

# Capturing the Truth

James Hill

---

*James Hill is a contract photographer for The New York Times. After studying History at Oriel College, Oxford, and Photojournalism at the London College of Printing, he began his career in the Soviet Union in 1991. His work, much of it spent in conflict zones across the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, has garnered multiple awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the World Press Photo, and the Visa d'Or. He is currently based in Paris.*

---

On 11 September 2001, as I walked to the Rome bureau of *The New York Times*, I stopped in a café on the Campo di Fiori to see why a crowd had gathered to watch CNN. Just as I edged towards the bar, the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center.

In the silence that engulfed the room, everyone understood that the world had suddenly become a different place. A torrent of thoughts rushed through my head as I imagined seismic geopolitical upheaval, but mostly I stood there, overwhelmed by the enormous and symbolic violence of the attack. Certainly, I did not understand how this moment would, in tandem with the digital charge of the internet, be the catalyst that would change my life as a photojournalist.

Shaking me from numbness, an editor called a few hours later and asked me to depart to Gaza as soon as possible. And so, I duly left for the Middle East the next morning. I saw daily violence between Palestinian youths and Israeli forces, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. After two weeks yo-yoing between Gaza and Jerusalem, the paper called again and asked if I would be prepared to head to Afghanistan. To convince me, they dangled a carrot: a digital camera. I had never seen a physical digital camera, even though there had been models available for over a year. When I had been in Kosovo in 1999, *The New York Times* had sent one with a photographer who had arrived from the United States, but the day before he was supposed to hand it over to me, he somehow managed to drop it into a river. The editors were almost as unhappy as I was—the camera had cost them \$12,000.

Unpacking the box, I looked with equal wonder at the small screen on the back of the camera and the sizeable instruction manual that came with it. I took a plane the next morning to Moscow, and another the day after to Tajikistan. This was the jump-off point for reporters heading into northern Afghanistan, where the base of the Northern Alliance was located. I remember still trying to decipher the manual when I arrived in Dushanbe.

Taking the camera in my hands, I was surprised by two things. Firstly, that the operation was almost the same as using a film camera—though why I had been expecting something different, I am not sure—and secondly, that the camera was so big, and heavy. It felt robust, which was a relief, since I had to take it to Afghanistan.

We have become so accustomed to digital cameras and photographs, that it is hard to imagine what a change this signified for photographers like myself working under deadlines in the field. Starting work as a photographer in 1991 in the Soviet Union, I had left the UK with a couple of cameras and a few boxes of film given to me by *The Times*. Most of the work that I shot in the early years of my career was for slow-burning feature stories or projects—it was also not particularly good, but that is another story—and the few times that I photographed news events were usually when I had been hired by the Reuters Moscow bureau. Travelling on assignment for them was a technologically complicated business. In addition to my camera equipment, I would depart with a big suitcase that contained a Hasselblad film scanner as well as chemicals and canisters for processing film. Since colour film needed to be developed at 38 degrees Celsius, usually in some cramped Soviet-style hotel bathroom, I also had to take a hand-sized electrical heating coil which, happily, also served for making cups of tea. At the time, it all felt like a perfectly normal way to go about sending photographs from the road but, looking back, it seems nothing other than a huge palaver. So when I could see this image appear immediately on the back of the camera, it was naturally an enormous revelation. I ended up spending three months in Afghanistan in late 2001, starting from the town of Khwaja Bahauddin in the north-east, where Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance commander had been killed, before moving through Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and finally flying to Kabul. Without that digital camera, it would have been all but impossible to have worked there for a daily newspaper.

Of course, every war is covered in a different way, depending on access to the battlefield and the country where it is taking place. A close friend of mine and neighbour from London, Horst Faas, was the legendary head of the Associated Press photo operation during the Vietnam War, and both a great photographer and a great editor. He recounted how photographers like himself could head to the military airport in Saigon and hitch a ride to the front on almost any helicopter. Because the roads outside of the city were under constant attack, it was the safest as well as the fastest way to travel. This was a time when the US military was still very open with the press—a legacy of goodwill that remained from positive coverage during World War II and the Korean War—and not at all comparable to the controlled access of today's embedded journalists. Generally, after a day or two outside of Saigon, he would come back to the city, have his films processed, edited and the photographs sent on the wire.

Afghanistan was a very different proposition, and being digitally connected was not always so simple. At that time most villages in Afghanistan were off the grid, meaning that the only way to have electricity was to possess a generator. But to have a generator work for six hours or more a day required good petrol that wasn't watered down with water (as it often was to make an easy profit). Not only did one need to power up the camera batteries and computer, one also needed to maintain a constant charge to a satellite modem and telephone in order to transmit the digital images. To complicate matters, the speed with which it was possible to send images depended enormously on the specifications of your satellite phone. I had one rated at 2,400 baud per minute, which was slow even by 2001 standards and laughable by today's. On average it took 20 minutes to send a 300-kilobyte image—one that is only a fraction of the size of those taken on a modern mobile phone. To the frustration of my editors in New York, on any given day I was rarely able to send more than five photographs.

Then there were the unexpected technical problems that arrived with a digital camera. Specks of fine dust would constantly and infuriatingly find their way onto the receptors of the camera's matrix, causing the photographs to appear as though they had drops of water on their surface. I remember looking at the instruction manual to figure out how to lift up the shutter to access the matrix, attempting to remove the particles with a soft brush and the delicacy of a Renaissance painter. I had to repeat the process every couple of days, knowing that one false move could damage the matrix and effectively mark the end of my assignment.

On a far deeper and more fundamental level, there came all the ethical issues that evolved from the digital source itself, in particular the temptations that Photoshop, the primary software tool used by photographers to edit images, could offer. Mercifully or not, I have never been very adept at the post-production of images. In my student days, when I used to print photographs in a darkroom, the results were always very simple, without much toning or dodging and burning. I never had the patience to learn the delicate techniques that the darkroom demanded, but I also understood that whenever I gave a negative to a printer the photograph was transformed. The style might have been darker or lighter, or simply more sophisticated, but it nonetheless appeared, to my eye, to have a different feeling. In most cases this was probably little more than a question of nuance and taste, and a far cry from the intentional manipulation that had existed in places like the Soviet Union, where commissars and generals, who had fallen out of favour or worse with the Kremlin, would be airbrushed out of official images. Those kinds of change required serious know-how and technique. The troubling brilliance of Photoshop lay in the fact that adjustments, such as cloning pixels, could be done with ease.

These concerns weighed on me from the very beginning. Previously, I had worked with digital images that had been scanned from negatives, but when I started dealing with ones created by a digital camera in Afghanistan, I set myself a limit of not spending more than a minute on a single photograph. I would make sure that the image was correctly exposed and the colour precisely rendered if the camera's white balance had gone haywire, as often happened with the early digital cameras. My discipline was aided by the fact that I was, and still am, digitally incapable of moving heads from one person to another. Nonetheless, I understood that even dedicated and experienced photojournalists could, in the heat of the moment, yield to the temptation. Two years later, when I was travelling to Baghdad with the Allied invasion force, I heard of a photographer from

the Los Angeles Times, Brian Walski, who combined two images showing British troops directing Iraqi civilians outside of Basra in order to make a stronger picture. As soon as the photograph was recognised as being manipulated, he was unceremoniously fired. Today, it is rare that a serious newspaper will encounter such a blatant attempt to change a journalistic image, but the prevalence of minor manipulation remains a problem within the photographic community. When my former Director of Photography at *The New York Times*, Michelle McNally, was chairwoman of the jury for the 2015 World Press Photo contest, the most important competition for photojournalists worldwide, she stated that '20 percent of the photographers entering the penultimate round—where images are considered for the top three awards—were disqualified after technicians compared the entries against the unprocessed RAW files.'

This debate arising at the core of photojournalism stems, in many ways, from the lack of a formal code of conduct and ethics. The manner in which a photojournalist behaves both in the field and afterwards during the editorial process remains, very much, a question of personal choice. On the ground, photojournalists have always had to carefully weigh the issues of proximity to a subject and bearing witness to them against being intrusive. Robert Capa's mantra, that if a photograph wasn't good enough one wasn't close enough, has remained a constant whisper in every war photographer's ear. The intrinsic choices of how to frame a scene demand rigorous visual, journalistic, and ethical judgments. While for most photojournalists it is a process that is generally instinctive, it is nonetheless one that needs to be permanently engaged.

The move to digital cameras also altered traditional photojournalistic practices in other ways, and one significant change was the way in which the editorial process shifted and became increasingly a role for the photographer. Previously, nearly all the important work I had done for *The New York Times* and other news magazines had been sent unseen to the photo-editor in charge of the shoot. I remember being based in Kiev and then Moscow, and constantly searching for friends to carry bags of unprocessed films to Paris, London, or New York, which were then picked up by couriers at the airport. Both the initial selection of images and those intended for publication were left entirely in the hands of the editors. In the digital age, it became up to the photographer to edit his or her own work, leaving only the final choice of images for publication to the photo-editor. It was an empowering but weighty responsibility. Editing images is a far more complex process than might be imagined. Not only does one need to judge the journalistic and artistic merits of a photograph, but the process requires enough emotional distance to let one be sure of one's decisions. Often, at the end of a long, hard day on the frontline, I was very far from being in the right frame of mind to be balanced and dispassionate about the photographs I had just taken and the scenes that I had witnessed.

The digital camera also changed the manner of the creative process. Using films, it was self-evident that there were only 36 frames for a 35mm camera or 12 for a medium format one, but that was, nonetheless, a natural brake on the way that I photographed. This gave a more measured manner to shooting, and one could almost visualise the images taking their place on the contact sheet. Each frame had to show a noticeable, if incremental, difference, rather than the imperceptible ones that occur with the endless space that a digital camera offers. Of course, in the early days, the first versions of digital cameras did have some technical limitations: the cameras themselves were less powerful, the writing speed of the images to the compact flash cards was slow, and the files

were small and of poor quality. A little less than ten years later, I would photograph the royal marriage of William and Kate, and in the 15 minutes or so that they stood alongside the Royal Family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace I took over 1,000 frames. The idea of shooting 25 rolls of film during that length of time seems absurd, but the arrival of the digital camera fundamentally changed the way in which photojournalists looked at and captured what was in front of them.

Above all—and the revolution that I had not foreseen that day in Rome—was the freedom that a digital camera gave me to work in the most remote places imaginable. Once the Northern Alliance began their attack on the Taliban and the front began to move, often on a daily basis, my colleague Dexter Filkins—now a journalist with *The New Yorker*—and I had to move with it. Creating a mobile bureau was not so much a choice as a necessity. So we hired a driver with a Toyota pick-up truck, and bought a set of mattresses, a generator, and jerry cans to carry petrol. Whenever we arrived in a new village or town, we would rent a hut in someone's yard to work from and sleep in. To have used analogue cameras and met a daily news deadline would have been unimaginable, so the Nikon D1H camera in my hands was nothing less than a liberation.

In the 20 years since, digital technology has continued its visual revolution for the public at large. As the cost of cameras has gone down, and the quality of photographs taken on mobile phones has continued to improve, so every one of us has effectively become a photographer. The manner in which we document our daily lives has rarely been so incessant and ubiquitous. We live in a world increasingly saturated with images and so, perhaps, we question their place and value. As the power and capabilities of digital photography become ever greater, so with them grow the boundaries of its possibilities both for creation and manipulation. Soon, wars will be photographed by drone cameras, with deepfake images impossible to distinguish from real ones. Just as, 20 years ago, I sat unwittingly on the cusp of a change that would bring a new era for war reporting in particular and for photojournalism in general, so today the incessant march of technology has brought us to the edge again. More than ever, it will be dependent on the desire of each individual photographer to capture the truth with honesty and courage to show and explain the world that we live in.