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Are professional photographers declining?

The digital age represents a massive change for the photography industry. Miller (2013), a professional photographer of over 40 years, suggests that the photography industry has changed more in the last 10 years than it did in the 50 years before. From a technological stand point, the advances that have been made in digital photography have been very positive. Digital photography certainly appears to be following Moore's Law (cited Bowden, 2004, pg 1) in terms of technological development and reducing cost. It should however be considered that the digital age could pose new threats that have a negative impact on the photography industry.

While it is easy to start speculating on the various different threats to professional photographers that exist in the current age of digital photography, it is perhaps better to step back further and look at whether or not the numbers of professional photographers are increasing or decreasing.

Both the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) and IBIS World (2013) report that the photography industry is in decline. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) expects to see the number employed in the photography industry increase by 4% between 2012 and 2022, this is well below the average of 11% increase across all industries. IBIS World (2013) reports a decline in the UK between 2009 and 2014 of 4.1% but also comments that this is a long term decline. Clifford (2013) and Photo Counter (2012) both support the view that the photography industry has been declining for some time. Clifford (2013) suggests that photographers have no clearly defined career paths anymore and that more photographers entering the market find themselves doing a wide variety of photography assignments to make a living.

The two metrics used to measure the growth and decline of an industry are generally the changes in revenue and the changes in the number of people employed in that industry. Yang (2010) explains that the distinction between amateur photographers and professional photographers is blurring and to an extent becomes irrelevant since many amateur photographers / hobbyist photographers are selling their work on micro stock photography websites. Amateur photographers selling their images on micro stock websites are not likely to be included in the metrics used for measuring the growth / decline of the photography industry. The current statistics suggest a declining number of photographers employed in the

industry and a decline in revenue; these statistics are unlikely to classify amateurs who sell a few images as employed in the industry. The revenue from the industry may well be decreasing over all but this could be due to the fact that there has been a massive increase in the number of photographers (amateur and professional) selling their work online. As Yang (2010) explains, it is simply economics that if demand remains constant and supply increases then the price will come down.

The problem that is likely to occur is how professional photographers are classified. Perhaps we should only be looking at photographers that earn a certain percentage of their income through photography. The British Photographic Council (2010) survey sample were largely photographers earning more than half of their income through photography, with only 18% of respondents falling under this threshold. It could be argued however that this is not representative of the way the industry has evolved in the digital age.

The evidence suggests that professional photographers as we traditionally think of them (wedding, portrait, commercial and news photographers) who earn the bulk of their income through freelancing or run photography businesses are in decline. It is perhaps a leap of faith to say that this indicates a decline in the photography industry. It needs to be considered that the digital age creates more opportunities for a greater range of people to take and supply images that might have otherwise have been supplied by a “professional photographer”; this demographic who make a smaller proportion of their income through photography might be described as semi-professional. If all semi-professionals were included in the employment figures then the forecasts for the future of the photography industry might look quite different.

Jeffries (2013) describes the increase in photographers as a democratisation of the medium. It could be argued that the increase in the number of semi-professional photographers represents a dilution of the industry as an increasing number of photographers earn smaller amounts. The next question should perhaps be how the professional photographers make the transition to make a living in a digital age with an increasing number of semi-professionals.

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