

# Power of the picture




**Stephen Mayes**, World Press Photo jury secretary and managing director of the VII agency, looks at the role of photojournalism, the impact it has in today's world and how the WPP can help to highlight some of today's most pressing issues. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

**IN HER** elegantly argued 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the writer Susan Sontag highlights a quote from Gustave Moynier, the then president of the International Committee of the Red Cross: 'We now know what happens every day throughout the world... the descriptions given by daily journalists put, as it were, those in agony on fields of battle under the eyes of [newspaper] readers and their cries resonate in their ears...' Moynier's bleak observation, uttered way back in 1899, could be accused of carrying the weight of hyperbole, but perhaps his thinking was just prescient. What would he have made of today's war-torn landscape and the countless whirring mechanical eyes that hungrily devour it and feed it back to the population? Flash forward from 1899 to 2001's live footage, and endless replays, of New York's twin towers collapsing, and

we can clearly see how, in just over a century, the media has become a saturating blanket of information.

However, news reportage, and photojournalism in particular, is undoubtedly a powerful tool. It can at once educate, entertain and, in some cases, inspire shifts in the political and cultural landscape. Look at the stunning images from 2012's World Press Photo Awards and it quickly becomes clear that photojournalism is as vital now as it ever has been.

For more than 55 years the event has displayed some of the most inspirational photojournalistic images that span a variety of styles and topics. This year, 101,254 photographs were submitted to the nine categories. Each image was pored over, critiqued and eventually either rejected or accepted by a jury of 20, this year chaired by Aidan Sullivan, 

## THE WINNING IMAGE

**THIS** year's World Press Photo of the Year image (this page) was taken by Spanish photographer Samuel Aranda, whose sensitive portrait of a Yemeni mother cradling her 18-year-old son after he was caught in a tear-gas attack resonated strongly with the World Press Photo Awards jury.

'Part of the reason this year's winning picture by Samuel Aranda works so well is that there are elements of it that are recognisable when viewed within the context of a

Western Christian framework,' says Mayes. 'Specifically, it almost appears to be a version of the Madonna and Child. But of course she's not a Christian – she's a Muslim. However, the visual pattern is very familiar. We respond to it by bringing our knowledge of art history and impose that on the picture. Photographers will often do that. They identify patterns in scenes and subjects that they've seen before, then they will reinterpret them. It's a powerful communication tool.'



Left: Yasuyoshi Chiba won first prize in the People in the News, Stories, category with 'Tsunami', Higashimatsushima, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan, 3 April 2011. Chieko Matsukawa holds up her daughter's graduation certificate, which she salvaged from the ruins of their home. On 11 March, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck 70 kilometres off the Tohoku coast, in north-east Japan. The quake triggered a tsunami that swept inland over an area of some 500 square kilometres

Right: Niclas Hammarström took second prize in the Spot News, Stories category. On 22 July, Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 people on the small island of Utøya, 40 kilometres north-west of Oslo, in Norway. The shootings formed the second of two sequential attacks, the first being a car-bomb explosion in the government quarter of the capital, which killed eight people and injured 92. The Utøya incident took place less than two hours later

vice-president of photo assignments for Getty Images. The jury includes an extra member, a jury secretary, who has no vote, but is tasked with ensuring that the judging process runs smoothly and fairly. For the past nine years this crucial role has been occupied by Stephen Mayes, managing director of the VII Photo Agency. 'The World Press Photo Awards are important on several levels,' says Mayes. 'From the point of view of a professional photojournalist, it's important because the awards are a measure of what the profession regards as good. The World Press Photo Contest has no agenda. It's not attempting to tell people, "This is how you do it and this is how not to do it". But it does, by default, demonstrate what works and what doesn't in the world of photojournalism.'

Mayes also points out that the World Press Photo Contest can deliver information to people who may otherwise not have been aware of the issues addressed within the imagery. The exhibition travels to around 100 countries throughout the world and the website is visited by millions of people. 'It's telling when you visit one of these exhibitions in a particular country and you witness the lines of people queuing up to get in,' says Mayes. 'The vast majority of the people haven't seen this work before. It could be that they haven't even heard of the subjects. The World Press Photo Contest has an impact. People pay attention to it'

**PHOTOJOURNALISM TODAY**  
Like most art forms, photojournalism is rarely static. It's a restless medium, one that finds itself in constant flux. It is also a comfortable framework from which to



witness the evolving world of photographic technology and the role of the professional photographer. Looking back at images of war published at the beginning of the 20th century, a common theme begins to emerge. All were images of the aftermath of battle, a result of the cumbersome and time-consuming cameras and tripods that photographers were forced to carry around at that time. It wasn't until the introduction of the lightweight and portable 35mm Leica camera (which was actually introduced as a landscape camera) that photographers were able to present images taken in the thick of battle. These photographs presented moments of realism and urgency that had otherwise been unseen and largely unwitnessed by the general public.

Photography had finally made 'real' those events and situations that the public could previously choose to ignore or had never been made aware of. Now, with the introduction of smartphones, no event goes undocumented, whether it's of global social consequence or one that takes place on the most private and intimate level. The fact that many of these images are uploaded and delivered into our homes in almost real time makes it all the more fascinating. Of course, it hasn't gone unnoticed that a majority of these photographs are delivered to us by what Mayes terms 'citizen journalists' – the ordinary man or woman on the street. So where does this leave the role of the professional?



Left: First prize in the Contemporary Issues, Singles, category went to Brent Stirton with this image of a woman from Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, 31 August 2011. Maria, a drug-addicted sex worker, rests between clients in the room she rents in Kryvyi Rih. The country has the highest incidence of HIV/Aids in Europe and, according to a UNICEF report, one in five sex workers is living with HIV. Maria says she remains HIV negative

Right: Yuri Kozyrev won first prize in the Spot News, Singles, section with 'On revolution road', Ras Lanuf, Libya, 11 March 2011. Rebels battle for Ras Lanuf, an oil-refining town on the Libyan coast. The uprising against the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi had grown out of clashes with authorities in the Libyan city of Benghazi, in mid-February



'The role of photojournalism and the changes in camera technology often go hand in hand,' says Mayes. 'There are a lot more cameras in the world. There are something like four billion smartphones out there. The notion of the eyewitness has shifted. It's an exciting change and one I'm very positive about. It's a rich, intimate view of the world and one that a photojournalist who is only visiting an event or a location could never achieve. We're at a staging post with camera technology. We still don't fully understand the implications of camera phones and where exactly they will take us. 'The means of photographic distribution are now open to everyone, so information is no longer just coming from the top down,' continues Mayes. 'I've always been very

sceptical about publications such as *Time* magazine dictating what is newsworthy. We've always been fed by a commercially driven machine that has to fill pages full of advertising and news that will sell. These days that's only true for the magazines. What we think of as news is now shifting. We can publish without constraints. The role of the photojournalist used to be to help sell magazines. Now, we are far more accountable to the people who view these images.'

Despite all this, what has remained consistent, in Mayes' opinion, is the ability of the professional storyteller. A trained photographer can tell stories in a way that an untrained photographer cannot. According to Mayes, untrained photographers are very

Above right: First prize in Portraits, Singles, went to Laerke Posselt's picture 'Danish and Iranian culture', Copenhagen, Denmark, 4 May 2011. Actress Mellica Mehraban, who was born in Iran but grew up in Denmark, played a lead role in the Iranian spy thriller *Fox Hunting*



good at simple observation, basically, 'This is where I am and this is what I see.' 'What the untrained photojournalistic mind is not so good at is linking elements together and generating emotion,' explains Mayes. 'It's difficult for citizen journalists to create a narrative. With photojournalism, you have to be able to engage your view beyond that immediate and visceral connection with the subject, such as Yasuyoshi Chiba's images of the magnitude 9.0 earthquake that struck Tohoku coast, in Japan [see opposite page, top]. This becomes vital as we gain more and more access to imagery. People are becoming more interested in the world and desire education. So, with that in mind, there will always be a role for professional photojournalists.'



**RESPONDING TO IMAGES**

Navigating your way through the winning images that make up 2012's World Press Photo Awards can at times be daunting – not necessarily for the sheer scope of imagery on display, but more for the challenging content that awaits you. Swedish photographer Niclas Hammarström's images of the massacre on Utoya Island in Norway (page 22) are a bleak and silent observation of an unthinkable tragedy. The images linger in the mind for days afterwards. There is often talk that the endless stream of death-obsessed photojournalism can in some ways numb us to the plight of human suffering, but Mayes feels that this claim has little ground.

'We often hear of this thing called famine fatigue, where people see so much suffering in the newspapers and on the television that people mentally switch off because we've become jaded,' says Mayes. 'However, there's a school of counter-thought that suggests we switch off because we can't respond. If you're reading a magazine, then what can you do? You turn the page and forget about it. However, with the advent of social media you *can* respond. It can be something as simple as leaving a comment or donating some money. Viewing these images online engages people so much more than the traditional print format.'

It's clear that one of the primary roles of the World Press Awards (and of photojournalism) is to bring to people those images that do elicit a powerful response. The purpose, on the most optimistic level, is to solicit a reaction to inspire change. Mayes is in no doubt that the medium of photojournalism can prompt shifts in the political and cultural field.

'Winning awards is the least important aspect of photojournalism, although it can help to build awareness of a situation,' says Mayes. 'When I started working at the VII agency I was a little cynical. I'd been in the industry for around 25 years at that point and had often heard photographers in these grand positions stating that a single picture could change the world.'

However, over time Mayes came to accept



that even if you change a single life with your images you have, in many ways, altered the world. He says he has seen countless examples of this with the photographers he has worked with during his career.

'The changes I've witnessed have been small, but cumulatively they have been massive,' says Mayes. 'If you set your framework small and think you can help a village or a single person, then you really can make a difference. I've heard stories of how the simple act of someone being at a particular location with a camera has stopped someone else being hurt. While that's not the image making a difference, it's the camera and the knowledge that the camera can deliver information to the wider world that is having an effect.'

**THE OBJECTIVE EYE**

A recurring observation about photojournalistic practice concerns the objective nature of the photographer. It's too easy to imagine the photographer as a cold objective eye who always remains

**Above: Jenny E Ross won the Nature, Singles, category with 'Cliff-climbing polar bear attempting to eat seabird eggs', Ostrova Oranskiye, Novaya Zemlya, Russia, 30 June 2011. A young male polar bear climbs on a cliff face above the ocean at Novaya Zemlya, Russia, attempting unsuccessfully to feed on eggs from the nests of Brünnich's guillemots**

at an emotional distance from the people they photograph. The photographer Brent Stirton, first-prize winner of the Contemporary Issues, Singles, round (page 23), insists that a photographer can't help but maintain a subjective edge. For him, empathy with a subject is part and parcel of real photojournalism. It's an opinion with which Mayes unequivocally agrees.

'It would be naive to think that a photographer goes into a situation without an agenda tainted by personal empathy,' says Mayes. 'You don't go to take pictures of malnutrition thinking, "Is malnutrition good or bad?" You already know the answer. That's different from pure journalism, where someone will go in and discover the facts and then draw a conclusion. A lot of the photographers featured in the World Press Photo Awards went into situations not just with an inquiring journalistic mind, but also with an ideological mission. That's what we call advocacy journalism.'

This can, of course, become a little trickier when covering a clash between two warring

**Left: Second prize in the General News, Stories, round went to Paolo Pellegrin with 'Tsunami aftermath', Kesenuma, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan, 14 April 2011. Tsunami waves created by a massive earthquake off the north-east of Japan caused wide-ranging destruction along the coast. Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima – the three worst-hit prefectures – were overwhelmed by an estimated 22.63 million tons of debris**

**Right: Adam Pretty took second prize in the Sports, Stories, category, with 'World Aquatics Championships', Shanghai, China, 17 July 2011. Divers practise during the second day of the FINA World Aquatics Championships**



parties, such as the uprising against Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. This event was captured by Yuri Kozzyrev, first-prize winner of the Spot News, Singles, round (page 23).

'It can become physically hard to cover both sides of a conflict,' says Mayes. But that doesn't mean you're uncritical of the position you're in. If you're with the rebels in Libya, you have to maintain a level of objectivity where you are not necessarily buying the argument you're getting. Ultimately, though, a good journalist must develop a, opinion from the process of inquiry. If you're really dispassionate about it, then you're really not doing a good job of journalism.'

**TACKLING SENSATIONALISM**

Sensationalism is a broad and controversial topic. When does an image move beyond the realms of informing its viewer and resort to out-and-out shock tactics simply to stand out from the crowd? It's a question that plagues the World Press Photo Awards jury year after year.

'Certainly, at the World Press Photo

Awards we see a lot of sensationalist images,' admits Mayes. 'A lot of road-traffic accidents find their way into the first and second rounds. You get these incredibly lurid and shocking images of violence. But it's just a road crash. What does that tell us about the world? It becomes a matter of judgement. That's one of the beauties of the World Press Photo Contest – there's no rule that defines what's newsworthy. It's down to the jury. Each group will have a different bias and emphasis. It has happened that pictures with no news merit have won prizes just because they're stunning and that's what the jury responded to.'

A criticism that has been levelled at the World Press Photo Awards has been the preoccupation with death and disaster. This year saw an article written by Kari Lundelin in *The Guardian* questioning the ethical nature of some of the images on display. Lundelin questioned the morbid motives of some of the photographers and felt that the grey area between aesthetic and subject was too glaring to ignore.

'Every year I go around the exhibition and count the gratuitous images that are explicitly violent,' says Mayes. 'Each time it's less than 7-8% of the images, yet those are the shots that seem to grab everyone's attention. Every year people respond to the challenging images and say that it's too much. But it's an opinion that's completely unrepresentative of the exhibition as a whole.'

The criticism of the World Press Photo Contest is perhaps unfair in that it denigrates many of the other category winners. As well as containing shocking images, the exhibition also contains life-affirming and striking images, such as Adam Pretty's shots of the World Aquatic Championships held in Shanghai, China (above).

'I really don't believe that there's a disproportionate representation between challenging images and ones that deal with more comfortable subjects,' says Mayes. 'It's simply that violent images tend to stick out in the mind. If you look at the category winners closely, you'll see that there's a lot more going on than you realise.' **AP**

To see more of the 2012 World Press Photo category winners, visit [www.worldpressphoto.org/gallery/2012-world-press-photo](http://www.worldpressphoto.org/gallery/2012-world-press-photo)

We talk to Adam Pretty, who took second prize in the Sports, Stories, category at the 2012 World Press Photo Awards, in **AP 26 January**