

# 2.14

## A Short History of Wire Service Photography

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Behind every iconic photograph is a rarely told story of circulation.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about images that move us and how they have such affective powers.<sup>2</sup> Yet the question of how photographs themselves move, the means by which they circulate, has received much less attention. For news images to have the tremendous affective and political impact scholars often highlight and analyze, they needed initially to get to one or several publications. This chapter focuses on the physical movement of images, and specifically on wire services as institutions that move most of the photographs that accompany daily news stories worldwide.

The story of transportation is central to photojournalism, for it is only by circulating in particular networks and appearing in certain types of publications that a photograph becomes a news image. There are two important stories here: the well-known one about the rise of photojournalism and the less-known one about the rise of distribution networks for journalistic photographs. Both are entangled histories of events deemed newsworthy in distant places, of technological developments, commercial interests, and new roles for old infrastructures.

News agencies (also called news services) were initially formed in the mid-nineteenth century to share the cost of gathering news.<sup>3</sup> News services became “wire services” as they turned to the latest invention—the electric telegraph—to send news farther and faster. The Associated Press for example, was formed in 1846 by six New York City newspapers to share the costs of getting news of the Mexican War via boat, pony express, and telegraph, rather than by relying on the US Post Office. Today, wire services are news organizations responsible for gathering news, both text and visuals (still and moving imagery). The three largest are Associated Press (AP), Agence France-Presse (AFP), and Reuters. They disseminate the majority of the international information broadcast in the world every day by serving as wholesalers of news for their subscriber base of worldwide news publications.

Initially news services were designed to dispatch text. If photographs were to be used to illustrate the news, there needed to be a transportation network to get them to the publications. Moreover, these distribution networks would develop according to the commercial value of news images and the costs of the means of transportation and eventually transmission available. There was a sort of feedback loop; the more publications believed that news images moved publics, the more necessary it became to move photographs quickly. Already by 1894 a photographic agency, the Illustrated Journals Photographic Supply Company of Ludgate Hill, guaranteed images from any part of

the United Kingdom in twenty-four hours, thus tying the visual news cycle to the means of transportation available.<sup>4</sup>

Communication networks were substituted for transportation networks when it became possible to transmit images over telegraph wires, eliminating the need to wait for carriages, trains, and ships. By 1913 pictures were being transmitted across the Atlantic by cable, though prohibitively high costs made very few photographs worthy of cable transmission. The 1920s saw experiments with telephotography—the transmission of photographs over dedicated telephone lines—but again costs were considerable. The technology that transmitted images by cable is the same as common fax technology.<sup>5</sup> Patented in 1843, it was not put to commercial use until the 1860s. More importantly, it did not take off in the general consumer market until over a century later in the mid-1980s when the Japanese economy boomed: fax technologies were useful for languages whose characters did not adapt easily to Western telegraph and telex systems.<sup>6</sup> In other words, it took the rise of the Japanese economy near the end of the twentieth century to produce sufficient commercial interest to justify the production of machines that would enable individuals to transmit images via telephone lines.

But even in the early twentieth century when costs were prohibitive for most individual consumers, institutions were nevertheless interested in the technology's potential. When telecommunications giant AT&T was unable to generate sufficient profit from individual users, it sold its picture telegraphy service to the Associated Press in 1933, and AP Wirephoto was launched in 1935.<sup>7</sup> With the introduction of Wirephoto, images could travel as quickly and as far as text. By 1938 pictures constituted almost 40 percent of the content in American dailies.<sup>8</sup> Given the scale of the conflict on several fronts and across four continents, the mobility of photographs became particularly important in covering World War II.

It made sense that wire services were the ones pursuing costly photographic transmission technologies. Whether corporations, government subsidized agencies, or not-for-profit cooperatives, these institutions understood the commercial value of information and had decades of expertise in distributing news stories to ever widening geographies. Take, for instance, Agence Havas, which later became Agence France-Presse. In 1835, more than a decade before the founding of AP, Charles-Louis Havas had established an international news service comprised of correspondents and translators. Paul Reuter and Bernhard Wolff set up rival news agencies in London and Berlin respectively. In 1859 the three agencies—Havas, Reuters and Wolff—divided Europe up into exclusive zones of reporting, essentially three non-competitive markets for news. This agreement lasted until the invention of shortwave wireless in the 1930s significantly reduced communication costs and enabled far greater reach for each of the wire services, making it profitable for them to compete once again.

Until the widespread use of digital photography in the late 1990s, wire services were one of three main sources of news photographs for news publications. The others were photo agencies and historical archives. The aim of a wire service was to have a photograph available on the wire as soon as possible after an event. These were “fast” photographs.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, news magazines would send freelance, staff, or contract photographers on assignment to cover the event. Smaller photo agencies representing freelancers catered mostly to the needs of news magazines, many of which distinguished themselves from daily newspapers through their photographic feature stories. Freelance photographers shipped their undeveloped rolls of film via airplane back to their agency or the publication that had assigned them. These images were often published some time after the event had been in the dailies but might accompany more in-depth reporting on the event. These were considered “good” photographs.

This is not to say that wire service photos—“fast” photos—were necessarily “bad,” but that they were perceived as less complex images.<sup>10</sup> Their value was their speed, and speed also determined their

content. Because the transmission of a single image took anywhere from four to fifteen minutes, wire photographers were trained to take shots that summed up the event in a single image—getting *the* picture—rather than in a series of images that collectively told a story or constituted a photo essay. Eventually when more news publications printed in color, color photographs were sent via wires as well. Each CMY (cyan, magenta, yellow) required seven minutes and several additional minutes for the photo to be written to tape, hence a single image could take up to half an hour. There was rarely any point to transmitting a series of photographs over the wire because daily newspapers, wire services' main clients, did not have space for photo stories in their pages. Thus, a wire service photographer excelled in getting a single summary image. In 2004, the senior manager of the AFP photo department at the Paris headquarters defined a wire service in a single word: "Speed."<sup>11</sup>

Another senior photo department official also emphasized speed as he led new bureau chiefs through orientation one day: "The most important thing for us is speed. We must not leave room for AP, Reuters, or Getty." Indeed the highest level daily planning meetings would begin with reports about which wire service had been the first to report each major story, and the history of journalism is full of stories about a wire service having a critical lead on its rivals. One of the visiting new bureau chiefs that day asked if publications had any sense of loyalty to a particular wire service, since many of the major publications subscribe to multiple wire services and use photographs from all of them. The photo official replied emphatically, "Yes, I believe speed creates loyalty." Speed—being the first with a photograph—allows publications to pay attention to the content of an image. The director of photography confirmed what the others had been saying by highlighting that speed was paramount in an environment where publications subscribed to all the major wire services, each competing for the same spots on front pages, "On the other end [of the wire] there is always someone waiting for the images no matter what the quality and therefore if you wait on your images they'll never get played [published.]"

Perhaps the best way to tell the story of digitization in photography is to suggest that it was just the latest innovation by wire services to get their photographs to subscribers faster. AP introduced the first digital camera for photojournalists in 1994. Their photographers shot the 1996 Super Bowl entirely without film, confirming that digital technologies could be relied upon for coverage of the largest news stories even in sports where speed is at a premium. The advent of digital photography and transmission led to the rise of large corporate "visual content" providers.<sup>12</sup> The two most often credited (or cursed, depending on the speaker) with changing the landscape of the image industry—Corbis and Getty Images—were founded by men whose expertise was not in journalism but rather corporate finance and technology. Both Corbis and Getty grew by acquiring the major news photography agencies of the day and historical archives to form large online image banks with millions of instantly available digitized photographs for anyone seeking visual content. Suddenly the established wire services were no longer the only ones who could instantly transmit images, and all distributors were in competition with one another. All photographs had to be "good" because they were all "fast."

Wire services, like all visual content providers, now use the Internet to transmit images. Yet, wire services have thus far survived the obsolescence of the wire. They still disseminate a majority of the international information broadcast every day. This is because of the continued pertinence of the wire's infrastructure, understood not only as the physical wire but also as the totality of organizational structures, protocols, practices, and conditions that allow for and direct the circulation of news by a wire service. Today it is the wire in this sense, rather than the speed enabled by wire transmission, that is valued. Historically, getting to an event or its aftermath first, and finding a timely way to transmit an image back to headquarters and then to the appropriate publications, was the primary challenge for wire service

photo departments. In the early years of digital photography when few freelance photographers could afford digital cameras or satellite phones required for remote transmission, the AP website bragged, “There is no place on earth too remote for same-day news picture transmission.”<sup>13</sup> Today the challenge is no longer simply to offer a representation but to offer a validated representation chosen from the overwhelming number available. Speed alone no longer guarantees success for a wire service; new challenges arise from the abundance of images. Wire services function as gatekeepers and sort through this abundance for the critical and credible images.

Moreover, today millions of people have access to the means of production and circulation of visual representations and are regularly promised opportunities to broker information, especially images, by being “i-witnesses” or citizen journalists. The Internet enables many new kinds of image brokers to put photographs into potentially global circulation: governments, military personnel, activists, amateur photographers, and terrorists all have networks through which they can circulate images extensively online.<sup>14</sup> Editors repeatedly noted that, although getting to the news site first remains important, it is now critical to be the source that has professional image brokers, both photographers who can take images and editors to evaluate and validate them, close to events so that they can understand images in context and gather citizen-produced images, if necessary.<sup>15</sup> “First to bring you the news” comes after “reliable” and “impartial” in a 2012 AFP video about its visual services.

Today major wire services all underscore the scale of their services both in terms of global coverage and in terms of sheer numbers of images transmitted every day, the size of their archives, and the number of photographers working for them. Reuters Pictures’ website boasts that its “global network of 600 photographers distributes 1,600 pictures each day, added to a growing archive of over 6 million. Images are transmitted within minutes to the world’s media providing a constant window on the world.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas being in multiple locations served to transmit images faster than anyone else, today wire services underscore that they are global networks with regional expertise, languages, topical breadth of coverage and reach (“Reaching a billion people everyday” reads Reuters’ tagline) on multiple platforms in multiple media.

After more than a century of visual journalism, significant events are rarely reported without images. The demise of physical newspapers at the beginning of the twenty-first century led to significant reductions in staff, and in some cases shutting down photography departments altogether, yet the demand for news images remains.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, whereas limited physical space in a print publication meant that not every article would be accompanied by an image, online versions of publications allegedly had no space concerns and, so, every news story could be accompanied by images—photo essays as well as single shots. Wire services now feature their editing function by prominently displaying slideshows on various topics—not just single shots. In short, despite rendering the physical wire obsolete, digital transmission has only revalidated the function of wire services.

As the uncertainty in the world of journalism continues, the specific role for photo departments in wire services may be unclear. What seems more certain, for now at least, is that they will continue to play a significant role. Wire service’ websites and news aggregator websites that automatically publish “wire feed” now provide multiple publics access to the wire—a constant window on the world—without the intermediary of publications. At the same time their business models fluctuate as journalism is restructured, and subscription models alone seem inadequate. Many historic publications have folded and “the world’s media” looks very different than it did just a few decades ago, but there are also new types of clients, from individual bloggers to corporations that some wire services now seem open to serving. Today many press images go beyond illustration and are often factors in causing these

events, often playing a critical and highly controversial part in political and military action. Paying attention to how images circulate and the institutions that validate their circulation has become ever more critical.

## Notes

- 1 See Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007) for accounts of how images gained significance through their circulation after publication.
- 2 Some examples include Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), Amahl Bishara, "Covering the Barrier in Bethlehem: The Production of Sympathy and the Reproduction of Difference," in *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, S. Elizabeth Bird, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Noonday Press, [1989] 1977). Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), and David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2003).
- 3 Oliver Boyd-Barrett's *The International News Agencies* (London: Sage, 1980) and his introduction to *News Agencies in the Turbulent Era of the Internet* (Government of Catalonia, 2010) provide extensive histories of international news agencies.
- 4 Ken Baynes Hopkinson, Allen Hutt, and Derrick Knight, *Scoop Scandal and Strife: A Study of Photography in Newspapers* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1971).
- 5 See *Spot News 1937*, Jam Handy Organization, Detroit <http://internetarchive.org>
- 6 Jonathan Coopersmith, "Facsimilie's False Starts," *IEEE Spectrum* (1993): 46–9.
- 7 Jonathan Coopersmith "The Failure of Fax: When a Vision is not Enough," *Business and Economic History* 23, (1994): 272–82.
- 8 Barbie Zelizer, "Journalism's 'Last' Stand: Wirephoto and the Discourse of Resistance," *Journal of Communication* 45:2 (1995): 78–93.
- 9 "Fast photographs" and "good photographs" regularly came up in conversations about wire service photography with professionals in the image industry.
- 10 For example, the work of wire service photographers was always present but rarely showcased at the prestigious annual photojournalism festival, *Visa Pour L'Image*.
- 11 See Zeynep D. Gürsel, "The Politics of Wire Service Photography: Infrastructures of Representation in a Digital Newsroom," *American Ethnologist* 39.1 (2012): 71–89 for an extended ethnography of the AFP photo service. All quotes are from fieldwork conducted by the author in 2003–2005 at nodal points in the international photojournalism industry.
- 12 Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (London: Berg, 2003). David Machin, "Building the World's Visual Language: The Increasing Global Importance of Image Banks in Corporate Media," *Visual Communication* 3.3 (2004): 316–36.
- 13 <http://www.ap.org> (accessed 28 September 2002).
- 14 Zeynep D. Gürsel, "The Politics of Wire Service Photography: Infrastructures of Representation in a Digital Newsroom," *American Ethnologist* 39.1.
- 15 Many wire photographers transmit from the event or a nearby location and, while exceptionally fast, many industry professionals expressed concern that these images may not be appropriately contextualized until they reach an editor with a little more distance and information about relevant events.
- 16 <http://www.reuters.com> (accessed 20 December 2013).

- 17 Pablo I. Boczkowski, *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). Zeynep D. Gürsel, "A Challenge for Visual Journalism: Rendering the Labor Behind News Images Visible," *Anthropology Now*, 17 July 2013. Neil Henry, *American Carnival: Journalism under Siege in an Age of New Media*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).