

Straight to



TRAVIS FOX: VIDEO VERITÉ

TRAVIS FOX was working as a Washingtonpost.com photo editor in 1999 when he told director of photography Tom Kennedy that he wanted to try his hand at video journalism. "I did it because I could. We had the cameras available," Fox says. "So I tried it and got the bug that I got way back when with still photography. I switched over to shooting video full time at the beginning of 2000."

This past spring, Fox won the top TV photography and editing awards in the White

House News Photographers' Association competition. Those awards were for various stories he produced during 2001. Recently, he won a Pew Fellowship for a four-month video documentary project on human rights abuses against gypsies in Eastern Europe.

Fox, who has never had any formal training in TV photography or production, is now teaching the craft to others—including veteran BBC cameramen.

"It's really come full circle with a Web person teaching

veteran BBC journalists how to do digital video," Fox says. "Within the TV world, there's a concept known as 'video journalism' for a lack of a better term, which is a more intimate way of storytelling."

It involves a lone photographer with minimal equipment (more on that shortly) rather than a large crew. More importantly, though, video journalism departs esthetically from what Fox calls the "radio with pictures" and "talking head" approach of most TV news.

Video journalism, he says, puts more emphasis on subject, story and character development.

Fox says he was drawn to video journalism because "I come from a tradition of documentary photojournalism that puts all the emphasis on the subject. And to a certain extent, [my approach is] a reaction to what I see on TV, which is very reporter driven, and I don't feel much connection with the subject or the story when I watch those types of pieces. I think it's my job to get

the connection between the subject and the viewer."

To that end, Fox tries to remain invisible in his work, which is influenced by classic cinema verité of Robert Flaherty and others. "I feel that me staying out of it is the best way of doing it," he says. If he needs to explain something to viewers, he usually does it with text. The Web, after all, can accommodate that.

Fox has tried several different cameras, including the Canon XLi, the Canon GL1, and a Sony

There have been many still photographers who became successful filmmakers. But with the advent of highly portable, flexible and inexpensive digital video cameras, the chance to capture moving images with sound is becoming more appealing to a number of photographers.

Here we talk to two respected photojournalists with no formal video training who have made the leap to DV—one shooting Web documentaries, the other fictional short subjects for theatrical release. By David Walker and Dana Rouse

Video



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PD-150. He keeps switching, he says, "because I wanted one that was better and I never really found it." Advantages of each one vary, but none is quite up to professional standards, he says.

For Fox, the switch from still photography to video was almost intuitive. "I'm a photographer. I had the basics down, I think—I thought!" He adds, "We live in a very TV-driven society. Most people under-

stand how a visual narrative is done from watching [TV and] movies." (Translation: just about any couch potato could put together a video).

Still, Fox had plenty to learn when he started. Editing his work himself was crucial to his education, he says. "It helped me understand how a video piece is put together. There's nothing better for teaching you what shots you need than

when you're editing and you don't have the shots you need." (Fox edits on a Macintosh laptop, using Final Cut Pro software.)

Fox says he conceptualizes his stories before he goes out. "I need to build—at least in my head—a storyboard, and a lot of times I'll do that while I'm out there." In that respect, video journalism isn't much different from photo documen-

tary projects, he notes.

He cites, for example, his story about Nineta, an orphan with AIDS caught up in Romania's drug shortage. "Before I left, I knew I wanted to find an orphan whose story symbolically [represented the problem]. And I wanted something that showed [the subject] doing things to try to get medicine as opposed to someone sitting there making phone calls."

The story begins with an introduction of Nineta and her caretaker. "I had to define their

relationship to viewers because it isn't obvious that it's not mother/daughter," he says. The story then explains, from the perspective of both subjects, the difficulties of getting medicine. "The climax of the story is them going to the hospital to try to get the medicine," Fox says. Throughout the shoot, he says, "You think about character development and relationship and interaction."

Unlike still photographers, video journalists cannot focus exclusively on the decisive

Spread: Stills from Fox's Web videos shot in the former Yugoslavia, a Virginia mosque (opposite, third from left) and a crab fishing boat in the Chesapeake (above, far right).



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moment. “As a still photographer, I would wait for the facial expression that’s going to tell the story. With video, I want that, but I can’t spend all of my time getting that because I’m going to miss all the other shots—the wide shots that establish you in the room, the cutaways showing other people in the room, the transition shots (such as close-ups of the subject’s hands). In video, you can’t have one shot going on and on and on. You’ve got to cut away to other things.”

Sound is another big difference between video and still

photography, of course. “Sound drives the video, and it’s a question of getting it or not,” Fox says. “Robert Capa said, ‘If it’s not good enough, [you’re] not close enough.’ The same thing applies to audio.”

“When I go out I tend to identify the potentially interesting sounds within a certain scene, and I will try to craft my shooting to a certain extent around those sounds. But I won’t let the sounds decide what I shoot. I try to strike a balance between them both.”

Fox says he’s still learning the ins and outs of video. “Hopefully, it will all become

second nature and I can just focus on the story.”

For a look at some of Fox’s award-winning work, visit www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/photo/whnpatv2002/.

Fox says that other good examples of video journalism include the local news broadcasts of KSTP and KARE in Minneapolis/St. Paul and KCNC and KUSA in Denver, as well as the PBS series called “POV,” “Nightline,” National Geographic TV, The Learning Channel and Bill Moyers’s “Now” on PBS also feature good video journalism from time to time, he says.

—David Walker

Below: Fox editing in a Belgrade hotel room. Above: Images of daily life in Belgrade, and at the Democratic National Convention (second from right), protesters scuffle with police.

Video Toolbox

Digital videographers have a handful of camera choices available to them. Leifer currently uses a Canon XL1. “It’s a terrific camera,” he says, noting that it’s now available in a 24-frames-per-second high-definition format. Fox used a Canon XL1 for all the award-winning stories he produced last year, but he’s also tried the Canon GL1 and Sony PD-150. He keeps switching, he says, “because I wanted one that was better and I never really found it.” He explains that digital video cameras are still prosumer products, which means manufacturers compromise to make them appeal to both consumers and pros. Fox awaits truly professional cameras. Meanwhile, he says, “For me, it’s between the Sony PD-150 I’m using now and the XL1 I used last year. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. The Sony is a little smaller, but the viewfinder is not as good [and] the Canon is easier to hold steady. People want camera advice, but I say it’s not about the camera. It’s like the Nikon/Canon thing with still photographers. People have different personal preferences.”

When it comes to editing, Fox uses Final Cut Pro software running on an Apple laptop. Andy Keir, who edited *Scout’s Honor* with Leifer, used a Macintosh editing system that is standard among professional editors. —D.W.



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