

A human being is born with two eyes. As a strictly evolutionary characteristic, sight (and the capability to interpret that external input) developed in conjunction with the brain as a sense to experience and manipulate the environment in order to survive. Similar to humans having two ears on either side of the head (in order to perceive the direction of a threat) and hearing varied volume sensitivity (in order to perceive distance), the eyes—and in particular, two eyes—became a survival necessity in order to perceive distance and make judgements based upon visual data. Without two eyes, a human can certainly survive; however, many people who experience blindness in one eye describe the world as “in 2-dimensions” or refer to the world “looking like a television screen.” To a human being with one usable eye, all things are perceived as 2-dimensional shapes; though logically a blind person deduces, of course, the external world and what they see exists in 3-dimensions. Still, it takes a great amount of work and practice to be able to do simple tasks with accuracy: for instance, grasping things at arms length takes on new difficulty or being able to tell the distance between two objects. Anecdotes of patients who have recently become blind in one eye have been reported to say that they never knew frustration until they tried to catch a ball without both of their eyes.

Again, from an evolutionary standpoint, the incorporation of the second eye was a survival characteristic that allowed for a 3-dimensional world to be perceived and the brain evolved along with it to comprehend that world. The human brain is highly flexible and adaptable, but it is not an accident that the symmetry of the human body allows for the perception and manipulation of the world inside the 360° sphere of direct influence we inhabit. Blind spots are just that: blind spots. Perhaps we are lucky that our ears work as well as they do or we may well have evolved with eyes near our temples instead of forward-facing.

For a single man to look at another and perceive all his complexities and all the vivid world around him is a man working in the realm of 2-dimensions. The addition of a second man, a second pair of eyes, and a second mind is, in effect, evolving a second eye in which to perceive the world. Apply this to a truth-seeking endeavor (such as photojournalism) and the possibilities rise as rapidly the first two-eyed man would have stood out as a genius among his one-eyed companions (as historically silly as that may be).

“Dual Observation” Defined

Scientists and research institutions are, by nature, required to perform experiments and develop theses that can be reproduced or replicated in order to be proven true. This is simple verification and validation of the scientific method. It works. It is a time-tested practical approach to documenting the world. Let us say that science is defined as a documentation and study of the processes and structures of the physical world. Through observation and experimentation, the natural universe can be explained. This is a definition that possibly any English dictionary may provide.

A scientist observes and documents these processes and structures and verifies them with facts. Facts lead to “truths” that in the context of science are understood as laws. Obviously, laws are relatively rare in the grand scheme of natural sciences, so the notion of “theories” are built in just to give that pesky Doubt some semblance of validation: “while everything we see points to this explanation as being true in every respect, it is only right that we – as scientists – allow for the possibility that someday we could be proven wrong.”

What, then, is a similar thought process in such an unscientific¹ endeavor as journalism or photojournalism? We journalists uphold such values as verification and fact-checking in order to establish some perception of “journalistic truth” (known in most academic circles as “facts in context”). Journalists the world-over are measured by such terms as “objectivity” or “fairness” which are all rooted in a discipline of verification. If it

¹ “Unscientific” as much as any intangible, qualitatively-measured field may be.

is not verified, it is not true and therefore should not be printed for the masses.² But the scientific method as used by natural sciences fails us here: there is often no possibility of recreating an experimental procedure, there are no double-blind stories, nor can a photographer re-photograph a scene after it has moved on. Where every human being exists in his or her own world, with all the fragility of memory and the intricacies of human nature all wrapped up into the singular quantity “a man,” how can we – photojournalists and/or journalists – expect to tell anything remotely close to truth?

This is an examination of the conscious turn to a documentation of reality with journalistic truth and verification based on a deliberate process of dual observation. Not only one fallible mind experiencing and interpreting the world, but a pair, and the embracing of all the intrinsic qualities of two observers experiencing a situation, interpreting that situation, filtering it through their own mind’s eye, and being honest about the conveyed reality being presented.

Dual observation requires two attuned journalists/photojournalists to experience and perceive the same (or similar) moments in the same place at the same time. Each of the journalists perceiving the moment must work to record the moment as literally and as accurately as possible. Each of them must then have the perception and depth in order to internalize the experience and apply all the width and breadth of human understanding to it as they experience it and combine their personal experiences into a single work.

The combination of the two individual experiences draws strongly on the two journalists’ (or photojournalists’) lives and past experiences, so it is paramount that the pair are different enough to perceive the world in unique ways, but similar enough to find common ground in the telling of the story. This restriction means that not every pair of journalists experiencing the same thing can work as a “dual observation” project.

A few criteria for successful projects include (but are not limited to): a breadth of knowledge in a variety of subjects that differ between the pair of observers. For instance, a well-adapted reader in religious studies and an open-minded observer of the physical world (perhaps read: “amateur scientist”) would be different enough to see the world from their individual perspectives; but if both are proponents of the tenets of journalism³, then both can work from a common ground in order to analyze the world they perceive and document that world in a way that conveys the truth⁴ of any matter.

A second criteria might include a relatively significant age gap. While two 20-somethings see the world from two different sets of eyes, their collective experience of the world is likely similar: they grew up with the same pop-culture references, experienced the same historical moments, and were brought up by their parents and experienced their schools in similar ways. To pair a 30-year old with a 50-year old, the wider generation gap ensures that a few potential perspective problems will be avoided. For instance, a 50-year old will have grown up during the Cold War. A 30-year old will have grown up always having had a computer in the home. A 50-year old will have age and mental maturity on his side. A 30-year old will have youth and energy on his.

Is there an upper or lower age limit to this argument? The world is rapidly entering a time when the youngest journalists did not experience a pre-9/11 world. They knew not a time when asking a person on the phone, “Where are you?” would be a silly thing to do. And the time has already come when cameras are able to make nearly an unlimited number of photographs and broadcast to a global audience mere minutes post-capture. A 50-something documentarian and a 20-something documentarian have much to teach one another. At the risk of introducing additional complexity to a story, this writer would welcome such a team.

² This is in an idea world, of course.

³ A logical example of an outline of the accepted tenets of journalism could be found in a study such as Kovach and Rosentiel’s *Elements of Journalism*.

⁴ *Truth* being defined here as “journalistic truth.”

A third criteria for successful projects might include the pair of journalists to have similar lifestyles and personality predispositions: they actually have to get along. Flexibility will be required in every endeavor such as this, but it helps if the two understand and can work in similar ways. One cannot wake up at noon and have a shower every day, while the other wakes up at dawn and never bathes.⁵ The frustration of dealing with personality conflicts will be hazardous to the success of the project. Conflicts should be relegated to the realm of professional critiques and project-oriented discussions, not the basic day-to-day necessities. When it is possible for a challenging situation to be prevented ahead of time, it should be prevented. Especially in the realm of international travel or dangerous situations, actually being somewhat amicable enables a positive working environment so that personal conflict does not interfere with the collection of material.

“Dual Observation” vs “Collaborative Journalism”

“Dual observation,” as stated above, requires two journalists or photojournalists to experience and perceive the same (or similar) moments at exactly the same place at exactly the same time. This differs from “collaborative journalism” in that dual observational journalism absolutely requires the two journalists/photojournalists to collect the material (photos, quotes, experiences, etc) together. Collaborative journalism does not require this. Collaborative journalism came about as a specialization and distribution of labor so that one journalist could dedicate time to writing and gathering spoken words while a photographer could go somewhere else and make a representative photo of the situation. So, collaborative journalism was, in essence, a means by which multiple people could contribute to the same story from widely different places and combine the individual reporting into a much larger and broader piece. Collaborative journalism does not require the collaborators to be in the same place at the same time; dual observation journalism does.

Critics of collaborative journalism often cite a lack of fact-checking as a drawback; dual observation actually takes measures to eliminate this lack of fact-checking by requiring two primary sources as an intrinsic part of the collection process. Primary sources are, by nature, limited to the perception of the individual who is experiencing the event. While primary sources are key for the development of stories, of course, they are limited by their proximity. One man or one woman cannot see everything. Therefore it is my summation that primary sources cannot convey truth: they can only convey facts. In an ideal “dual observation” situation, the journalists or photojournalists are continually cross-referencing the situation and documenting everything from multiple angles. Critics of collaborative journalism also note that increased numbers of journalists can increase the likelihood that a story will leak before it is completed; dual observational projects are different in that it is limited to the two journalists involved who both share an equal stake in the success or failure of the project: if one fails, both fail.

This also implies that dual observation is limited to two participants: literally “dual,” a pair. Much of the restriction is logistically based. Two journalists are nearly as light and flexible as one, but two adds all the benefits listed above plus the added personal security and splitting of costs. When a third person is added, things get far more complicated. Logistically speaking, larger vehicles are needed, far more space is needed to sleep, far more cost is incurred at hotels/hostels, the apparent size of the group grows (which could be perceived by outsiders as intimidating), et al. Two people traveling together is not unusual; three people becomes a “crew.” Furthermore, any additional person needed for the project (a translator or fixer, for example) then becomes *four* people traveling together.

A further reason that “dual observation” holds to its “duality” is that two people are equally matched in their decision-making. There is no possibility of taking conflicting viewpoints to a majority vote and every decision is forced to be discussed and agreed upon by the pair. With a little practice and patience, only the most significant conflicts will ever devolve into verbal confrontation and the pair of journalists will be mentally in tune with one another for most decisions. The pair work as a mental team.

⁵ This may seem like a silly reference, but the reality of long-form documentary journalism is exactly this.

Historical Context of the Dual Observation Concept

The idea of dual observation journalism projects is not a new idea, though the use of it may be often confused or distracted by the classic “collaborative journalism” approach. An obvious example might be Agee and Evans collecting the materials that became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It is in this exhausting volume that Agee makes the argument that the two parts – the photographs and the text – be experienced as “mutually independent” parts of the same whole. Agee and Evans sought to present the text and the photographs as separate parts that could tell a story by themselves, but because they are together, the result is greater than the sum of its parts. To explain this further, this is in contrast to stories with photographs and text that are “co-dependent,” ie. works that rely on each other for context.

Agee and Evans fit this mold better than their contemporaries such as Margaret Bourke-White or W. Eugene Smith in that Bourke-White and Smith often produced works that they themselves wrote AND photographed, or their works were accompanied by written words collected separately from the original photographs. It is true that Agee was primarily the writer and Evans primarily the photographer, they produced much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* directly experiencing the situation together.⁶ Photographs can be frequently matched directly to the words on the page.

A mode such as this, of presenting words and photographs that are able to stand “mutually independent” while overlapping content, enhances the likelihood that truth will be conveyed and it will be absorbed by the audience more readily. Taking into account a varied audience with all their myriad ways they may best perceive the world, the dual observation journalists/photojournalists are making every effort to bring a world that the audience has never physically experienced and allowing them to experience it with more senses. Perhaps this dual observation concept is more relevant to Agee and Evans’ work than any other pair of documentarians as Agee wrote:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game. A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

A pair of dual observationists, barring no ability to bring the physical world to the audience in any literal way, is making every effort to do just this. With all the possible recording of the known universe, words and photographs are most easily transmitted. And when two perceive this world and record it and check themselves against one another, the truth can be set free.

Personal Experience of Dual Observation

Writer and photographer Philip Holsinger and I (also a photojournalist) have frequently worked on projects together in many situations ranging from rural farmlands of Ohio, to Chicago and New York City, to extensive projects throughout Haiti, and now to the Caucasus Mountains of the Republic of Georgia. During our projects together, we have explored many of the ideas discussed in this essay.

An initial discussion between myself and Mr. Holsinger after photographing a fishing sailboat off the south coast of Haiti revealed that two photographers in exactly the same place (the extremely limited space of a motorized canoe following the sailboat) photographed the exact same thing in two different ways. Composition, focal length, exposure selection resulted in two different images with two different moods.

⁶ Acknowledging, however, a period of time when the pair spent time apart: Agee stayed in the field and Evans spent time in Birmingham, Alabama, to develop film and handle administrative matters.



While both were obviously factual, we had seen and experienced the same thing at the same time, it was possible to see our individual states of mind and how we were interpreting the world.

Mr. Holsinger admitted that he saw the small boat in a big world, brooding clouds and uncertain seas. I said that I found a certain amount of humor and irony in the shirt the man wore: “Putting Safety First: 1 Year No Lost Time” as the sailor was perched precariously on a narrow outboard rigger to balance the sailboat in increasingly gusty winds (this was a day prior to the arrival of a tropical depression to southwest Haiti). My 25-year-old self saw playfulness and irony; Mr. Holsinger was painting his 45 years of experiences into his photography. Both were interpretations of the facts, and an outside viewer no longer is restricted by one perspective, while the truth can be conveyed with little loss of “truth.”

The facts conveyed by this image remain the same in either photograph: a boat was on water in that place at that time, a man was perched upon an outrigger in that way. The boat was blue. It is clear, also, that the boat is of a certain size and rustic design, the weather conditions are relatively apparent, and the direction the boat is sailing appears to be toward some distant land mass. Beyond that, little is conveyed. You do not know the man’s name, or anything else about him other than he appears to be a capable sailor. Other than the darkness of the man’s skin, nothing can be perceived about the geographical location of the boat. In fact, the English text on the man’s t-shirt confuses the location by implying that this image might be made in an English-speaking country: in fact, it is likely that the man is unaware of what his shirt actually says or means.⁷

⁷ Further considerations bring even more layers of complexity to “what is true” in this case. Shirts such as this in a country such as Haiti come here by two primary ways: they are donated by a person, or they are donated by a company. In the case of being donated by a person, they may come here as a simple donation: “Donate your clothes to charity!” If donated by a company, the company is frequently a clothing company or printing company with excess shirts, or a company that – for some reason – has far too many of that kind of shirt. For example, before each Super Bowl, the NFL and other merchandisers order thousands of shirts with BOTH teams having “won.” Then, whoever does win, they ship the “winner” merchandise out to their stores, and then discard the team that lost. And, by “discard” I mean, “donate the shirts to a foreign country.” In the months following the January 2010 Earthquake in Haiti (mere weeks before the XLIV Super Bowl between the Saints and the Colts), tens of thousands of shirts arrived in Haiti declaring the Colts had won the Super Bowl. The Saints won the Super Bowl on February 7, 2010, but the “discarded” shirts bearing “Colts Win!” were distributed all over Haiti.

In the case of this man on this boat in Haiti wearing a shirt saying that it had been one year with no accidents? There’s a significant chance that this shirt is here because there WAS an accident at whatever company this was, but because they had already printed up the shirts in celebration, they shipped them down to Haiti after the earthquake. Shirts such as this are a subtle indicator of commercial waste and/or failure. Is it too far-flung to suggest that Haiti exists in an alternate reality in which the Colts won the Super Bowl and companies succeeded in reaching a year with no time-loss accidents? Indeed, the ocean of truth in a simple image can be filled by trickling tributaries emanating from remarkably distant glaciers of fact.