

Me and Sandy on Instagram

Andrew Quilty wasn't a fan of Instagram, but that's the platform *TIME* wanted, and the experience changed his mind



At 3:07pm on Sunday, October 28, I boarded one of the last trains out of New York City bound for the New Jersey coast. The carriage I was on was all but empty. After a desperate ring-around to my limited network in New York, I had been put in touch with a friend of a friend who welcomed me to his home in Bradley Beach – a square-mile town roughly halfway between Atlantic City and New York City. As it turned out, Bradley Beach was one of a few small towns that made up Monmouth County, where the approaching Hurricane Sandy was predicted to make landfall sometime in the next 36 hours.

Arriving a couple of hours before dark, I was collected from the station by my host, Paul, who runs a swanky cafe nearby.

That afternoon, he chauffeured me along the coast road, where we parked the car and walked stretches of the famous Jersey Shore boardwalk. Overzealous security guards

screamed at people to “Get off!” despite, at this point, there being no immediate danger of the much hyped storm surge.

As the colour left the sky and the tide peaked, people returned to their homes, finalised preparations for the inevitable loss of power, sat down to the constant TV news coverage and took a little while longer to drift off to sleep on this, the night before the storm.

I didn't sleep much that night either, and so when, from the couch, I began to see the sky turn an inky blue through the living room window, I was relieved to be able to get up and about. I made for the ocean front again.

The weather had begun to deteriorate. The wind had picked up noticeably and a steady, pelting rain came sideways like buckshot. The seas had risen as well and earthmovers had been working since daybreak to bolster the sand walls that had been all but washed flat overnight. I photographed people running for the shelter of their cars, waves pounding the

Sandy's aftermath on October 31, 2012, with the ruins of the beachfront boardwalk and houses in Mantoloking, New Jersey. This area was closed to residents and the media, as a body had allegedly been found in a house.

PHOTO BY ANDREW QUILTY / OCULI FOR TIME

Ocean Grove Fishing Club that was perched precariously at the end of a long, timber jetty and the bulldozers at work against the sea.

I returned to my temporary home, cold and wet. After a shower and a cup of tea, I began to download the card of digital images from the morning so that I could send a selection off to my agencies in Europe and the US, as well as to various picture desks at home in Australia.

While my pictures were downloading I decided to check my Facebook account. It was there that I saw a post from the deputy director of photography at *TIME*, Paul Moakley, expressing interest in the work of photographers shooting the impending hurricane for a web gallery on *TIME* LightBox – the photography portal of *TIME*'s website.

Not thinking too much of it, I wrote a short message in response, noting that I'd shot a couple of assignments back in Australia for two of his colleagues at *TIME*, that I was on the Jersey Shore, in the path of Sandy and ▶



► at his disposal should he need me. Ten minutes later I had a response. “Hi Andrew, call you in 5.”

What *TIME*'s photo department was proposing was a minute-by-minute account of what was occurring along the stretch of coast that Sandy was soon to hit. Five photographers – Benjamin Lowy, Michael Christopher Brown, Ed Kashi, Stephen Wilkes and I – were assigned and provided with *TIME*'s Instagram login details, to which we'd post smartphone images at our discretion.

It wasn't a decision taken lightly by *TIME*'s director of photography, Kira Pollack. When asked in an interview with *Forbes Magazine* about the risk of handing over editorial control to the photographers themselves, Pollack responded, “You have to pick the right photographers.”

While the other four photographers (most with followers in the tens of thousands) were known for their use of this new mode of image sharing, I was a virgin. I created an account and stumbled through some of the unworded icons, exploring the filters that I'd vehemently denounced on many occasions, deciphering what hashtags were and what the '@' symbol before my username meant.

As the storm crept closer toward the coast and conditions began to get serious, I managed to jump aboard truck 2 of the Asbury Park Fire Department, stationed a couple of kilometres north of where I was staying. I used their station as a base for the next 72 hours, slept and ate there and went out on each call that engine 2 attended as winds rose above 150 km/hr and as a third full-moon high tide peaked – the one which, combined with the winds and massive seas, would devastate the coastline from North Carolina to Connecticut and see 17 states without power, more than 50 deaths and a damage bill estimated to be upwards of US\$50 billion.

While the other photographers – more proficient using their iPhones as a primary method of capture and perhaps in areas where power (and therefore mobile reception) was still more readily available – posted regularly, receiving fistfuls of 'likes', I found it difficult to juggle a camera and an iPhone.

For one, it was pitch black save for the headlights and emergency lights of the fire engine and head-lamps of the firefighters, which makes shooting difficult even with the best of equipment. Secondly, the conditions were horrendous. Pouring rain and driving winds, flooded streets, falling trees and power lines, exploding transformers on telegraph poles, car-sized steel bins blowing across car parks and through cyclone fences. The instinctive manner in which any professional photographer is able to wield their camera in such circumstances is crucial and shooting with my iPhone, despite its simplicity, was equivalent to being in a 20ft half-pipe on training wheels.



A home sits in the middle of a lagoon after it was swept from its foundations in Mantoloking on the Jersey Shore. The home had been carried hundreds of metres from the nearest row of houses. PHOTO BY ANDREW QUILTY / OCULI FOR TIME

I decided not to fight this too much but rather to focus on what I knew I *could* do, which was to use the camera that hung around my neck – the one that I knew back to front. I would be able to give Instagram more energy when things were less frenetic in the following days, when the focus would turn to the aftermath – a different beast that would require more consideration and less instinct than did the chaos as Sandy came ashore that night.

With fairly frequent contact with the *TIME* photo department throughout the day and night that most of the destruction took place, it was made clear to me that Instagram shouldn't merely be an afterthought but something that should be given as much priority as I was giving to the *magazine*.

I studied what the other four had been posting late into the night, noting the multiple thousands of 'likes' that some of their more spectacular Instagrams were receiving and determined that this was actually something quite revolutionary and something that I – all of a sudden – saw the value in.

I'd never seen the point, as an individual, of posting photos from a sub-standard camera to a platform that only allowed them to be viewed the size of an after-dinner mint, only to be superseded by a photo of someone's pet cat seconds later. But this – working with a team of incredible photographers, under the banner of a magazine with the reputation and authority of *TIME* – was something different altogether.

On Tuesday, the day after Sandy struck, the *TIME* website attracted the fourth highest number of visitors for 2012. Thirteen per cent of that traffic ended up on the Sandy gallery, while the *TIME* Insta-feed attracted 12,000 new followers over the Monday and Tuesday.

And so for the next few days, while I continued to use an SLR as my primary

camera, I now had another perspective to bear in mind – the square, instantly eye-catching format necessary for a successful Instagram post.

Instagram does, in my opinion, require a different point of view. Quiet, subtle and thoughtful images that need time to bring their meaning to bear are near worthless to an Instagram audience. For this reason, I'm confident in saying that Instagram will never become an integral part of my own practice (as an individual). Instead, what I found was needed were more 'front page' or 'cover' style pictures. The type that instantly catches your eye as you hurry past the newsstand on the way to work.

In my limited experience, Instagram followers need visual simplicity and respond less well to complex compositions. One could well say that this translates to a dumbed down aesthetic. Instagram is, after all, a ready-made market research tool where what is most popular is measured clear as day with 'likes'. It is an accurate measure of the visual literacy of any given audience and, being the audience, while I wouldn't *pander* to popularity by changing what and how I post, I must at least *listen* to them.

I think it's the responsibility of the bastions of great journalism – like *TIME* – to promote the same high standard of photography that they do in their printed and web forms on platforms such as Instagram. Why? To advocate for greater visual literacy, to demonstrate what sets them apart, and to prove that they are valuable and irreplaceable sources of record to an audience quite possibly outside their traditional markets. And who knows? Perhaps we might even see circulation go *up* as a result.

Predictably, there was a fair amount of debate online following *TIME*'s decision to use Instagram the way they did. I dare say that had I not been one of the photographers, I'd have been critical myself. Now, however, I have a different perspective and can see where Instagram has a place.

Of course, dividing your time between one or more tasks on top of your primary assignment does, unavoidably, compromise each outcome. Giving 100 per cent of my time and energy to shooting for the print edition of *TIME* would have produced, however marginally, a more comprehensive account than I was able to achieve having to think of multiple platforms.

Having said that, whether the print edition was in fact compromised is doubtful. I feel a balance was achieved between the two outlets in a time when instant information is demanded, but considered, long-form work remains the bastion, the godfather of information.

Andrew Quilty, now based in New York City, has won a World Press Photo Award and a Walkley Young Australian Photojournalist of The Year Award

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