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Documentary Photography & Visual Activism

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ADAD5004/C

Word Count: 2340

I declare that all the material contained in this essay is my own work

Ai Acknowledgement Declaration

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Illustration List:

Fig 1. Noble, P. (2026) Available at:

<https://www.philnoblephoto.co.uk/albums/ZFe5Ab/news-features> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Fig 2. Capa, R. (1936) *The Falling Soldier* Available at:

<https://www.srlounge.com/documentary-photography-for-professionals/> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Fig 3. Halpern, G (2016) ZZYZX Available at:

<http://www.gregoryhalpern.com/zzyzx.html> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Fig 4. Halpern, G (2016) ZZYZX Available at:

<http://www.gregoryhalpern.com/zzyzx.html> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Fig 5. Torok, D (2025) Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy4mmrr7j8mo> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Fig 6. Brown, M (2023) *90 miles* Available at:

<https://www.michaelchristopherbrown.com/artificial-intelligence/90-miles?itemId=67xi0wocne2ko8yrlhoyilctgosedc> (Accessed: 06/05/2026)

Abstract:

Information is something that is treasured in society, historically it has been something that could come from almost anywhere and still be correct, maybe it has been reworded but the information tends to still be correct. There have been small cases where people have doctored film photographs, but they have always been obvious or have got an easy-to-follow trail back to source images through public access to information. This is something that in recent years has sadly begun to change with the wave of artificial intelligence, the ability to digitally doctor images and remove metadata, along with the ability quickly spread mass disinformation across multiple platforms, both physical and digital media. Documentary, Portraiture & Artificial intelligence are all things that are used in modern day society to either tell stories, spread information or cause confusion and spread misinformation/ fake news. Whether it's through, Ai slop, doctored or faked images, or out of context images which intend to tell a malformed narrative. Through this thesis I will take these 3 topics, separate them, and research deeply into each of them to create a basis of understanding that will help me to write my dissertation in the future, allowing me to broaden my understanding of these topics and find how they crossover with each other in ways that will give me a question to answer in said dissertation.

Introduction

In this essay I will be researching into 3 different topics in preparation for my dissertation. These topics are, Documentary, Portraiture & Artificial intelligence. I intend to go in depth on certain aspects of these topics and by the end of it come out with a question that I will then answer in my future dissertation. I will be using different artists, writers, blog posts and news articles to further my understanding of these topics and to broaden my understanding of Documentary photography in the modern world. My first title being 'Documentary' will allow me to set a basis for what I will be looking into for the rest of my essay, researching the definitions and modern uses and effects of documentary photography on a societal level, not just on a commercial level. Then I will go into my second topic 'Portraiture' and how the evolution of this style of photography is used to tell stories and even create artworks which are made with the intention to inform the viewer. This should also explain why portraiture is not burdened by its basic definition of photographing a person's head and shoulders but is also a powerful form of storytelling when done in the right way. This will then lead into my final topic of research 'Artificial Intelligence', In this section I will be talking about it's main uses in modern day society, how it has been used for spreading misinformation, how it is used by the younger generations to create images and videos which cause controversy, and the impact that these creations have on the information that is shared in society today.

Documentary



Figure 1: Phil Noble/REUTERS, 2026

Documentary photography has always followed the same rule of collecting truthful information in a visual medium so that it can be presented to viewers as fact. This does not always include large news articles but freelance photographers sharing stories through social media or independently owned websites and newsletters.

This type of photography does not always have to be about 'big' issues: it includes showing everyday life as it happens around us. Showing the mundane, the everyday environment and human interactions can make us aware of situations or things that we did not notice before. (manten photography, 2025)

One of the greatest photographs to come out of modern-day documentary photography would be the photo taken by Phil Noble (Figure 1.). A direct and what I would call a damaging look at one of the UK's most coddled public figures, a photograph of someone who has only ever been photographed in a public setting now placed into this lo-fi frame and captured by surprise. I make note of this photograph because of its difference to what we usually see in the news today, there's no studio, no tripod, no planning, just a man frozen in place. And it seemed that the media as a whole have taken to this photo in the same way that I have, BBC News commenting "Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, shell-shocked and slumped back in a car after his arrest." (2026), and The Mirror stating "Andrew was captured on camera looking shell-shocked and dishevelled - all signs of his former royal status completely stripped away." (2026). This kind of reaction to a photograph is not unheard of, if there's a story to be told then it will be told, but this use of insulting language toward this calibre of person is something that isn't usually seen in mainstream news.



Figure 2: Robert Capa, 1936

But documentary photography has not always been used as a way to show the truth, sometimes photographers had to fabricate photographs to portray the truth, a diversion from the rule of documentary photography, to document the truth in a visual medium and present it as fact.

An example of exaggerated photography being presented as documentary photography is the photograph of the falling man by Robert Capa (Figure 2). This photo depicts a man wearing plain clothes and holding a gun as he falls, presumably after being shot. The photograph was presented as a documentation of a man being shot during the war in Cerro Muriano, being killed just as Capa takes the photograph. But the truth of the matter is that Capa did not photograph the man dying but just him falling over, the man did eventually die but it was much later when he was shot with a sniper during the same war. It was not only this photograph that was disputed, but all of the photographs in his book. This controversy was, for some people, a spark of distrust toward photographic media, if this man could fake a photograph and present it as real, then why wouldn't anyone else?

Portraiture



Figure 3: Gregory Halpern, 2016



Figure 4: Gregory Halpern, 2016

In 2016 an American photographer named Gregory Halpern released the book ZZZZX and contained in this book was a collection of landscapes, animal photographs, detailed photographs of streets and a selection of wonderful portraits. These portraits are sometimes sat next to each other and sometimes set apart, telling different stories depending on how they sit in the book. The way that Halpern's work in this book is moving to say the least,

The people, places, and animals in the book did exist before Halpern's camera, but he has sewn these photographs into a work of fiction or fantasy – a structure, sequence, and edit which, like Los Angeles itself, teeters on the brink of collapsing under the weight of its own strangely-shaped mass. (mackbooks, 2026)

Even if we were to remove this book format and lay two of them next to each other digitally, we can still get a story from them. As you can see in Figure 3 there is a woman with bright dyed hair being held by another woman with red painted nails. From this we can gather that there is almost definitely a relationship between them, and because the woman is smiling it must be a happy one. In Figure 4 there is a woman squatting in the middle of what seems to be a street, on her own and basking in the sunlight. From this we can gather our own story about the two photographs, whether we want to tell them together or apart, just through simple portraiture we are told a story about two different women that could intertwine in whichever way we choose. This is the power that Portrait photography can have in a book setting and in art photography.



Figure 5: Daniel Torok, 2025

Portraiture is not just something to tell stories with, but it is something that is used largely to capture a person in a frame and at times use this framing and the present lighting to inform the viewer about this person, or at least how this person thinks of themselves. As you can see in Figure 5 Donald Blump is shown looking straight down the barrel of the Lense and making a stern face as if he were angry with you or attempting to be incredibly honest, the lighting in the room "suggests seriousness and intent" (Paul Duerickx, 2025) and the light singling out the American flag badge shows patriotism to America, this goes hand in hand with the American flag's stripes which are draped in the background. This photograph is a prime example of someone who is using the medium of photography to affect how the public views him as a person, the photograph showing strong, patriotic, honest and serious, whilst reality shows us a different story. When posting on twitter about the assault on the US Capitol, he states,

These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever. (Donald Trump, 2025)

This goes to show that whilst portrait photography is a great tool for showing a person's character and telling stories, it can also be used to skew the look of a

person, the photograph says serious and honest whilst the reality says childish and insensitive.

Artificial Intelligence

Over the past couple of years Artificial Intelligence (Ai) has surged into mainstream media with people using it for spell checks, essay writing, music composition, answering day to day questions, helping with time-keeping and online tasks. But as time went on and people started using Ai more and more, it became a way for people to generate videos and images of fake and real people at will, meaning that they could virtually make anyone do anything with the right prompt. Most of the time it was being used for light-hearted fun and jokes, but as time went on and the wrong people got their hands on it, people started using it to spread misinformation and cause harm to others. An example of Ai deepfakes being used to attack or to harm the image of another person is, when the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni's likeness was used to create sexualised photographs which were then spread around the internet (euro news, 2026). She addressed this problem with a post to X, saying "Check before you believe, and believe before you share. Because today it's happening to me; tomorrow it could happen to anyone," (euro news 2026).

But this isn't Ai's only use and problem, people have started using Ai to create art and to use it as a replacement or tool for documentary photography and photojournalism. Some photographers feel that they can create accurate and informative photography using Ai.



Figure 6: Michael Brown, 2023

A photographer that comes to mind in Michael Brown and his body of work '90 Miles', the story he intended to cover follows "the decades-long story of Cubans crossing the 90 miles of ocean separating Havana from Florida." (Michael Brown,

2023). One of his photographs, Figure 6, shows what looks to be a docked fishing boat with a large metallic horse skeleton protruding from the top of it, a mess of nets merging into branches and hanging off the front of the boat, two men standing nearby with mal-formed heads and a blinding white light being shot out of the front of the boat. I can see how he has tried to create an image based on true events, but in my opinion, there are too many problems with the image to be entered as a documentation of an actual historical reportage illustration. On his website Brown (2023) writes that he has been wanting to do this for more than 25 years but could not find any meaningful or ethical access to it and then going on to say that when he worked there from 2014-2016, he realised that there would be no way to responsibly tell the story directly. He puts himself in the position of a reportage illustrator, the Urban Sketching World (2026) defines this as a type of visual journalism where the relevant illustrator will sketch whilst on location to tell a specific story, the central premise of reportage illustration is story telling. Due to the fact that he was not there when it happened, whether he used anecdotes, research and his two years of experience for the prompts or not, I do not feel that this is genuine journalistic work and would better fit into the definition of fantasy derived from truth.

Question/ conclusion

Through researching these three topics I have found myself noticing a large amount of crossover between them and documentary photography, which is my basis of study. This crossover and interaction are something that I keep seeing and something that I find interesting. The fact that Artificial intelligence is not just something that is being used for spell checking or spreading misinformation but actually being used practically to create attempts at journalistic works. Portrait photography having such a complex uses in modern-day society for not only creating deep stories and beautiful images but also creating photographs that tell us everything we need to know about a person by using lighting, subject matter, the surroundings, objects in the frame and the facial expressions on the persons face. And how it sometimes is used to skew our idea of that person, making them out to be better or worse than they actually are. Finally, how Documentary photography can be used to both show false visuals of real occurrences, and real visuals of real occurrences, proving the importance of fact checking, extensive researching and data analysing.

A question that I have come up with for my future dissertation based on these topics is "Metadata: How do we use documentary photography to separate real information from Ai slop?"

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