

Is a photo worth 1,000 words?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

There is an old saying: 'A picture is worth 1000 words.'

That may be true in some cases, but quite often a photograph does not deliver the whole truth.

Photographers can easily manipulate a situation to completely skew emotion, feeling, and what the image is trying to convey.

A photograph represents only 1/250th or maybe 1/1000th of a second in time.

The difference in the final image is the result of what happens in that split second.

Say you're photographing a beautiful woman. She smiles for the camera and suddenly happens to sneeze while you just fired off several rapid shots.

You'll end up with two distinct photos, one showing a woman smiling for the camera, and the next one a photo of the same woman with wrinkled forehead, slightly closed eyes, open mouth, and a disturbing look as she just gets into sneeze mode.

The difference in that second goes from 'you look beautiful?' to 'Hey, what's the matter with you?'

The media has been guilty of this type of thing for the past decade.

When Rob Ford was mayor of Toronto, one newspaper in particular, which obviously did not like him, ran the same photo over and over again.

Instead of a photo of him at a podium or somewhere similar, they ran the same off-the-cuff photo of him in some social gathering with his mouth open, and eyes half closed. It was cheap journalism.

Other news sources did the same thing to a member of parliament a few years ago.

This particular member was quite an attractive woman. But instead of running a nice, natural photo of her, this particular news media, doing their best to slam her, kept running the same awful photo of her taken at mid-sentence. It was a terrible photo. Any reputable photo editor would have dropped that one into the recycle bin, but they wanted to create a negative image so they ran the same bad photo of a brief slice of time.

I've been a photo journalist for a good number of years and an avid photographer since age 10 when I got my first Kodak Instamatic camera and roamed the neighbourhood taking photos of everything I found interesting.

I've always admired the work of international journalists - especially those who captured a moment in time that won them a Pulitzer Prize or changed the way the world views things.

One fantastic award-winning photo is that of an American pilot officer who had been shot down over Vietnam and taken prisoner.

After spending several years in a prison camp he was released.

The photo shows the officer, in uniform, walking across the airstrip as his family runs to greet him. His 15-year-old daughter is in the lead, a look of absolute joy on her face, and her arms outstretched to meet him. His three other children run to meet him, as does

his smiling wife.

What a joyous photo. But it doesn't tell the real story.

Although his children were of course happy to see him, his smiling wife had been having affairs with several different men while he was imprisoned. In her final letter to him, she told him she wanted a divorce so she could marry another man.

The pilot, years later, said there was no joy in that photo for him, only sadness as he knew his wife was leaving and his family would never be the same. He said in an interview that he hated that photo and never looked at it, despite it being a world famous image.

Another famous Vietnam War era photo shows an execution on the streets of Saigon.

The National Police Chief, a Major General, is photographed firing a bullet into the head of a poorly dressed, nondescript looking man. That single photograph did a lot to change the opinion of many people as to why the U.S. was fighting that war.

However, the man wasn't some poor peasant trying to earn a living to support his family.

He was a Viet Cong spy and gang leader, who had just murdered a Vietnamese official, the official's wife and mother, and five of his children.

Wearing civilian clothes as a combatant, in a war zone, and committing mass murder won't endear you to the local population.

The General was reviled by the public for his apparently callous murder.

The photographer later regretted taking the photo. He wrote: "The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation."

Some photographs are worth 1000 words, however others never tell the real story.