

Images by the people—of Haiti (how about: Images of Haiti: By Haitians?)

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There is no better time than now, nor place than Haiti, to provide citizens with cameras to tell their own story. Last month, media professionals dropped in on Haiti following the devastating 7.0 earthquake. Major print media, competing for viewers, dispatched star photographers to the scene. The Washington Post sent Carol Guzy, winner of several Pulitzer Prizes. Her images, posted to the Internet, are shot in stark black and white, making them even more dramatic. The Los Angeles Times sent Carolyn Cole, and the New York Times sent Damon Winter, also Pulitzer winners. Even legendary war photographer James Nawtchwey was there a few days after the quake.

They, along with scores of other photographers from around the world, captured devastating images of death, despair, and destruction that were relayed to those outside Haiti via the Internet and 24/7 news outlets. The volume of such images in the U.S. press, particularly of dead and dying people, eclipses the number of similar images from any other natural or unnatural calamity in recent memory. In fact, this may be the first time that mainstream media in the United States has saturated the public with death imagery, upsetting many viewers but also inducing sympathy prompting significant philanthropy.

Collectively, the thousands of images taken by professional photographers represent one of the most compelling depictions of a catastrophe that I have seen in my 40 years as a professional photographer. With no yellow police tape stretched across the tragedy, as would be customary in the United States, the photographers had complete access and, under perilous conditions, created beautifully crafted, albeit gruesome, photographs. They did a superb job depicting epic horror, which millions of others witnessed at a distance through their newspapers, Internet sites, and television.

In addition to still image coverage, television crews from across the globe sent their star on-camera reporters who provided round-the-clock coverage. CNN, for example, sent Dr. Sanjay Gupta and anchor Anderson Cooper. While watching CNN, feature after feature showed Dr. Gupta saving lives, while nimble enough to also report the story. Cooper, a heroic Johnny-on-the spot, conducted interviews with people who had just lost their entire family or had been recently dug out of the rubble, some cooperating with Cooper's interviews even while dying of hunger and thirst or requiring emergency medical care which, in the earliest days of the crisis, was essentially unavailable. I was mesmerized by their stories, although it was increasingly unclear who the story was really about: the reporter, devastated by what she or he was witnessing, or the people living the nightmare.

By year's end, when the images from Haiti are a blur in the public's mind, the major publications will devote significant time and resources toward winning the coveted Pulitzer Prize; winners will earn bragging rights over their competitors. It is also

conceivable that, in a decade or two, some of the beautiful but devastating images may be hanging in a gallery or museum and sold as art to wealthy patrons.

What was missing from this reportage—both still and moving—was the opportunity for Haitians to tell their own stories. One blogger stated on internet site Newspaper Death Watch, “When Diane Sawyer arrived on the scene she got to practice her O-Level French but, apart from that, there was nothing she said that could not have been said better, more concisely, more urgently, by anybody whose house had been reduced to splinters and rubble and who’s family members were buried under it all.”

This brings me to the heart of the issue: Why wasn’t more time devoted to citizen storytelling? And, when the media departs to await another earth shattering story, will we continue to cover the story; especially if it is told by the people of Haiti, showing and telling the world of their ongoing struggle to rebuild their lives?

There is a decades old criticism of the “outsider,” most often journalists from developed nations, arriving in underdeveloped nations to tell the story of “insiders.” Whether HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, conflict in the Middle East, violence in economically depressed U.S. inner cities, poverty and alcoholism in Native American communities or, currently, victims of the earthquake in Haiti, the outsiders’ stories are often the only stories told. Criticism tends to focus not on the presence of journalists but, rather, on the ways in which they depict the story and the lack of acknowledgment that there is an equally, if not more important role, for local storytellers.

With the attention that professional journalism has brought to both the plight and strengths of the Haitian people, perhaps this is a perfect time to expand the practice of participant photography in Haiti, providing Haitian citizens the opportunity to develop their media skills and visually share their continuing stories over the coming decades. There are, currently, a host of NGO’s in Haiti capable of training people in the tools and technology necessary to sustain global attention for their long-term struggles. One group, Zanmi Lakay, has been teaching participatory photography for several years. Founded by American Jennifer Pantaléon of Pacifica, California, along with her Haitian husband Guy, they are dedicated to improving the quality of life for current and former Haitian street children and orphans.

It is urgent that the Haitian story continues to be told long after the journalists leave. Engaging Haitians to tell their own stories to the world, through pictures and words, is one way to reveal the resiliency and beauty of the human spirit and to show the rest of the world Haitian’s are valued in God’s creation.