

The Corporate Creation of the Photojournalist: *Life* Magazine and Margaret Bourke-White in World War II

BETH E. WILSON 

State University of New York at New Paltz, USA

The familiar cultural figure of the photojournalist emerged relatively late in the history of photography, taking a shape only in the 1930s and developing quickly in the unique conditions provided by the conjunction of the new, picture-driven mass print media and their coverage of the global conflict of World War II. This article asserts that market and business demands drove this invention, focusing primarily on the career of Margaret Bourke-White and her symbiotic relationship with *Life* magazine. By analyzing the management hierarchy and business model of *Life*, I show how the majority of staff photographers were in fact constrained by the corporate structure, while only a few, such as Bourke-White, were accorded star status as ‘independent’ and intrepid photojournalists. Finally, the ideological function of the romanticised photojournalist as a proxy of freedom is analysed in relation to the rise of corporate/technocratic bureaucratic structures that came to dominate the post-war period.

KEYWORDS World War II, photojournalism, *Life* magazine, cultural history, Bourke-White, corporate media, reporting

It is at least reasonable to suggest the possibility that among the most considerable of *Life*’s gifts to twentieth-century American culture is the creation of the *Life* photographer as a recognizable stock character. (Wainwright, 1986: 150)

Introduction

The cultural figure of the photojournalist — the intrepid photographer known for his/her daring adventures with the camera, traveling to exotic and/or dangerous locations, bringing back pictures intended to document the world for viewers’

armchair delectation — emerged at what might seem to be a relatively late date, given that news photography had been employed in a variety of publications from the 1890s onward. While it is generally accepted that modern photojournalism began to take shape in the years after the First World War, with the appearance of new image-driven publications such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (Lebeck & von Dewitz, 2001: 110), according to the OED ('Photojournalist', 2015), the first published use of the word 'photojournalist' was in a 1938 article authored by Alfred Eisenstadt, then one of the four original staff photographers for *Life* magazine, which had begun publication in November 1936. By the interwar period, the practice of press photography was already well established, with most newspapers and magazines relying heavily on photo agencies for their images, which were typically published without reference to the individual photographers responsible for making them. While this practice persisted (and persists) as the means of production for the vast majority of news images, something different emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as a handful of photographers rose to prominence not only for the images they produced, but as a new sort of celebrity in their own right. In this article, I trace the proximate cause of this development to the rise of the new, global, image-driven corporate media that took its quantum leap specifically in the context of the largest global conflict we have experienced to date, namely World War II.

Henry Luce's *Life* magazine was, without a doubt, the publication that created the most successful model for these new commercial, corporately organised publications, and it developed a specific business strategy for elevating a handful of their photographers in the public eye, thus establishing the enduring cultural figure of the heroic and daring photojournalist we know today. This article examines these developments, focusing primarily on the career of Margaret Bourke-White and her symbiotic professional relationship with *Life* magazine. By analysing the management hierarchy and business model of *Life*, I show how the majority of staff photographers were in fact constrained by shooting scripts, and that only a handful of photographers, such as Bourke-White, achieved star status as 'independent' and intrepid photojournalists. This romanticised notion of the photojournalist, I argue, played an ideological role as a proxy of freedom in the context of the rise of the corporate technocratic/bureaucratic structures that came to dominate the post-war period.

Histories of news photography and the question of photojournalism

Many of the classic histories of photography focus a great deal of attention on the technical obstacles that prevented photography from becoming a serious mass-communications medium until the twentieth century (Newhall, 1982; Rosenblum, 2008). These accounts emphasize breakthroughs such as the introduction of half-tone printing technology, or the development of cameras such as the Graphlex or the Leica, and so on, as agents making the new, image-driven magazines that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s possible. All too often, however, these histories

fall into a kind of technological determinism, a sort of passive requirement for the picture press to take place, rather than thinking of the development of these technologies as the means invented, ultimately, to *achieve* that end.¹

While conventional histories of photography trace the beginnings of news photography to roots in the mid-nineteenth century — Newhall (1982: 85), for example, begins by crediting Roger Fenton and his collodion images of the Crimean War made in 1855 as the first instance of war photography (and as the first example of photojournalism — I would contend that conceptualising Fenton's work as 'photojournalism' is anachronistic). In the nascent mass media of the nineteenth century, not only was the circulation of photographic images restrained by the need to reproduce them laboriously via artist-interpreted wood engravings, but there did not yet exist a full conceptualisation of the image as the primary bearer of news information (Hannigan & Johnston, 2004: 8). The advent of truly journalistic photography would wait until the late nineteenth century, with the invention of both newer, faster film technologies and the means to print photographic half-tones without the intervention of the engraver — technologies that, I hasten to stress, reflected a growing, perceived *need* on the part of the publishers, as news information evolved as a truly modern commodity, and (photographic) images became an increasingly desired and expressive visual component of that information.

The visual turn of the news business at the turn of the twentieth century did not spontaneously result in the emergence of well-known news photographers; rather, for quite some time, the makers of published images remained largely anonymous. By the 1890s, with the requisite reproductive technologies finally in place, the demand for publishable images gave rise to the organisation of the first photographic agencies, starting with the Illustrated Journals Photographic Supply Co. in London in 1894 (Leenaerts, 2010: 51). Many others followed. As they developed, these picture agencies drew on the services of a large number of freelance photographers, printing their negatives, labelling the prints, and organizing and distributing them according to the news of the day and the particular interests of the publications subscribing to their services. Most of these images survive with only the agency stamp to identify their source, rarely giving credit to an individual photographer. This business model took root quickly, and by 1929, there were 18 such agencies active in France alone, for example (Frizot & de Veigy, 2009: 14). During the interwar period, as the concept of modern photojournalism began to gain traction, a handful of individual photographers began to receive more credit/public recognition in a number of European publications, for example Erich Salomon, Martin Mun-kaschi, and Alfred Eisenstadt in Germany (Lebeck & von Dewitz, 2001: 112); however, none of the magazines they worked for seemed inclined to take advantage

¹This tendency to technological determinism is a quality shared with most accounts of the very invention of photography as well; by contrast, see works such as Geoffrey Batchen's *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1999) which attempt to explain in historicised terms the very desire that led to the inventions in question.

of leveraging their exploits for greater publicity in any systematic fashion, as *Life* would do later.

Prior to the 1930s, very few news photographers were even given a byline or published credit for their images. As Frizot and de Veigy (2009: 14) take pains to point out,

For several decades, the history of photography has emphasised the role and function of photographers and lauded their images, but they were considered rather lowly in their day. It is now hard to believe that agency photographers were employees like any others, less esteemed even than their freelance colleagues; they were only doing their jobs, even if those jobs and their end products involved hardship, difficulty or danger. Their names were not mentioned and their work was credited only to the agency. They did not even own their own negatives.

This situation reflects an interesting skew in the very format and programme of studies in the history of photography more generally: the history of this technical field has been largely conditioned by a reliance on older art historical traditions such as connoisseurship, placing an emphasis on the originality and genius of the individual maker, leading to framing assumptions that do a certain violence to the new and different modes of production and practice engaged in by those employing this radically new mode of image generation and the technical reproduction and distribution of those images. This creates a critical blind spot with regard to the material practices of photography; in particular, how the images were actually produced and consumed, including (quite notably) the business practices that provided the material/economic base that created the very possibility of such a thing as 'press photography' or 'photojournalism'. In fact, the art historical conventions that privilege the individual producers of images, I would contend, functioned as an important precedent for the formation of the figure of 'the photojournalist', and subsequent histories of photography have blithely (and often blindly) reinforced the primacy of the individual photographer/photojournalist, thereby ensuring the success of this celebrity-model; see for example, the parade of proper names underpinning Naomi Rosenblum's account in her *History of World Photography* (2008: 464–85).

The tendency to lionise the individual photographer has obscured the practical and ideological reasons for the cultural valorization of these practitioners in the first place. They have become elevated, in the public eye, to the level of mythic figures, in the sense in which Barthes (1972) has used that language to describe the formation of bourgeois mythologies, creations of mass media that ultimately serve to reassure and shore up the conventions of that class. In more recent years, this 'great man' approach has given way to more critical scholarly approaches, in studies such as Wendy Kozol's *Life's America* (1994), which focuses on a rhetorical analysis of images by a number of photographers, and the way *Life* used them to construct ideal images of the family in its pages, or Erika Doss's *Looking at Life*

Magazine (2001), in which a number of scholars examine questions of the magazine's audience, and its representations of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. To date, however, there has been little explicit attention paid to the way in which the very business of publishing, and the modes in which the company functioned, impacted its product. One goal of this article is to comprehend the popular image of the photojournalist in this light.

***LIFE* magazine and the corporate invention of 'the photojournalist'**

The practice of news photography underwent major transformation from the 1920s onward, as a new mass market for image-driven publications emerged in Europe. New magazines such as the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* and *Vu* provided inspiration for Henry Luce to found *Life*, which first appeared in November 1936. Luce's organization, which was built on the success of his weekly news magazine *Time* (founded in 1923) and his groundbreaking financial magazine *Fortune* (first appearing in 1930), developed a complex, hierarchical corporate structure, and served as an early (and influential) model of the modern mass media company. In its first few years of publication, *Life* magazine reflected the general approach followed by *Time*, emphasizing a collaborative approach they referred to as 'group journalism' (Baughman, 1987: 96). The complexity of managing '*Life*'s weekly publication schedule and multiple deadlines due to its heavy use of illustrations all but required a supremely well-organised manager' (Baughman, 1987: 91–92); this need for strong coordination in turn led to the sublimation of individual interests into a modern, collective corporate identity for the publication.

Such emphasis on managerial control in the process of producing the magazine was strongly reinforced when *Life* began to cover the global conflict of World War II, its biggest news story ever. Long before the start of the war, the potential commercial benefit of armed conflict was recognized early in the planning stages of *Life* by Dan Longwell, one of its founding editors, who noted in a 1935 memo that 'a war, any war, is going to be a natural promotion for a picture magazine' (cited in Goldberg, 1986: 252).

The advent of war prompted some major changes in the magazine, as it responded to the demands of organizing itself to relay stories and pictures from literally around the globe, to be assembled into each weekly issue at the head office in New York. By the time the US entered the war at the end of 1941, the immediate news demand for pictures of the conflict, including keen public interest in coverage of events such as the Blitz in England, caused *Life* to enlarge its pool of staff photographers, and to develop news bureaux around the globe.² In the premier issue of *Life* in November

²The language used here is significant: the publication's satellite offices were designated as bureaux with good reason. They served literally as bureaucratic way-stations, offices in which local assignments were made, the reporters' stories were initially collected, photographers' film was developed and printed, and the necessary coordination with military censors was conducted, before sending everything along to the home office in New York for production in the finished magazine.

1936, the masthead lists only four staff photographers: Margaret Bourke-White, Alfred Eisenstadt, Tom McAvoy, and Peter Stackpole. By 1939, the number of photographers listed rose to ten, and by 1945, a reflection of the manpower needed to cover World War II, no fewer than 26 ‘Staff Photographers’ are named. With this exponential increase in the number of photographers, a new pecking order emerged as well, a thread that I will return to shortly.³

Official military accreditation of journalists, required for anyone working in or near a combat zone, necessitated staff status with a recognised publication; freelancers were not given such access. In fact, correspondents in battle zones were accorded officer status (Wainwright, 1986: 126). One chapter of *Life* photographer Robert Capa’s memoir, for example, focuses on his persistence in maintaining his status with one or another publication as a condition for staying at the front in North Africa (although he was perhaps overstating how precarious his position actually was at the time for dramatic purposes) (Capa, 1947: 41–50). Editors needed to stay in close contact with reporters and photographers in the field, to usher their stories and pictures through the local military censors, and to provide important logistical support, such as photograph laboratories, for this growing army of photographic foot soldiers. While there was significant friction between the commercial/corporate interests of *Life* and its editors, and the level of control desired by the military (Wainwright, 1986: 135), the alignment of the military’s organization with the corporate structure of Luce’s publications took place with relative ease, given their already similar reliance on a hierarchical chain of command; especially in conflict zones, this coordination was a fundamental condition of the possibility of photojournalism in the war. The impress of such inevitably close contact with military bureaucracy helped to shape and reinforce the corporate structures and culture of Luce’s Time-Life empire. Perhaps one of the earliest examples of ‘embedding’ journalists within active military units, the hierarchical structures of these twinned chains of command ultimately complemented one another.

The conundrum of the photojournalist in this situation is the contrast between the relatively low status of the staff photographers in the magazine’s production process, and the public function they ultimately served to advance the larger corporate brand. Loudon Wainwright in *Life, The Great American Magazine* (1986) cites a telling memo written in early 1943 from general manager Andrew Haskell to publisher Roy Larsen, which discussed in detail the problem engendered by the lack of respect accorded new photographers generally, and the elitist tendency of ‘better minds’ to ‘sneer at picture magazines’. He proposed that *Life* should not wait for the ‘natural course of evolution [to] bring respectability to photo-reporting’, saying that

it would be unwise for us to wait [...] since there is going to be an increasing belief that *Life* is a war baby [...] I therefore suggest that we establish a

³Figures for the rise in the number of photographers at *Life* are drawn from the publication’s mastheads in the years listed.

broad programme of action to emphasise the contributions of photography (cited in [Wainwright, 1986: 136–37](#)).

He included in this programme the increased promotion of the photographers which, Wainwright points out, ‘would be the basis, in fact, of promotion campaigns in the future’ ([Wainwright, 1986: 137](#)). Thus ‘the photojournalist’ was an ingenious marketing creation of a corporatised communications medium that ironically, in its own daily functions largely served to downplay the role of the photographer.

Under these charged wartime circumstances, *Life* developed into a well-oiled corporate machine, one that created a well-demarcated division of labour and a military-style chain of command within the organization, structures which then carried over into the post-war period of the magazine as well, as described in detail in Wilson Hicks’s *Words and Pictures* ([1952](#)), one of the most systematic accounts of the inner workings of *Life* magazine’s editorial process. Hicks had served as Picture Editor of *Life* from shortly after its founding in 1937 until 1950. In his book, he describes the process of producing an issue of the magazine with the bureaucratic precision of a middle-manager, emphasising a rational, hierarchical corporate structure; one in which, furthermore, the photographer is literally at the bottom of the food chain, with little impact or influence on the ultimate shape or meaning of the stories illustrated by his/her images.

In contrast to what one might assume about the importance of the photographer’s ability to encounter his/her subject on the fly, and to respond with a trained eye and the technical knowledge of the equipment at hand to make bold images worthy of the magazine, [Hicks \(1952: 48–59\)](#) instead describes how a ‘picture story starts with an event or an idea’ and that

coverage of a fixed event in which ‘the office’ has more than ordinary interest is carefully, in some cases elaborately planned [...] detailed study of past events of similar character are made by the planners so that the structure and movement of the event can be imagined beforehand. Individual pictures are hypothesised for the photographer, who obtains them provided the actual occasion produces reasonable facsimiles of the ‘prior images’ of editor or writer.

Former *Life* photographer John Loengard claims that in reality, the purpose of such shooting scripts was ‘to persuade the picture editor that a story idea which sounded interesting would look interesting and be worth assigning to a photographer’, noting that

many photographers did not want suggestions and felt that their best pictures depended upon a spontaneity that no one could predict. If they read a script, most *Life* photographers said, it was only to note the factual information and travel arrangements it contained ([Loengard, 1998: 10](#)).

And yet Hicks insists in his account upon the primacy of the elaborately planned, corporate editorial process. In his detailed description of the division of labor in

producing an issue (in Figure 1, I diagram the key roles), he goes out of his way to let us know that one of the very last steps in the process of reporting a story in the field is the assignment of the photographer. As he notes,

There is a defect which is fundamental and, at the same time, insurmountable. While one story is being planned at the base of operations, the photographer is away from that base working on another story. He therefore cannot, except infrequently, attend a conference in which a story is given its direction and theoretical structure, hear the exchanges of views and suggestions pertaining to it and perhaps participate in the exchanges himself. (Hicks, 1952: 54)



FIGURE 1 *Life* Magazine chain of command. Schema by the author, derived from information in Wilson Hicks's *Words and Pictures* (1952)

Thus it becomes clear, from Hicks' fundamentally corporate point of view, that the photographer was in fact one of the least powerful members of the staff involved in making key decisions about a story; the photographer's job was to provide a sufficient array of images from which the others on the staff could select to suit the final story and layout, as determined in the regular departmental and higher-level editorial meetings where such business was transacted.

There is thus an enormous gap between the functional, organizational grunt work of the photographer at *Life* described in Wilson Hicks's account, who has little or no authority or input in the final published product, and the more popularly-held cultural stereotype of the heroic, intrepid photographer who regularly plunges into the unknown, emerging with vivid photographs that bring ordinary readers into seemingly direct contact with people and situations that virtually none of us would be bold enough to seek out on our own. That the management of *Life* actively cultivated this romanticised myth of the photojournalist, even as it ran counter to the day-to-day, hierarchical functioning of the publication, may seem contradictory, but it served an important set of ideological functions, as I shall argue later.

Margaret Bourke-White: Model persona of the photojournalist

The photographer who perhaps best personifies the symbiotic relationship between the new corporate media and the emerging figure of the photojournalist is Margaret Bourke-White. She actually had the longest-standing ties of any of the *Life* photographers to the Luce publishing empire: in 1929, she was hired as the first staff photographer for Luce's business magazine *Fortune*. Her modern, graphic eye as an industrial photographer translated easily into success both on the Luce payroll at *Fortune*, and in her own commercial studio, specialising in sharply focused advertising photography: in both contexts, she created bold, abstracted images were in great demand with her clients (Goldberg, 1986). But Bourke-White never seemed satisfied with just producing these photographs; from early on, she carefully and self-consciously cultivated her own public image. This included leasing the 61st floor of the newly completed Chrysler building for her combined studio and apartment space, which she used to maximum effect in this photograph by her primary printer, Oscar Graubner (Figure 2). Not coincidentally, Time Inc.'s main offices were also housed in the Chrysler Building at the time.⁴

In the Margaret Bourke-White papers now archived at Syracuse University, it is striking to see that she was self-conscious enough about her public profile to subscribe to a commercial clipping service starting at least as early as 1931, and maintained that subscription for the duration of her professional career (Margaret Bourke-White Papers). She made a point of putting herself in the position of being the focus of the news, even as she practiced her craft; news stories published about her exploits (as the first American photographer given access to the USSR,

⁴All details of Bourke-White's biography are drawn from Goldberg (1986).



FIGURE 2 Oscar Graubner, *Margaret Bourke-White atop the Chrysler Building*, c. 1930. ©Oscar Graubner/Getty Images

for example) helped the sale of a series of commercial books she published with Simon and Schuster, writing her own (first-person) texts to accompany the photographs she had made. It is worth noting that she did not hesitate to use her gender to gain privileged access to certain stories, nor did she contest the additional notoriety gained by virtue of her feminine presence in often hyper-masculinised contexts, whether in covering industry for *Fortune* or the military for *Life*. Patricia Vettel-Becker's account of the gendering of the photographer in World War II combat photography (2005: 33–59) notably omits mention of Bourke-White altogether, focusing instead on the exploits of Robert Capa. I believe the argument can be made that Bourke-White's prominence reinforces her thesis, as a feminine counter-example that served to reinforce the dominant masculine paradigm. Bourke-White's star status shone brighter because of (not despite) her gender.

The Luce empire made good use of Bourke-White's high public visibility. When *Life* was launched in November 1936, the first cover was a photograph of the monumental Fort Peck Dam in Montana (a major New Deal project), accompanied by a story on life in the temporary town occupied by the dam's builders. The editors' introduction to the magazine ('Introduction to this first issue of *Life*', 1936) played up their surprise at seeing Bourke-White's ability to cover such a human-interest story, having only really expected from her the sort of first-rate

industrial image of the dam that appeared on the cover, thus rendering the photographer a part of her own story. Thus from its very first issue, *Life* took the opportunity to portray the exploits of its photographers as stories in their own right, and in Bourke-White the Luce publications found an appealingly glamorous leading lady, a dazzling, courageous figure who could, incidentally, help to sell magazines (and beyond that, attract advertising income itself).

For her part, Bourke-White openly embraced, and indeed cultivated her role as 'star reporter' and diva. When *Life* was first launched, she insisted that her key dark-room man, Oscar Graubner, be given special status in the *Life* darkrooms, processing and printing her work exclusively, despite frictions this caused with the magazine's staff (Scherman, 1995). The magazine not only acceded to her demands, it made certain that she was given plum assignments throughout the war, often much to the dismay of staff photographers who were already on the ground (Wainwright, 1986: 132–33).

Bourke-White's war work brought her tremendous celebrity, as *Life* used all its corporate resources to play up her intrepid adventures, sometimes making her presence more of a story than the military operation she was ostensibly covering. One striking example is the 1 March 1943 article 'Life's Bourke-White goes bombing', featuring a large photograph of the photographer herself, decked out in high-altitude flight gear, which almost makes it appear as though she were single-handedly winning the war for the Allies in North Africa (Figure 3). In late 1943, she returned to the US, undertaking an extensive lecture tour which served to bring first-hand information about the war to the American home front and, not coincidentally, helping to burnish her own celebrity even further. When the lecture tour reached California, she initiated discussions in Hollywood about filming the story of her life, although ultimately without success (Goldberg, 1986: 142).

The contrast between Bourke-White's high-profile position and the relatively lowly status of the regular staff photographers is evident in a churlish cable in early 1943 from *Life* photographer Eliot Elisofon to his editors, saying:

Have heard from someone who came here from Algiers that Bourke-White expects to be back in America in a month. I still don't get the picture at all. I come here in the original operation. Have sense enough to get off and wait for a chance and then have her scoot in under my nose and she is lucky enough to be torpedoed on the way. I wonder if she'll get out a book on 'Torpedoed in the Med', or afloat in a negligee. I am really dying of curiosity to know whether she had presence of mind to have someone in the lifeboat make a shot of her, chin outthrust, camera in hand. Oh, I've got the Bourke-White Blues. (Wainwright, 1986: 132–33)

In fact, the rather widespread phenomenon of escaping from a torpedoed vessel had become frighteningly commonplace by then, but in Bourke-White's case, the story appears to have inspired Hitchcock's film *Lifeboat*, made in late 1943 (near the time that Bourke-White was shopping her biopic in Hollywood) and released in



FIGURE 3 'Life's Bourke-White goes Bombing', *Life Magazine*, 1 March 1943, 17. ©1943 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from LIFE Magazine and published with permission of Time Inc. Reproduction in any manner in any language in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

January 1944. The star of the film is the inimitable Tallulah Bankhead, who plays Constance Porter, a baroquely self-confident female reporter and photojournalist, who seems more concerned about maintaining her lipstick and hairdo than the dire situation on the boat. This hyper-feminised Hollywood image essentially caricatured Bourke-White's (and *Life's*) calculated exploitation of her gender, which had been played up, for example, in a profile in the pages of British *Vogue* (Blanch, 1943: 34–37) that included photographs (by Lee Miller, no less) of not only her camera equipment but also her make-up kit. In any event, as the film was being made, *Life* sent their longtime California-based photographer Peter Stackpole to the soundstage to document it, in order to maximise the public relations value of the film for its own investments in the celebrity of one of its own photojournalists (Figure 4).

Bourke-White's special treatment by *Life* magazine included distinguishing her from the ever-growing list of staff photographers on the masthead, and giving her very prominent credit for her photographs within the magazine. The other photographers had to be satisfied with receiving their credit in a difficult-to-read block of type hidden near the bottom of the masthead/front matter, set in miniscule type



FIGURE 4 Peter Stackpole, property man using watering can to give actress Tallulah Bankhead a shower during filming of *Lifeboat*, unpublished photo from shoot for an extended photo story in *Life Magazine*, January 1944. ©Peter Stackpole/Getty Images

(Figure 5). Only a handful photographers, including Bourke-White, Robert Capa, W. Eugene Smith, and a few others received this sort of prominent play, typically when the photographer him- or herself had become part of the story in some noteworthy way.

Life magazine's editors further capitalised on the brand value of its intrepid band of photographers following the declaration of peace. In November 1945, the magazine ran a long feature on 21 of these photographers, highlighting their most iconic images from the conflict ('*Life Salutes*', 1945) (Figure 6). These icons did not emerge spontaneously: there was considerable editorial effort, guided by Time-Life's larger corporate interests, of course, to publicise these images, and to identify them with the magazine's brand in the process. Thus this large feature story should be understood not only as a 'thank-you' to the photographers for their fearless service during the war, but also as a consolidation and confirmation of the importance of the wartime coverage under the banner of *Life* itself. To this day, Time Inc. (now a subsidiary of Time Warner) maintains a tight rein on the copyrights to these images, which continue to form a significant part of the company's intellectual assets. The information in the Time-Life archives is kept under tight control. Researchers are not allowed

Typical table of contents from *Life*, August 11, 1941

A small box features one of the
photographers included in the issue
(here, Bourke-White)

Below, in miniscule type,
run the photo credits
for the entire issue



FIGURE 5 Photographer's credits, as typically published in *Life*. Photo illustration by the author

direct access to the files, but must pay steep rates to have the company's own archivists retrieve specific information.⁵ *Life*'s self-conscious management of Bourke-White's career becomes quite clear in the light of several cables exchanged between the photographer and Wilson Hicks at the close of the European part of the conflict, preserved in the Margaret Bourke-White papers at Syracuse University. In late spring of 1945, she sent Hicks a dense, detailed cable conveying her interest in covering the post-war fallout in Germany, keeping an eye on the efforts by Krupps and other steel and coal barons to rebuild their empires, locating prewar images for before/after shots for the magazine, and noting excitedly, 'Ruhr worthy serious treatment as in many ways holds key Germanys future' ('Cables', Bourke-White Archives, 1945). Hicks responded to her in June with a short but explicit directive:

I hope you will not be too unhappy at our request that you return now. I had given this plan much thought and am confident it is the right one, both from your and *Life*'s viewpoint. You will remember our old concept of how your talents are best employed. One way of stating it is: beware of anticlimaxes. Naturally, we will discuss possible future exploits. Best regards. –Wilson Hicks

Bourke-White responded enthusiastically to this advice, opening her next cable to him saying 'Happy get your understanding cable and subscribe whole

⁵As of summer 2015, the rate quoted was \$600 per day, and the conditions stipulated that the researcher should know in advance the specific topic and timeframe to instruct the archivists, making serendipitous discoveries virtually impossible.

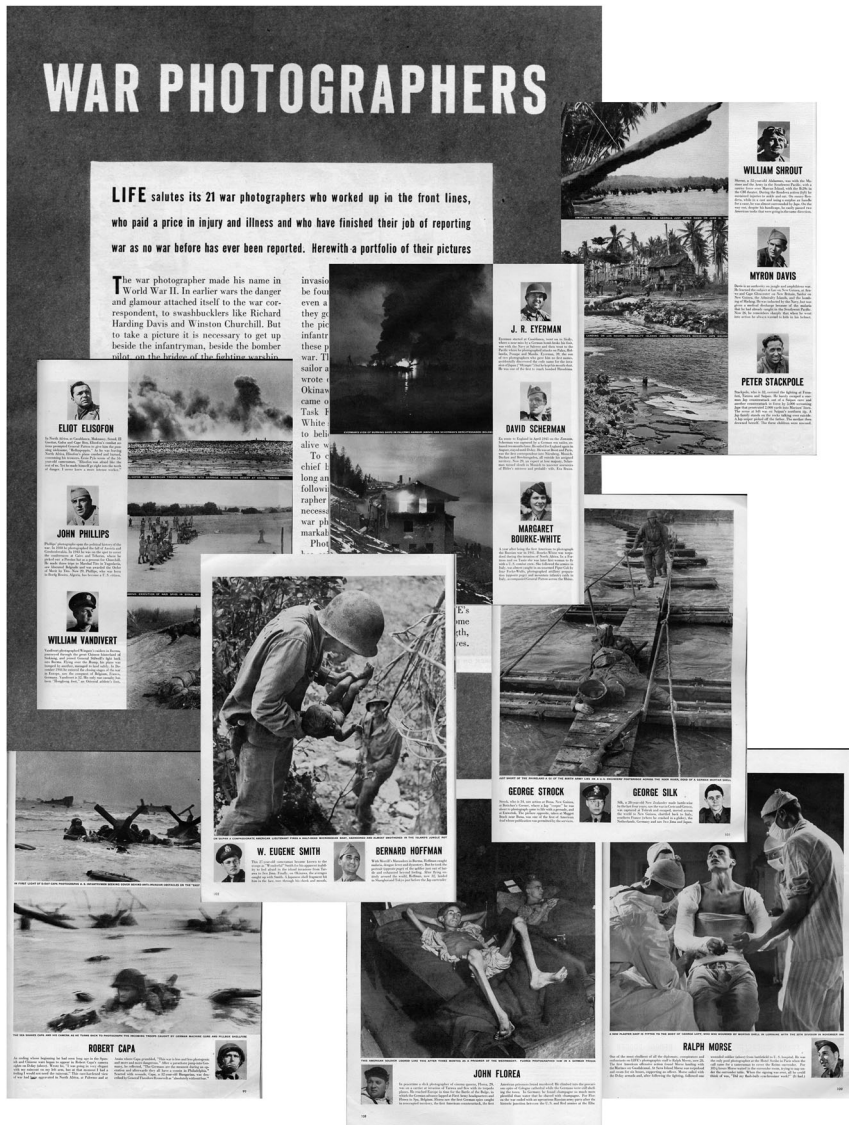


FIGURE 6 Montage of pages from 'Life Salutes its War Photographers', *Life Magazine*, 5 November 1945, 97–112. Photo illustration by the author

heartedly to beware of anticlimaxes principle stop Believe intelligent use talents has always been happiest note *Life's* work' ('Cables', 1945). At the end of June, the publication allowed Bourke-White's military accreditation to lapse, and by 1946 she was covering her next big story — the independence movement in India, led by Mahatma Gandhi. The Indian independence story did, indeed, prove anything but anti-climactic: she was one of the last photographers to make pictures of Gandhi, photographing him mere hours before his assassination.

Conclusion: The triumph of the modern bureaucratic ‘utopia of rules’

In addition to the purely pragmatic marketing value gained by *Life* in its promotion of the myth of the photojournalist, as seen here with the specific example of Margaret Bourke-White (one could make an equally plausible case for such star-making with Robert Capa, another very willing self-promoter), it served an important ideological function as well. In his most recent book, anthropologist David Graeber (2015) examines the dominance of technocratic bureaucracies in the contemporary West, describing their ultimate organizational goal as a ‘utopia of rules’. Graeber outlines a history of the development of the German postal system in the nineteenth century as a new communications technology developed out of the military, which spread rapidly, radically redefining fundamental elements of everyday life (Graeber, 2015: 162).⁶ For my current purposes, I would like to highlight the similarities between the organizational and overarching bureaucratic tendencies that characterise the primarily governmental bureaucracies described by Graeber, and the corporate, big business version exemplified by Time Inc. In the case of *Life* magazine, we have yet another example of a significant, modern communications medium developed in alignment with the model of a military organization (in the context of World War II), which privileges a de-personalised, hierarchical bureaucratic structure that follows a utopian set of rules/functions in order to operate.

In his analysis of the symbolic/ideological function of modern bureaucracy, Graeber pursues an extended discussion of fantasy literature and its function as a sort of escapist counter-example to the predictability of modern systems of production and ideological control. As he describes the function of such literature, Graeber (2015: 181) declares that

These books are not just appealing because they create endless daydream material for the inhabitants of bureaucratic societies. Above all, they appeal because they continue to provide a systematic negation of everything bureaucracy stands for [...] Why do we do so? Well, the simplest explanation is that we are dealing with a form of ideological inoculation. Historically, one of the most effective ways for a system of authority to tout its virtues is not to speak of them directly, but to create a particularly vivid image of their absolute negation – of what it claims life would be like in the total absence of, say, patriarchal authority, or capitalism, or the state. As an ideological ploy, the trick works best when the image is on some level, profoundly appealing. One is first drawn in to the vision of the alternative world, experiences a kind of vicarious thrill imagining it – only to ultimately recoil in horror at the implications of one’s own desires.


For our purposes here, the cultural figure of the intrepid photojournalist, as quite consciously constructed by the editorial staff at *Life* (and its cognate competitors),

⁶He also draws a direct parallel to the genesis and development of the Internet in the twenty-first century.

can be seen as a *prima facie* example of precisely this ideological ‘ugly mirror phenomenon’ that Graeber (2007: 343) describes. The figure of the globetrotting, conflict-courting photographer, who in reality is mostly kept quite out of the loop in terms of the real decisions about the meaning and use of his/her images, becomes a certain proxy image of freedom — someone who lives outside the system and makes their own rules. This ‘freedom’ is then applied by the corporate organisation as a mythic veneer, obscuring the plodding, bureaucratic functioning of the corporate entity, while serving as exciting marketing material for their products, and a way of representing their bold movement in the world to readers and consumers who were ultimately more interested in the regularity of a good job, a nice home in the post-war suburbs, and a quiet, conventional family life. One could hardly envision a more complete counterpoint to the uncertainty and spontaneity of life as a mythic photojournalist than the normative vision of the (patriarchal, white) American Dream during the Eisenhower administration.

Terry Smith, in his essay ‘Life-Style Modernity: Making Modern America’, makes a similar point regarding the ideological function of the magazine, when he understands that ‘at the core of all the excitement, openness, and the liberating promise of *Life* lies ideological closure [...] At every moment, the imagery of democracy is evoked and betrayed — a rhetoric of freedom disguises a hierarchical “empire of signs”’ (Smith, 2001: 29). As exciting and compelling as the colourful stories by and about *Life*’s photographers are, we would do well to look long and hard at the ideological work being done through these popular narratives, to understand these modern-day mythic stories as an integral function of the larger corporate-bureaucratic machine.

ORCID

Beth E. Wilson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5724-1305>

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Notes on contributor

Correspondence to: Beth E. Wilson, State University of New York, New Paltz, USA.
Email: wilsonb@newpaltz.edu.

Beth E. Wilson is a Lecturer in the Department of Art History at the State University of New York at New Paltz. A published art critic, she has also curated a number of exhibitions of photography, and was a contributor *The Art Seminar: Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins in 2007.

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