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Why complaining will not help.

I have heard time and time again, how the market for photo documentary work is shrinking and there is no work to be found, and the little there is pays very poorly.

The question to be asked is if this statement is true, and if so what can be done about it.

In general terms I think there is indeed a big change in the size and scope of the market for photographic work available to freelance photographers. Today there are numerous solutions for those in need of photography to illustrate whatever is needed, other than hiring photographers to do such jobs. With online stock photography being just one of the many options to those in need of photographs, to the fact that with digital cameras many people have taken to make their own pictures rather than hiring someone for that purpose.

So let us agree on the fact that the market has changed enormously. I would ask further, why are so many photographers so surprised? Unless they have been living a cave over the past decade, they would have probably noticed how everybody else's job has also been radically transformed. Why would it be any different for photographers? Just ask any musician how their jobs have been in a process of total turmoil.

When I was a kid there was a man who operated the elevator in the building where my father had his office in downtown Mexico City. He would also repair watches as he brought people up and down all day long. He would sit on a little stool and have a nice tidy little desk beside him, which would hold all the parts of the watch he was repairing as well as his work tools. He had found a way to service the continuous flow of people in and out of his elevator, while also being able to concentrate on his watches. He was always looking up with one of those special eye pieces that work as an enlarging glass, in his right eye, and then looking back at the watch. I never ceased to be amazed at his ability to cope with two such different jobs.

As you can well imagine today that elevator is automatic and does not require someone sitting there all day long to operate it. The watches he used to repair have been replaced by cheap watches that are better replaced with new ones, rather than spending on a repair. I don't know

what became of this man, but I do know that both jobs he had no longer exist.

So rather than feeling sorry for oneself, it is best to move on, and ask, now what? How will a photographer survive in today's world?

The answers of course depend on where one is living, but in general it is reasonable to imagine that the variables are not that huge.

The first basic question is, who actually needs your service? Stop thinking in terms of what you need, but rather in who you can provide a service to. If you can start making a list of who it is that might need the type of photography you like doing, then it is just a matter of finding who those potential clients are and start contacting them.



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You then can compete with other photographers on the basis of price, or on the basis of the uniqueness of your photography, or on both. But be prepared to consider that this is a process that is constantly in flux, in other words, you can't think anymore in terms of just sitting back to relax once you found the answers to your question. The market is changing all the time, and what might be a good solution today will no longer be so in a year or two.

I googled "photo agencies" and came up with over 19 million pages. That should tell you something about what is going on. The largest photo agencies are finding that they have a hard time competing against newer smaller agencies that charge a fraction of the price that the bigger agencies are charging, and this process will keep on changing as people figure out how to deliver a service for the best price possible while still making a profit. Something, which by the way, the larger agencies have not been having.

Complaining will not help in finding any solution to the changing market place. Searching for ways to offer a service, is what will be a much more promising route.



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Let's look at some ideas:

A- Read all your local newspapers for interesting stories, or go out to local community centers, and hear what the locals have to say about their lives. Surely something will come up that will catch your attention. Be careful to choose ideas that are VISUAL, as you are going to produce a a photographic story. Try to imagine, as well, how the local can be of interest to the universal. In other words, doing a story that only touches upon the interests of the local people makes it less appealing on a world wide scale, and indeed we are in a world wide market place.

B- Add value to the images you are taking. For instance, in addition to the pictures you took, you could deliver a color selection that you can take to print. Place the images into a PDF presentation. In short, help the client make the best use of your images. You can even make printed books, to give to your clients. Increasingly wedding photographers are using such techniques, even going to the extent of making video presentations to go with the pictures, that will allow the newly wedded couple have a one stop shopping experience for all their visual needs.

C- Think of yourself in terms of a story teller, rather than simply a photographer. That will open up all sorts of creative ideas, consider who needs stories that have not been told before, or told as well. You now have all kinds of new delivery methods, which can go from an online over Internet presentation to CD ROM/DVD; PDF; formats. There are many more publications of every sort now, than at any time before.

D- If you were a very good printer in the lab, you might use the expert eye that you developed over the years, in order to solve new problems. Printing with a digital printer, still requires that expert eye trained to see what a good print looks like. Or you could scan images for a living, this is not such an easy job and is highly valued.

E- Add sound to your still images. That is another way of enhancing values and finding new clients. There are a number of web sites (New York Times, Washington Post) who have been publishing stories were use multimedia.

F- The sole market for educational and training programs is larger that it ever was in the past. Contribute more than just attempting to deliver the pictures, try to contribute ideas that are related to educational programs which might need video feeds or texts.

G- If you like food, then you have a world of ideas to explore just taking pictures of food preparation in places that are new, other than the traditional kitchen and well lit studio. These are fun stories, and offer an array of possibilities for documentary photographers.

H- I don't know why documentary photographers always have to think in terms of making pictures of the down trodden, the poor, or the exploited, in short, stories of injustice. I always find it very suspect when the photographer thinks that his or her ax to grind can only be by addressing histories that are hugely dramatic, such as wars, famine, drought, plague, invasion or destruction. What about the other side of life? I am thinking of the very wonderful story by Lauren Greenfield, [Girl Culture](#) Or her recent story she did on the super rich in China.

I- I don't think there is a woman, man or child, that has not gotten some sort of spam mail, offering penis enlargement products, or fake Rolex watches. Yet I have never seen anywhere a story related to all of these, so called "industries". I am sure there must be someplace in the world, a warehouse from which all this stuff gets sent out. I could also imagine, that someone must produce all these items, but where? how? who makes all these watches? in China? what do those factories look like? How many fake Rolex watches get made each hour? And all those women students who offer their bodies over the internet, in every variety of peep show possible, in order to supplement their income as "students". That is a culture unto itself, where are all those stories?

J- the excuse that there are no major magazines interested in publishing interesting stories is probably untrue. What I think has happened is that the major magazines are the ones that are in a process of publishing remission, but that does not mean that there aren't hundreds and hundreds of new publications, all over the world, which use a lot of photographic essays. Every time I travel by plane, I find the pocket in front of my seat, all sorts of publications, that use lots and lots of photography. Just go to a new stand, and count the number of magazines that you can find there.

K- If you look at what happened with commercial television, and apply the same sort of analysis to photography you will see what I mean. Sure, the large television networks have lost audience, but does that mean that people are watching less television? I don't think so. They are just watching it through different channels, such as cable for instance, or Youtube over the internet, or DVDs. Yes the markets have changed, but not so the consumption of video images and stories. Story telling is alive and well.

I am sure that you can contribute any number of even better ideas to this roster of possibilities, the whole point is to bring out the notion that we have a lot more to gain, by thinking constructively rather than complaining. And just as in any other endeavor at this time, we as photographers have to also find ways to adjust our work to the prevailing change of winds. Remember, "it is not the gale but the set of the sails".

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