

## Humans of Internet-Era Photography

Although the average person may not be able to tell you who Brandon Stanton is, they could almost certainly recognize his photography-blog-turned-Internet-movement Humans of New York. What started as a few Facebook albums shared with friends has turned into a business venture. At time of publication, the Humans of New York (often nicknamed HONY) Facebook page has 18,230,866 followers (Fig. 1).

HONY operates on a simple formula: an image shot by Stanton of his chosen subject on the streets of New York paired with a short excerpt from an interview conducted on the spot. His photographic style is fairly straightforward. He relies on crisp focus and shallow depth of field to add a sense of quality to his work. This style isolates the subject while still allowing the photograph to have a setting and flavor that is distinctly New York. The photos are captioned with quotes from the subject. Sometimes it's as little as a few words, and sometimes can be a paragraph.

These posts exist within the realm of social media. By nature, this changes the way the information is consumed and how the public reacts to its content. Because of the subject matter and intention behind the project, Humans of New York can be seen as a direct descendant of the social documentary movement of the late 19th century, however, its existence on social media makes it an entirely different animal. Brandon Stanton has reached a modern, popular success with Humans Of New York, but when we compare his project to historical social documentary photographers, it becomes clear that social media has had a huge impact on the way we experience photography.

Humans of New York began when Stanton was laid off from his job as a stock broker in Chicago and made the move to New York (Bosman). Upon arriving in the area, he began

to shoot around the city and post them on Facebook for his friends to see. Through this, he began to shoot people on the street. Stanton arrived at the goal of "photograph[ing] 10,000 New Yorkers on the street, and creat[ing] an exhaustive catalogue of the city's inhabitants" (Stanton). Along the way, as Stanton began including quotes from his subjects alongside his photos, he created a separate Facebook page just for these images. Following this decision, Humans of New York was born in 2010.

Although he initially referred to the project as a 'photography blog,' over time, the posts became more about the captions, or 'stories' as Stanton refers to them, and less about the photos. These stories became the emotional drive of the project; they are what cause people to connect to the individual photographed. Oftentimes, the posts speak to a sense of normalization. For example, a person felt lonely after college, or a person that struggles to feel confident at work. The people featured on the blog publicly admit their struggles, which allows the audience to admit that they are struggling too, and provides proof that they aren't alone. Because of its existence as a product of social media, that connection people make with the image determines its success. Humans of New York delivers identical content on its website, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and most naturally, on Facebook. Social media delivers a built in way to respond to an image, whether that be through a 'like' or a 'retweet.' (Konnikova).

In addition to being generally popular, Stanton has used his platform for change. The first post that truly saw an effort for social change by Stanton was an image of a young man named Vidal, posted January 19, 2015 (Fig. 2). This particular image depicts Vidal on the streets of Brooklyn, and is paired with the following text:

*"Who's influenced you the most in your life?"*

*"My principal, Ms. Lopez."*

*"How has she influenced you?"*

*"When we get in trouble, she doesn't suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains to us how society was built down around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. And one time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter."*

This image of Vidal, with his hood drawn up on his head, along with the huge online response to it, sparked a series by Stanton focused on Ms. Lopez and her school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy. He focused on others she had influenced in a similar way to Vidal. This school is full of underprivileged youth, and Stanton began a campaign for the school. Ms. Lopez wanted to take her kids to visit Harvard and let them know they belong there (Cunningham). For the next two weeks, the HONY posts were only about this crowdfunding campaign. Stanton had a recipe for success. The individuals that were highlighted for the duration of this time easily provided the emotional connection that the audience needed in order to give financially. HONY thrives on quickly establishing that element of pathos through Stanton's curated captions that are paired with each one. When these captions establish both an emotional connection and a need that must be met, it prompts people to participate and donate. The crowdfunding campaign was a huge success, raising enough for Mott Hall Bridges Academy to continue to take trips to Harvard for the next 10 years, along with a scholarship fund set up in Vidal's name.

This power to affect social change through photography is not new. In fact, it's a formula that has been used since the late 19th century, not long after photography's inception. People are hardwired to relate to the human face. When photographic processes began making it possible to show accurate depictions of people, it quickly became clear that this could be used to draw attention and empathy towards social issues. This gave rise

to the social documentary movement. Photographers began using imagery to attempt bringing about a change. Eventually, this led to photographers like Lewis Hine. He began his work just after the turn of the century, and his focus was on child labor. Much like HONY, Hine operated by taking sensitive portraits of child workers, often isolating individuals in the frame and through depth of field (Fig. 3). Hine traveled into the environment where these children lived and worked, and he met them where they are. These images have a sadness about them; the audience finds themselves grieving for the loss of childhood for these factory workers. Hine's goal in shooting these images was to bring about change in regards to child labor laws (Freedman). Although he shot individual portraits, he did not focus on the individual child. These portraits were used as a generalization of child labor conditions; rather than showing that one child was suffering in a particular way, he showed that many different children were suffering in the same way.

Humans of New York is essentially a descendant of this type of social documentary photography, however, it has evolved over time. The biggest factor that has changed this type of photography is social media. Previously, photographs existed in finite, physical forms. Social media and internet access has changed everything about the way we consume imagery. We still use similar vocabulary: albums, portraits, sharing, editing. However, photography has become so commonplace. Everyone knows how to take pictures, even if it is only on their phone (Sarvas). People are so used to seeing images that the image itself is no longer enough to illicit a reaction. This is a problem Lewis Hine did not face, but one that is fundamental to Brandon Stanton's success. Stanton's images are good. Just good. They are not distinctive in any particular way, and could be easily replicated by anyone with the knowledge to operate a DSLR camera. However, Stanton has used the mission of his project as a means to differentiate himself from the barrage of images that we

consume on a daily basis. In doing so, he has managed to create an entire brand surrounding the idea that people are relatable, and his posts are proving.

Success on Facebook relies heavily on the number of times an image was shared. Sharing an image takes it from the account it was originally posted to, and copies it to the personal account of whoever shared it. This is important, because it is fairly easy to get an audience to hit a 'like' button, but to post something that resounds emotionally enough to cause people to share it is difficult. Sharing is, essentially, a selfish act. It is perpetuating the image of yourself that you have created online. By sharing a Humans of New York post, you are admitting that the subject matter touched you in a way that you want others to know about.

It may sound silly, but this logic is truly what drives HONY. Stanton could easily photograph a rich socialite and quote her speaking about the difficulty of choosing which designer handbag to carry that day. He could also photograph an elderly couple and include a quote about how their love has survived for so long. Which image would get the bigger reaction? People are attracted to things they can relate to and things that give them hope. A 30-something looking for happiness is relatable; the thought of helping students in a struggling school gives people hope. These posts are successful. It is unquestionable that Stanton understands this principle. The proof can be found in the quotes he chooses to include in each image. But this awareness can be problematic, and raise questions about the validity of the project, especially given it's rising fame.

The biggest critical response to Humans of New York, and Stanton himself, is that the project is so reflective of Stanton. It is important to remember that every caption posted on the Humans of New York site is an edited excerpt. As viewers we do not get to know any more details about the conversation than what he offers us. The chosen quote becomes the

defining feature of the subject. (Smyth). Having the power to represent people in that manner can be dangerous. Many times, HONY posts fall into the category of perpetuating stereotypes. A clear example of this is an image of an African American man's arm, covered in tattoos (Fig. 4). The caption for this photo simply reads "Can I take your photograph? 'Nah, I've got warrants.'" Stanton has revealed in interviews that he gets turned down frequently when requesting to photograph people (Bosman). He could have left this post out in favor of someone who was willing to have their portrait revealed. However, by choosing to post it as he did, Stanton is reinforcing the stereotype of the black man as a criminal. The problem with Humans of New York posts is that they are so brief, they offer a short quote as a description of an entire person, and that can contradict the very purpose of the blog. HONY is meant to bring people together and to show diversity while maintaining the premise that we're all still humans, and we aren't that different after all. Unfortunately, revealing a small piece of information about a person as a representation of them as a whole can actually be *dehumanizing*.

Stanton's fame is continuing to grow as Humans of New York gains more and more recognition. While this means more success for him and his project, it also can be a bit problematic when it comes to his strategy for taking photographs. As an anonymous Midwestern dude, Stanton could approach any stranger on the street and just seem like someone working on an interesting series. However, if the subject has a knowledge of HONY, they are aware of the implications their words have (Fig. 5). People know that the words they say will represent them on the internet, so they curate them in order to have control over how they are portrayed. However, it is also revealing that Stanton often includes quotes that mention knowing who he is and what he is doing. It reveals that he wants the public to know that who he is and what he represents. On a human level, that

leads people to see him as egotistical. On a logical level, that leads to the questioning of his responses as genuine. With growing fame, New Yorkers are walking around, pondering how they would respond if they ran into Stanton. This is no longer observation of a city, but changing the landscape of it (D'Addario).

Humans of New York has been questioned more and more in recent years. The blog still continues to have popular success, however. Stanton does not claim to be an artist. As such, it may not bother him at all that his motives have been questioned by scholars and critics. Despite these doubts and critiques, HONY has managed to bring social documentation to the 21st Century, and spurn hundreds of copycats and millions of followers in the process. Stanton has used his platform to affect real change in the lives of some of his subjects. He has also created an Internet environment where people can go and see that there are others like them. Perhaps this is the way photography exists in this day and age, and social media success is good enough.

## Illustrations

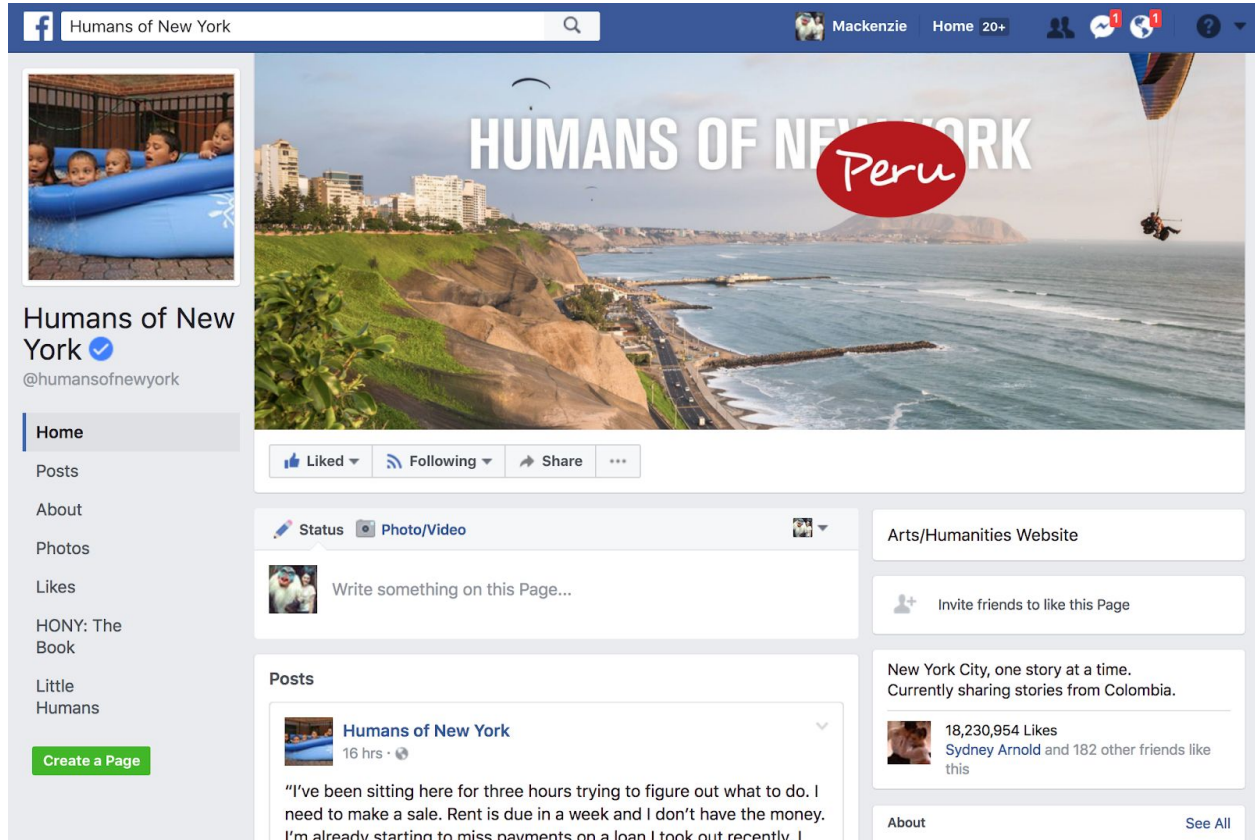


Figure 1 / Humans of New York Facebook page, created by Brandon Stanton. Screenshot.



Figure 2 / Humans of New York post, January 19, 2015. Brandon Stanton. Screenshot.





Figure 3 / Lewis Hine, *The Mill: Jo Bodeon*. 1909, Print from Black & White Negative. The History Place Archive.



Figure 4 / Humans of New York post, June 21, 2014. Brandon Stanton. Screenshot.

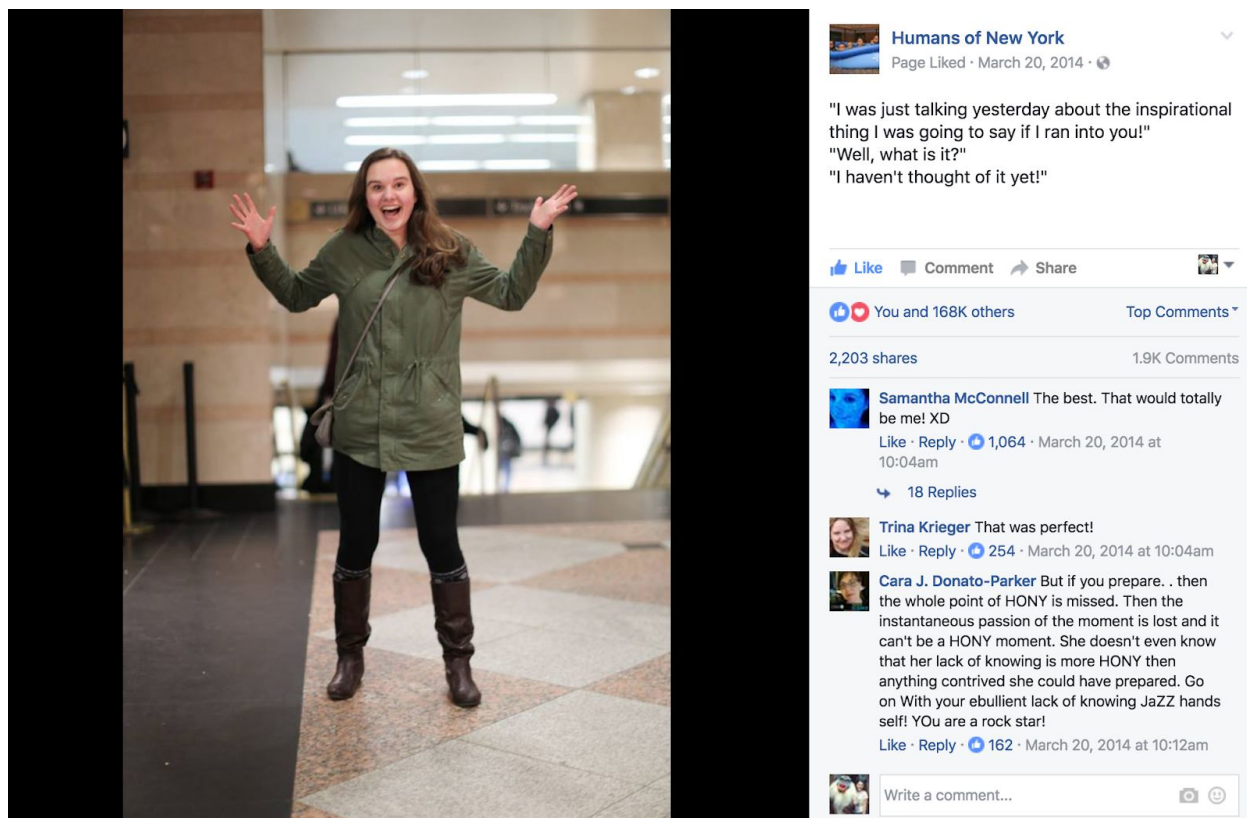


Figure 5 / Humans of New York post, March 20, 2014. Brandon Stanton. Screenshot.

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