

Photojournalism and the civil rights movement



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Photographs as historical sources have always played a role in the importance of documenting events, especially so in the last century. There have been many disagreements as to whether such sources were valid before this time. Images in history give a wider knowledge and understanding of the time that one was studying, as it has been said that, a picture paints a thousand words, used in the correct context. However many images can be easily forged, therefore it is important to carefully examine all images used. Despite this images were extremely powerful in the ways in which they helped to change ideas in society; it could be argued that the impact of images has been underrated, and they have not been acknowledged as being as important as they really were.

Photojournalism in the United States of America in the 1960s was extremely important to the coming and development of the civil rights movement. It had a positive impact upon the movement as well as the photographers that documented the experiences of members of black and other ethnic groups. It was also responsible for highlighting and gaining support for the movement. Images that were typically taken of this group of people before this time represented them as being violent, uncooperative and even portrayed them as the 'jokes' of society. Images appeared in daily newspapers such as Time, Life and Look, as well as other well known journals and magazines such as Ebony, Jet and Our World. These latter journals were read by a predominantly black audience. Photojournalism helped to change the ways in which these people were portrayed, as it focused closely on black communities as well as their struggle for freedom. This movement was portrayed in a way whereby there was no bias to the photographs. In the

way in which white photographers still wanted to take photographs of this time and were not denying what was going on around them. However, taking the images may not have been their main priority, but making more money. Many of the photographers were white who did not necessarily disagree with the movement but saw it as their duty to photograph what was going on at the time. The photographs simply made it possible to freeze a scene in time which could be viewed by many, and this acted as evidence for what many people tried to deny was happening. As far as evidence showed none of these photographs had been contrived or staged for added effect. On the other hand protests and rallies would have been scheduled which therefore meant that photographers were able to position themselves correctly. It has been suggested that 'Sometimes the atrocities are thought to have taken place chiefly because there were cameras at the ready....'[1]The images that were selected to be appear in magazines and newspapers would have been selected from a larger range of images from the same event. This would have made the viewer assess and figure out what exactly the photographer was trying to convey. There definitely would have been competition between the photographers and magazines to print the most powerful image. One example of this is Herbert Randall who was a photographer that focused on Hattiesburg, Mississippi during Freedom Summer, 'At the conclusion of Freedom summer in August 1964, Herbert Randall took the 1, 759 negatives he had shot during those past two months and returned to New York.'[2]However only 831 of these images were actually developed from negatives.[3]His work was used by various media publications throughout America including, Black Star, the Associated Press, United Press International.[4]Only five of these photographs were published in the

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summer of 1964[5], and only a small number of the images were printed, 'Few of Randall's photographs were seen or even printed until 1998 when he donated the negatives to the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.'.[6]'However there was an exhibition to show the public his work, 'The school organized a travelling exhibition for 100 of the photographs'.[7]Although we do know that the images that he did take were not seen by the American society for a long time after the event, and this was for an exhibition and would not have had a direct impact towards the Civil Rights Movement.

Photojournalism had a significant and powerful role to play in the Civil Rights Movement. However it would not have been possible without the many talented photographers that believed in the importance of displaying these images to the public. Some of the most successful photojournalists during this period were Gordon Parks (1912-2006), Charles Moore (1931-2010), Flip Schulke (1930-2008) a white freelancer, and Bob Adelman (1930-), to name a few. These photographers must have felt great passion for what they were doing as many risked their lives to take amazing photographs. It was said by a reporter named Nicholas Von Hoffman that, " Charles Moore was fearless. He was known as the cameraman at the point of danger, at the place where the rocks were being thrown and the billy clubs were being swung. He was always there".[8]

Photographers at this time could be catergorised by those that wanted to create change by taking photographs, those that were interested in a salary alone and did not feel anyways towards the movement. Those that were taking photographs as an art form, as well as the photojournalists that were

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against the movement and wanted to portray this in their work. This essay will be taking these issues into consideration, but will not be looking at those against the movement, as it does not fit into the hypothesis. As a white southern journalist Charles Moore felt strongly about the movement, he was moved by what he was witnessing and used the only way he knew to try to create a change, which was with his camera, he was fighting against the Jim Crow discrimination.[9]

Photojournalism had always played an important and active role in political affairs and in the 1960s this did not change. The success of the movement helped in many areas of black peoples' lives. The movement meant that black children were able to go to integrated schools and black people were for the first time able to graduate from university.

Campaigning began for a civil rights movement after events in America were publicised about the segregation of blacks and whites. One of the most famous incidents that chrystalized the movement was when in 1955 Rosa Parks, a local member of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, refused to give up her seat on a bus for a white man. This defiance and act of bravery from Parks resulted in her being arrested and a 381 day boycott of the bus system which was organised by Martin Luther King Jr. who at this time was merely a Baptist minister. Even though King was found guilty in the courts in 1956 for conspiracy to boycott Montgomery buses, his fine was finally suspended. This protest was successful and was able to end segregation on transport systems. Many have argued that it was this event that began the fight initial fight for freedom for black Americans. However many other groups opposed the new direction that America was

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trying to take; one of the most active was the Klu Klux Klan, a hate group organisation that believed in white supremacy.

Some of the most influential figures of this time that fought for the civil rights movement included Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and President John F. Kennedy. Despite gaining support for the movement, it was still a battle, however finally in 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed. This meant that racial discrimination in public places was now illegal. The act also ensured that employers implemented regulations to give equal opportunities to black as well as white employees within their organisations. It was not until the next year that more black people were enabled to vote after various disputes the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

This project investigates the ways in which photojournalism had an impact on the civil rights movement, gained votes for the movement and highlighted hardships for black families, as well as how the images were perceived. It will also look at the ways that photographs in magazine and newspapers were distributed and viewed. Even though there were other minor events that were happening at the same time, the struggle for civil rights was documented the most through-out this period. The large majority of photographers risked their lives to take photographs in dangerous and unpredictable settings, 'Photographing such events was both defiant and dangerous.' [10]

It could have been argued that images produced by photojournalists acted as propaganda for the movement. However it was not only the images that helped to do this but also the text that accompanied it.

Chapter 1 - What the images where and by whom?

How images were seen and viewed- Many of the images that were taken at the height of the conflict with black Americans were duplicated in different magazines and newspapers. At the time some of the images were used incorrectly and thus gave a different meaning to what had been intended when the original photograph was taken. It would have been true to say that images that were a product of such violent events were not later necessarily used inappropriately but different magazines focused on the same images but merely focused on different political points. '... each uses the photography differently, in order to underline its own political views.' [11] The majority of the photographs that documented these important days were not contrived and gave a true account of these important days. The majority of the photographs that were taken were spontaneous or were set up to a degree. The photographer would have been informed about the location of rallies or protests that were scheduled to happen, therefore the photographer could set up their station accordingly to take the best photographs that they could. However, this could not be said for the photograph taken by Jan Kaulins () named 'Rosa Parks sits on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956' [12] as there were not any photographers present at the moment that she refused to give up her seat on the bus. (See Appendix 1) Therefore Kaulins staged the photograph that was taken, so that there was photographic imagery of the event even if it was staged. This image is one of the most powerful and memorable images from the civil rights movement.

Society's opinion- The majority of images that were circulated showed unnecessary violence towards the black community, however some images were not shown in white mediums. 'Since the mainstream press is predominantly (and at that time was almost exclusively) white, the point of view of white photographers influenced the reactions of the white audience.'^[13]Life Magazine was one of the major magazines that was read throughout the 1950s and 1960s, 'With over half of the American adult population reading it, Life was seen by more people than any television program.'^[14]They helped to inform the white community of what was going on in the 'real world', the world outside the neighbourhood where they lived. The use of the white photojournalists would have been seen as the 'go-between', between black and white Americans, and thus bridging the gap between both communities.

At this time Birmingham was the most segregated city in the United States. It was said by one campaigner that, "' In Birmingham, white people had a lot of hate and little respect for black folk"'.^[15]Even as a result of Birmingham's reputation a reader of LIFE explained how the powerful images changed his attitudes and views. "' As a white Southerner who believed in white supremacy until I'd had a bellyful and realised I was all wrong..."^[16]This was his response to Charles Moore's photographic article in the letters to the editor section of the May 17 1963 issue of LIFE magazine. The photographs that Moore took focused on Birmingham Campaign of 1963^[17]. This was only one man's opinion after he had seen the photographs by Moore and how they had helped to change his perceptions of black people.

" The photographs of Bull Connor's police dogs lunging at the marchers in Birmingham did as much as anything to transform the national mood and make legislation not just necessary, . . . but possible." [18] This image brought the issues to the for front of the American governments agenda, it was such a disturbing image of what was happening in the South, that it could no longer be overlooked, ignored or denied any longer. The photograph also reached out to other black Americans that were not living in the south, it showed them that they were not be complacent with their everyday lives and it reminded them not to forget about the harsher lives that others were living.

Even though this was only the view of selected individuals, many more people must have been forced to re-think their attitudes towards either black or white people, but it definitely expressed the ways in which photography had a direct impact upon the views of society and thus the movement itself. The fact that white photographers were capturing these images may have been seen and viewed as bravery to the majority of the white population, as many would have felt inferior towards black people, as up until this time black and white Americans would not have mixed. All of the images that were taken by the photojournalists would have caused an empathetic response. It has been argued that the images produced all had a purpose, '... Surely, the photos were not taken as to serve the historian, to answer to its expectancies. The photographers had their own preoccupations as well as their intended messages.' [19] They could be accessed by many and thus it depended on who was taking the photograph as to what message they were trying to convey, and also to what audience they were trying to target.

However, the purpose of the images would have depended upon whom the photograph was taken by. Many photographers were actively working at this time; however their purpose was for their own art work rather than to be used to help bring about change. This may have been different for photojournalists as many believed in the cause in which they were documenting, and were not merely driven by the money that they would earn. Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was a man of many talents as well as being a photojournalist he was also a writer and movie director amongst other things. He was infact the first African American staff photographer for Life (1948 - 72), however he began his photography career by working for the Farm Security Administration, in 1942, but began his journey as a fashion photographer. He was inspired by his difficult upbringing and struggles to make it as a photographer in America. As a result of this he wanted to do what he could to help promote a change in America. " I didn't care about Life magazine. I cared about the people." [20] However, it could be argued that Graeme Shulke was money driven as he got an incredible role in documenting the days of Martin Luther King, he was his personal photographer. King knew that this opportunity would enhance his career prospects in the future but it would also benefit King for viewers to get an insight into his world. Whereas Bob Adelman felt strongly about the movement and wanted to help make a stand, even as a white man, " Well, I had a strong feeling about documenting it, and I hoped by photographing it I might help change it. If people saw what was going on they wouldn't accept it any longer." [21]

The relationship between photojournalism and society was so significant, however it was not only photography had an impact upon society's attitudes towards the movement. This extra knowledge about it was reinforced by other types of medias also. 'Newspapers, television, magazines, and radio reinforce, confirm, and sometimes recast each other's reports.' [22] One of the most well known events would have been Martin Luther King's, 'I Have A Dream' speech, was definitely one of these that was covered by all medias. All types of mediums possible covered this important time in American history; it could be argued that they all contributed towards the passing of the civil rights act, and not just photography alone. On the other hand, more importantly the text that accompanied the photographs ultimately enhanced the impact of them. As the image drew peoples' eyes towards the page, whereby the reader would have been intrigued to find out more about the story, the text that followed did this, it gave the main story behind the images and put them into context. The text consolidated what could already be seen in the images. In the 1950s and 1960s newspapers and magazines were the core medium for finding out information and photographers such as Flip Schulke knew this and used this to their advantage. [23] Even though the popularity of newspapers had fallen they were still extremely widely available, accessible and read. They were the main way of finding out about news daily, 'In 1909 there were 689 cities in the United States that had competing daily newspapers; by 1963 that number had shrunk to 55.' [24]

Chapter 2-What the images actively did.

The impact of the images shown in newspapers is usually instant and it was their purpose to transmit pictorial information as quickly and effectively as

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possible. 'Photographs have a swifter and more succinct impact than words, an impact that is instantaneous, visceral, and intense... A recent book of the power of images argues that a good part of the faith in representation depends on " the felt efficacy... of the exactly life like,"[25]

Another positive impact of photojournalism was that it helped society to see first-hand the violent racism that was occurring in their own country. The general public could no longer ignore this, as images were beginning to appear in every newspaper and magazine. The brutality and racist actions were out in the open for everyone to see. Goldberg knew that 'The photographs gave this abstraction a visual image, which was easier to hate than an idea.'[26]Because before these images became public, it was easy for people to distance themselves from the realities of what was going on around them. For many people, reading newspapers was not a regular habit. However, to see images of racial hatred and violence splashed across the pages of newspapers and magazines must have made these people want to buy newspapers purely due to the attraction and message sent out by these images, regardless of whether the reader was a supporter of or a fighter against the injustices they could see in these newspapers and magazines. These images were also distributed into white as well as black neighbourhoods. For the black communities in the South it was something that they all knew too well, some would have witnessed some of these events, whereas for many in the white and black communities in the North East were largely protected and therefore were disturbed and shocked also. Many would have felt appalled that people could be treated in this way, it was no longer an issue that could be kept a secret.[27]Martin Luther King Jr.

had a good relationship with Flip Schulke, developing into a friendship they realised that they both could help each other. King knew the importance of documenting the struggle for freedom as well as Schulke, who knew that he could be successful by taking powerful and inspiring images of King in support of his struggle for freedom. During the years that they worked alongside each other, Schulke was one of the few photographers who took photographs of King at those times when he enjoyed those quieter more personal moments in the privacy of his own home as well as those more public times whilst on his campaign trail. These photographs of the more private times also served to show people that Martin Luther King Jr. was an ordinary man, just like any other.

'Many Americans wrote letters to the newspapers about how appalled they were to see dogs attacking innocent people.' [28] This supports the idea that many Americans felt empathy towards the people that they saw in the photographs, and thus felt helpless to do anything and probably wanted to actively do something to help change their situation. "I wish to state my disgust and frustration with your editorial policies. One would conclude from your coverage of racial tension that you have more interest in bringing disgrace to the South than in truly improving the plight of the Negro." [29] This was only one public opinion that was published in Life Magazine in 1963, in response to the images taken by Charles Moore in a feature from the previous months' edition of Life Magazine. This took the idea that many the newspapers were not doing enough to help those victims of racism but merely just highlighted the issue. Even though Grady Franklin congratulated Life Magazine in their efforts to highlight in the issue on June 7

1963. 'Charles Moore's photographs on the racial troubles in Birmingham were superb and bone-chilling...'[30]

On the other hand it was stated that 'Within forty-eight hours of the front-page publication of the lunging-dog photograph, money began to pour in to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), with which King was affiliated.'[31] This therefore showed that people were affected by the images they saw and probably started to become interested in the cause and the violent situations the freedom fighters found themselves in and wanted to give what they had to help those that they did not know personally but felt a connection with through images portrayed.

" I know of nothing which has more keened the American people to the moral implications of the struggle called the struggle for civil rights, than the photographs which the American press and magazines have shown of actual events on the southern front... It is only because pictures backed up the words, no matter how authoritative, that [this justice] has been credited." Javits believed that the Senate, for the first time in its history, would soon vote to end a filibuster on a civil-rights bill-as indeed it did, partly in response to the impact made on voters by such photographs.'[32]

It also came to the attention of the American Government that these images were having a negative impact on the international community. 'Because of the international negative reaction to these photographs, many in the American government realized they would have to support the Civil Rights Movement, for Americans could not aid freedom fighters in other parts of the world while ignoring those who were seeking it in their own country.'[33] The

uprisings and riots had become recognised around the world, at a time when America was seen as a superpower this bad coverage was unconstructive and damaging to their reputation. 'Reports and photographs of Birmingham received extensive coverage abroad. The dogs and firehoses were seen and condemned from Britain to France to Russia, Asia and Africa.' [34] President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) was being attacked by European governments for the way that people in his country were being treated. He realised the damage that these images were doing to his country and had to do anything he could to try and put an end to the exposure. JF Kennedy was advised to pass the Civil Rights Act. 'Reports from Birmingham had not only pressed Kennedy to take the lead, they had convinced many citizens and elected officials that the federal government should intervene.' [35]

The impact of these images helped to gain support for the cause. It exposed the severity of the issue, which could not be ignored. This support would not have been so great if the images were not distributed across America. 'The spread of these images throughout the nation was crucial for the movement's success...' [36] In some instances many believed that the violence that they were seeing could not possibly be happening in America.

(Blacks were able to take a stand it encouraged them to do this.) 'Over the next couple of years, more aggressive and activist leaders than King moved in, "black power" became the cry, and peaceful marches shared the news with explosive riots.' [37]

Conclusion

In answer to the question, 'What was the impact of photojournalism in the civil rights movement?' in answering this question it is true to say that the hypothesis, 'Photojournalism had a positive impact on the civil rights movement, was proven to be correct. The photojournalism that surrounded the time of the civil rights movement had a great impact upon the civil rights movement. It helped to change conflicting ideas about black people in general, by doing this it also highlighted the challenges that the black community were facing which were once again shown in these images. The photographs that were taken aided the movement, as they were able to give visual imagery to people who had only heard about the extent of the issue. The distribution of these images was important to their impact as they showed the extend of the problems to those that were not living in the south. The images were also shown worldwide which put pressure on the American government to change the way that their country was being viewed from outside of the United States of America. They were also extremely powerful, and this was most probably deliberate to get an emotional response from the audience to help change or influence their minds on their thoughts about the black community and the issues they were faced with. By doing this is helped others to widen their knowledge about the situation by highlighting the issues through photography.

The great impact of this photography fuelled protests and rallies, it motivated people to bring about a change that they knew was over due.

Incidentally the most powerful images were thus selected from many to be printed in such magazines and newspapers, even though this was a terrible time, the amount of images that showed peaceful protests and rallies, and <https://assignbuster.com/photojournalism-and-the-civil-rights-movement/>

black and white citizens peacefully mixed were sparse in comparison to other images which showed conflict and violence. Even though these images were widely produced, the majority of these images were not shown in the media, read or watched predominantly by a white audience, but were for black audiences when they already knew the extent of the prejudice as they were living through it every day, therefore reinforcing the view that a life of inequality and prejudice was their lot. However it is naive to say that it was photojournalism alone that helped blacks to gain the vote and increase the public's knowledge and understanding of the movement. Other types of media such as television, radio, and written literature also participated in broadening understanding and knowledge in addition to the breaking down of barriers of segregation and prejudice towards black people. Martin Luther King played a vital role in this also, he knew the power of photography and the media in general, and if it was used correctly it could help to bring about change.

It would be untrue to say that photojournalism at this time did not have an impact on the Civil Rights Movement, as it was one of the most documented periods in American History. However, it was not just photographs alone that helped to bring about this change in American society. It was also aided by specific individuals who helped play a major role in the campaign, John F Kennedy in addition Martin Luther King Jr.'s whose charismatic leadership skills, as well as his knowledge of the importance of photographic image at this time captivate the public interest.

Appendix

Library of Congress (2010) Images of 20th Century African American

Activists: A Select List, Kaulins, J. (1956) Rosa Parks .[Online]. Available