

“It’s the age of the digital image, where pictures are used as easily as words”



Ben Hammersley
Futurologist, BBC presenter and editor-at-large of *Wired* magazine

Mostly, people feel queasy. My work as a futurist consists of imagining what might be. We like to think it’s equal parts cultural, political, and technological, but this is a lie. The driving force behind the change around us is almost entirely technological. And almost unbearably rapid. And with it has come intense social transformation. People hate that.

Few art forms have changed as quickly as photography. Every step has been affected: you don’t have to budget for shots; expertise is no longer restricted to people with access to materials; instant publishing, globally, for free, is commonplace now.

Almost every adult in the developed world has a camera in their pocket. Hundreds of people on social media have over a million followers, all consuming images. Cara Delevingne, the actress and model, has over 40 million Instagram followers. As I write,

her latest image has 1.9 million likes. Tomorrow she’ll post another. Her impact alone rivals any professional photographer in history. Like I say, people feel queasy.

So how can the professional deal with this new world?

Partly, of course, by exemplifying professionalism. You know the argument: it’s the ability to produce good work on time and under budget that matters, not the one-in-a-million shot going viral on Twitter. True, but dull. That’s not embracing the future even a bit.

Perhaps instead we should think beyond the present and consider not just followers, or megapixels, or Likes, on the one hand, and the more human values of soul, romance or inspiration,



Steve Mayes
Strategist, futurist and former CEO of VII

The analogue photograph, with over 160 years of associations, is less and less relevant. Where the photograph was fixed – you took the shot, you printed it and could hang it

onto the wall – the digital image is fluid. It is put together in the camera through computation and like the digital white balance, it’s flexible. There is no true reference anymore.

By still calling it a photograph, we are open to distortion, because the digital image has so little in common with it. The digital image is no longer a two-dimensional object, it comes with a whole package of data, from Exif, sound and ancillary tags, to GPS telling us where it was taken. Adding facial recognition and other methods of making sense of the data, paves the way to even richer communication. The future is about augmenting the image.

The big changes are coming from non-photographers, just as the big technological innovations are emerging from unexpected corners such as facial recognition, driven by the demand for surveillance and which is being incorporated into photography.

When it comes to artificial intelligence, I think that computers don’t act like people and vice versa, but together we can do great things. In time, it will make us better photographers.

The explosive distribution of photography through smartphones has changed the place of photography in society – photography is now really coming into its own. It’s the age of the

digital image, where pictures are used as easily as words. The global population now understands the language of images more than ever before, giving more scope to photographers to communicate complex and subtle messages.

Of course these developments have changed the whole industry. Where the photographer’s income was once driven by advertising, today diversity is everything – print sales, grants, workshops, crowd sourcing are all fair game. And in this brave new world, photographers who see themselves as communicators, rather than as makers of pictures, will succeed, and in ways they hadn’t imagined ten years ago.

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on the other, but how these might be combined into one.

There’s only one way to do this: go through it. We need to absorb not only the trends of Instagram and Snapchat, but the latest in image creation, editing and curation, brain-device interfaces

and artificial intelligence too. We need to abandon what got us here, and embrace what makes us uncomfortable. That way, we can make the mark of the professional the mastery of the technology, before it’s fully invented.

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