

Editors



26th October 2016

...Fears for child refugees as Calais camp broken up...The scandal behind supermarket eggs...Prosecution service hit by fear culture MSPs warned...

#4 DISPATCHES FROM THE REAL WORLD

In this series, news headlines from the day the photograph was taken are published along side the image to highlight the dissonance between the "real world" the media tells us we need to pay attention to and the one where natural processes hold sway.

I was amused to see a large poster in a local shopping centre recently proclaiming Facebook's intention to recruit more "fact checkers" in an attempt to displace "fake news" from its users' feeds. We used to call these people "editors". You could react in one of two ways to this: "about time too - credulous people need to be protected from the cynics"; or "if people developed their critical faculty a bit more they wouldn't be taken in by fake news and there wouldn't be a need for fact checkers". For my part, as someone already baffled by much of what happens in modern industrial society, I'd go with the first view. I want an editor to intervene on my behalf; a professional who knows more about something than I do, sparing me from a perpetual state of doubt and need to investigate everything I read from scratch. It's just too exhausting, too time consuming and I want to do other things. Like being out in Nature.

While I'm delighted that this particular social media platform is reviving the concept of the editor in the context of news, it's a pity that the same courtesy isn't being extended to protect us from the anodyne "art" photography that dominates this and its sister platform, Instagram. (Photos of family, friends and cats are excluded from this critique; they aren't trying to be something they're not.) It's perhaps unfair to characterise it thus as the picture clearly has meaning and significance for the person who has posted it but

there, usually, the interest ends and the thought that it might have wider appeal could have been scotched by the intervention of a kindly editor, had one existed. When people who know what they're talking about, through deep knowledge and wide experience, tell you that your work isn't up to the mark, it tends to make you try harder until it is. Good editors are more than mere gatekeepers; they foster talent when they see it and protect us from ourselves when they don't.

The role of the editor at the gate, and all her (or his) accumulated knowledge, has been trampled underfoot as massed ranks of people with cameras surge forward to claim the publication space. Now (rather like trusting a chimpanzee to assemble a watch from a box of parts) something amazing may appear that would otherwise have been rejected but it's a slim chance, with a lot more shouting and confusion, fractiousness and dissembling, than vision, being propagated. I don't have the time or necessarily the knowledge to tell what is authentic, form a view on what is an "Awesome capture!", or to understand the context in all the photography I see. I want a good editor to do that for me, because I want to do other things besides. Like being out in Nature.

One of the biggest swindles of the digital era is the mis-selling of agency. We've been told that we will

be empowered by choice and the independence of being our own travel agents, accountants, marketing specialists and web masters. In truth, this agency comes at the cost of the huge amount of time it takes to acquire large amounts of knowledge of often transient value. It's knowledge that has little relevance out in the physical world where natural processes underpin all the mechanisms that allow the synthetic, digital one to be contrived. Mesmerised by the virtual world, it is very easy to lose sight of the real one where, by the good grace of photosynthesis and the carbon cycle, mycorrhiza and a multitude of interlinked processes and organisms, we can live as physical beings. Ignorance of, or disinterest in, our physical roots disregards the primary need to maintain the conditions in which life and diversity can thrive. The notion of agency, ultimately, is illusory and right now, Mother Nature looks like she's squaring up to give us a good talking to.

The nature photographers I admire most, such as Vincent Munier and Laurie Campbell, are editors of natural knowledge. Their's isn't the "fake news" that emanates from contrived set-ups but the real thing that results from long observation, an understanding of the animal's biology and willingness to entertain the idea that it too may be acting on something other than a purely instinctive level; that it may believe it has some

agency in its life. This is knowledge we can all acquire, whether it is in a back garden or under a sullen arctic sky, if we can just pull ourselves away for long enough from the digital flypaper.

A good editor's restraining influence can save us embarrassment later as our work matures and their encouragement can transform a timid photographer into one with confidence in their own work. The public whooping and baying on Facebook just doesn't have the same authority.

