote** “I’m afraid of losing my ability to laugh during moments of hard times. My laugh is what I cherish most of all. Sometimes there are people who come into your life whose purpose is to destroy you and by some miracle it changes you.

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Often times this can make you a better person and other times it can make you bitter. My laugh is infectious and youthful and losing it is a constant fear of mine. . .” [#humansofnewyork](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/humansofnewyork)

For the second image, I decided to include myself in the project. I wanted to involve myself because I thought it would be refreshing to reflect upon on loss and to be fully immersed in my project. This part was a little intense because Brandon Stanton never participated in HONY in any of the platforms. I was fearful that I was risking my project however I continued. On the subject of loss, I took a different approach to sharing my story. I wanted to reflect upon a loss that was more inclined with who I am. I was not comfortable with sharing a personal loss because I was not ready to put that side of me on display for the world to see. So instead I wrote a quote on the fear of losing my laughter. I chose the fear of losing my laughter because it is a constant fear of mine. Often times there are moments in each of our lives, which call for us to laugh off the hard times. I have always been able to laugh during moments of hard times and not being able to do is a fear of mine. My laugh as I like to define as infectious and youthful is one of the things that makes me who I am. I chose an old photo of me from two summers ago and shared the images via my [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153324593090773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/jodieannsteph/status/673319330973687808), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/-6qwuBDm3H/) and [Black Attire Aficionado](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/06/always-with-a-smile/). I shared my image and quote along the hashtag (#HumansofNewYork). Over the next following days I began to monitor the user engagement across all the platforms. Initially, when I first posted the image, the response was immediate. During the course of the weeks where I tracked and recorded the user engagements across all the platforms the numbers were surprising. I found the photo shared on Facebook to be successful because it received likes and users engaged with the photo. On the platform [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153324593090773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater), I received 36 likes and there were 5 user engagements. On [Twitter](https://twitter.com/jodieannsteph/status/673319330973687808), I took a different approach to sharing the image. I posted the image with a short sentence from the quote and linked it to my personal blog[**Black Attire Aficionado**](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/a-timely-loss/) using Bitly and the hashtag #HONY so that anyone searching the hashtag would see the tweet. The photo shared via Twitter, received over 230 impressions (the amount of times people saw the tweet on Twitter), and received 3 user engagements such as clicking the link, the hashtag and the media (the photo).  On my personal blog[**Black Attire Aficionado**](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/05/a-timely-loss/)the image received 11 likes, 1 comment and received 7 stars. There was something about the numbers that did not make me happy; I could not narrow down what it was so I proceeded to the next image creation. After posting my second image deliverable, I started to have mix feelings as to what would make the images more successful. I was not getting the user engagement that I imagined. I was expecting the images to become viral and to have over 30 comments. At this point of the project, I knew something was not right. I continued to my last and final user engagement where I discovered what I was feeling all this time.

Image 3: A Granddaughters Laugh

**Quote**“Losing my grandmother was one of the worst feelings in the world. She was like a second mother to me. She raised me and lived right downstairs from me. All I knew was her being there. She moved to Canada a few years before her passing. It was sudden and out of nowhere and by far one of the worst things that I would have found out. She had an aneurysm. We went to Canada right away to be by her side. When I saw her it wasn’t her, she wasn’t herself and she was not conscious. It’s a horrible feeling seeing someone you love so much in that type of state. I was in the room with her and some family when she passed. My heart was sinking and I felt like I was dying inside.

[](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153326476535773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater)

When we heard the machine go off I knew she was gone. I felt like I died inside. I starred at her and spoke to her in her ear before she went. It wasn’t easy to deal with at all. But thank God I had my son, Aiden there to hug and kiss and keep me strong and keep my mind busy. I know she’s in a better place, I just think it was too early for her to leave. It’s not an easy thing to deal with losing someone you love so much. I am grateful she was able to be here when my son was born and she knew him for a year and a half. I still miss her to this day but I smile knowing she’s watching over my family and me. I know she sees my son growing up and is proud of the job I’m doing as a mother. I see her in my dreams and sometimes feel that she’s around, either by smell or just feeling her presence.” #HumansofNewYork

As for the third and final deliverable, Image 3: A Granddaughter’s Loss, participant 3 reflected on the loss of her grandmother a few years ago. This photo was shared via these four social media platforms [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153326476535773&set=a.10150578856690773.384404.513945772&type=3&theater), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/jodieannsteph/status/673559398371999744), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/-9WqaJDm3l/) and [Black Attire Aficionado](https://blackattireaficionado.wordpress.com/2015/12/06/a-granddaughters-loss/). I posted the image and the quote from participant #3 along with the hashtag (#HumansofNewYork) on social media sites. Over the course of a week, I monitored the amount of time the image was shared. I had very high expectations for this image because it was a quote on the loss of a loved one, which I knew many people would be able to relate to. The image was shared to Facebook received 10 likes and 3 comments. The responses were “I love this!” The photo via Instagram received over 33 likes with only one Instagram comment. Because the quote was very long, I broke it up into 2 parts. On 12/6 I posted part one and will post part 2 on 12/7. One of the best practices I found in my analysis of HONY was that for long quotes Brandon Stanton broke it up into short quotes and would post the rest the following day. On Twitter the image received over 200 impressions, and 11 user engagements. On my personal blog Black Attire Aficionado 5 views, 1 favorite and 1 comment.

**Understanding User Engagement**

Initially, one of the biggest variables of my project was to monitor and record user engagement on all the images created and shared via my social channels. One of the revelations I realized after not having the success that I expected was that it takes years to build up a successful blog with stories that are relatable. Popularity and virality does not occur overnight. But even with this thought, I was still not satisfied. I became upset and started to think that my project was a fail. I was supposed to have created successfulimages; my project was going to fail miserably. And then I thought, what about the stories that I shared, were they not successful?

**What if the Numbers don’t Matter?**

This question of “What if the numbers don’t matter?” came to me after I was feeling disappointed with the analytics from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Wordpress. This was the most defining moment of the project because I realized I was trying to quantify something that was unquantifiable. The idea that individuals stories are characterized as successful because of the numbers of likes, retweets, reblog or comments they received is one of the constraints that new media has brought. At the end of the experiment I realized it was almost as if I was putting price or a number to someone’s life, it was not fair. I was jeopardizing my ethics. I realized that mastering storytelling in photojournalism is not about the analytics or user engagement but about the story having a platform to be shared on. Each of our stories matters and the structures that place limitations on what stories are shared needs to be destroyed. I fell into the trap of trying to quantify success and what that entails and the truth is its not quantifiable. The individuals who shared their stories across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and my personal blog Black Attire Aficionado had courage to share their stories. They agreed to subject themselves to scrutiny in an effort to share their stories and that’s more than what any of us are willing to do. As for mastering storytelling in photojournalism, it is simply about sharing a story on a social site and having the courage to do so.

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